

A romantic couple embracing in a dark setting. The man is on the left, wearing a light-colored t-shirt, and the woman is on the right, wearing a white lace-trimmed top. They are both looking towards each other. In the foreground, there is a glass of whiskey cocktail with ice, orange slices, and raspberries. The background is dark and moody, with some blurred lights.

Vamp

JESSICA PRINCE



VAMP

A WHISKEY DOLLS NOVEL

JESSICA PRINCE

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Knockout
Stunner
Seductress
Temptress
Vamp

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Come Back Home Again
The Best of Me
Wrong Side of the Tracks
Stay With Me
Out of the Darkness
The Second Time Around
Waiting for Forever
Love to Hate You
Playing for Keeps
When You Least Expect It

Never for Him

REDEMPTION SERIES

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Sweet Spot

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Worth the Wait

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Enticing Daphne
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STANDALONE TITLES:

One Knight Stand
Chance Encounters
Nightmares from Within

DEADLY LOVE SERIES:

Destructive
Addictive

ABOUT VAMP



He has the voice of an angel, the body of a God, and I hate the very ground he walks on.

After having her heart broken, Alma Rossi made a vow: no more relationships. All she wants now is a good time with a guy who won't try to cuddle afterward. She's content with the new life she's built for herself, even if all of her friends are starting their own happily ever afters. But when the man she's tried for years to forget shows up in her town, begging for another chance, he throws her new life off its axis.

From the outside, Roan Blackwell has it all: a shining career as a country music superstar, a house that would make anyone green with envy, and more money than he knows what to do with. But after losing the love of his life,

none of that other stuff seemed to matter anymore.

He would happily give it all up just for one more shot with the one who got away. He just has to convince Alma he's worth a second chance. He's not above playing dirty, and if that means going out of his way to charm her entire town so they'll help in his mission to win her back, then that's exactly what he'll do.

ROAN

I stared out my living room windows, the gleaming floor-to-ceiling glass more than fifteen feet high, giving an unobstructed view of Nashville, wondering when the hell all of this had stopped being enough. There had been a time in my life when a view like this, a view that only came from standing inside one of the fucking ridiculously large mansions that towered over the city, was all I'd ever wanted.

I'd wanted to be able to stand at these windows at night and look down at the city lights, to be a part of the heartbeat of Nashville while still lording over it. One of the important. The elite. When I was younger, I was stupid enough to think that was all I needed, this lifestyle of flash and fame was all that mattered. If I'd had a view like this, I had really made it.

God, I was a fucking idiot.

I thought that was all it would take to give me the calm I had spent nearly my entire life searching for. The peace I'd only had once before. But as I stood there, looking out on my city, all I felt was . . . empty.

"Roan, are you even listening to me?"

I rolled my eyes at Cal's nasally voice and turned away from the view that no longer held the same appeal it once had. My manager sat in the large, hideous wingback chair that wasn't my taste at all but had been chosen by the interior decorator I'd hired because that was the one everyone who was anyone in Nashville used, so it made sense. I hated that fucking chair with its fucking *tassels* and *brocade pattern*, whatever the hell that was. It felt like it was stuffed with rocks.

As a matter of fact, I hated *all* the furniture in this house. I hated the dishes in the cabinets. I hated the colors on the walls and the bedding that had

been chosen for my bedroom. I hated the art hanging on the walls—I mean, I had a framed canvas that had been painted *white* and had cost thirty grand hanging over my fireplace, for christ’s sake. I could have done that my damn self for less than ten bucks. And what did it say about me that I hadn’t blinked an eye at the price tag because the artist was a popular up-and-coming dude who everyone wanted a piece of.

Jesus christ.

“Of course I fuckin’ hear you. It’s impossible not to since you won’t shut the hell up.”

He gave me a flat look as he tapped the arm of the chair with the tip of his index finger, his tell for when he was anxious. I could always tell by the *tap, tap, tap* just how close he was to a meltdown, and lately, that *tap, tap, tap* had been happening a whole lot more. Especially when it came to me.

I wasn’t exactly making his job easy as of late, but for some reason, I just couldn’t find it in me to give a shit.

All the things I used to care about, used to love, seemed so insignificant now.

“All right, what did I just say?”

I moved to the wet bar in the corner of the room and poured two fingers of Lagavulin. I tossed it back in a single gulp and set up another. That one I’d sip slower, make it last. I didn’t allow myself to get out of hand anymore. I’d spent too many years making stupid fucking choices like chasing the fake relief alcohol provided, the numbness, and I wasn’t going to let myself go down that road again.

“I said I heard you, not that I was listenin’.”

Tap, tap, tap.

“I swear to christ, Roan. You’re going to give me a goddamn heart attack one of these days.”

I gave him a flat stare. “No, Cal. That’ll be from the two packs of cigarettes you smoke every damn day.” I pointed a threatening finger at him as he stood and patted at his pockets. “And don’t even think of lighting up in here. I might hate all the shit in this house, but I hate the stench of those cancer sticks even more.”

“It was only one pack a day until you turned into this surly, moody jackass.”

He pushed to his feet and came over to the bar. My jaw started to tick and my hands clenched into fists when he began to fix himself a drink without

even asking. And worst, he used my expensive shit. The prick.

“You used to be so agreeable and even-tempered. What the fuck happened to that guy, huh? He never gave me angina.”

“Maybe that guy got tired of being everyone’s puppet.” I took another sip, beating down the need to chug. “Ever thought of that? Or maybe he got sick and fucking tired of doing whatever everyone around him wanted and not what he wanted.”

Instead of getting it, Cal pointed in my direction, his expression accusing as he said, “See? That right there. That’s the shit I’m talking about. What’s your deal, man? You need to get laid? Is that it? Just say the word and I’ll have a few ladies here in no time. You can take your pick. Or hell, fuck all of them if that’s what it takes to snap your personality back into place.”

My top lip curled in disgust. I couldn’t believe I’d ever actually considered this man a friend. He was only looking out for number one. Sure, he used to be supportive, but that was back when I did what I was told without any argument. Now that I was no longer the dumbass who was content to simply go with the flow, that support had flown right out the window. Like most things in my career, I was starting to second-guess whether or not Cal Stark was the right fit as my manager.

It was beginning to feel like I had outgrown everything. My label, my sound, my team. If I could, I’d wipe the slate clean and start all over. Only this time, I’d do so many things differently. But I guess that was hindsight for you.

The callous bitch.

“Look, just say what you came to say so you can get the hell out before you really piss me off and get your ass fired, yeah?”

I could practically hear his molars grinding together from across the room.

“The label doesn’t like the new material.” And there it was. I let out a dry laugh as he continued. “They feel that, compared to your older albums, the new songs are too depressing.”

“They aren’t depressing. They’re *real*. There’s a fucking difference, Cal.”

The music industry could be a real bitch, whether you’d already made it as an artist or not, and as a country singer, my fans had gotten used to my style, which was the fast pace, feel good songs you could dance to. There were reels all over social media of special line dances that had been created to go with my songs. I wasn’t going to lie, that kind of shit put me on the map in

a big way, and now my name was being mentioned alongside some of the biggest names in country music. I had a shelf full of awards, and had walked down my fair share of red carpets.

Over the past decade, I achieved every single thing I'd set out to do. I was famous. My face was on fucking magazine covers. I was one of the most played artists on the radio. You couldn't flip past a country station without hearing one of my songs. I played for sold-out stadiums across the country. I couldn't go to the grocery store without people clamoring to get a picture with me, for christ's sake.

And I was sick of it.

All of it.

For the first time in my career, I'd made the album *I* wanted to make. No country anthems, no ass-shaking, two-stepping beats. I wrote and recorded songs that actually meant something to me. I'd dug down deep in my soul where I'd kept all those feelings hidden for the past decade and pulled each and every one of those words out. It had been *painful*. But so worth it. These new songs were a part of me. They were in my blood, in my bones.

Just like she was and always would be.

Those songs were the realest thing I had ever created.

"I think I've made those assholes enough money over the past several years that I've earned a little bit of leeway in the music I make."

I could see it written all over Cal's face. He didn't agree. What the label wanted, the label got, as far as he was concerned. They were the big dogs.

I took another sip, pinning my manager with a hard stare as I said, "If the label doesn't like the new material, maybe it's time for us to part ways. Because that's the album I'm making. Whether they like it or not. And if you can't get behind that, maybe it's time we part ways as well."

I heard his sharp intake of breath, but I'd already turned away, looking back at that view that meant nothing. In the past handful of minutes, the sun had started to lower beyond the horizon, painting the sky in deeper shades. The lights from the city below began to wink on, and, as I'd experienced more times that I could count, the clubs, bars, and restaurants were setting up for the incoming crowds. Day might have slowly been turning into night, but this city didn't sleep.

In fact, it was gearing up while all I wanted to do was strip down to my underwear, crawl into bed, and watch ESPN highlights in the dark until I passed out with the remote in my hand.

And, christ, but that thought made me feel old as hell.

“You know what? I don’t think this is the right time for this conversation,” Cal stated magnanimously. Like the prick was doing me some kind of favor. “Clearly you’re in a mood, so we’ll table this discussion for the time being, come back to it when you’re feeling more yourself.”

I let out a snort as I brought the glass back to my lips. What the bastard failed to realize was I was feeling more myself than I had in years. The real me was a miserable, unhappy asshole now that all the shitty decisions I’d made in my youth were coming back to bite me in the ass.

“Whatever you say, Cal. You can go ahead and see yourself out.” I held up the glass, dismissing the man without even turning back to look at him.

I didn’t turn around as I waited in silence for the sound of my front door opening and closing. Once I heard it slam harder than necessary, I reached into the back pocket of my jeans and pulled out my cell, scrolling through my contacts. I hit Call the instant my thumb landed on the number I’d been looking for.

It only took three rings for him to pick up. The moment the familiar voice carried through my ears, the corners of my mouth curled ever so slightly in the closest thing to a smile I’d felt in days, or hell, even weeks.

“Well I’ll be. If it isn’t Roan Blackwell. It’s been a while, man.”

“Lincoln. Good to hear your voice, buddy.”

I’d met Lincoln Sheppard several years ago, back when my career had just shot off. I’d been playing a set one night at the Bluebird Café, and when I got home, I discovered an overzealous fan had not only climbed over the privacy fence that surrounded my old house, but she’d also managed to pick the lock and get inside. I found her naked in my bed.

The whole thing had been a huge mess. The cops had come to haul her ass out of my house, and she sure as hell hadn’t made it easy for them. By the time they finally got her out the door, both officers and I were sporting fresh scratch marks and she’d managed to break a mirror, a glass end table, a lamp, and a coat rack. It was so bad they’d had to taser her.

I’d asked around for the best security company in the business and got Lincoln Sheppard’s name. He owned an operation over in Virginia and was usually booked months out. His firm, Alpha Omega, did a hell of a lot more than install security systems, so getting an appointment was damn near impossible.

It just so happened to be a lucky coincidence that he’d been a fan, and

when I told him the situation, he made an exception—after charging me double the already astronomical cost—and set me up with a system that was completely impenetrable.

When I bought this place, he'd come out again to do the same—and again, charged me through the fucking roof, knowing his work was worth it and I had more than enough money lying around.

“How are things down in Nashville treating you? Don't tell me you're moving again, brother. That last place I set up for you was a fucking beast. What more could you want in a house?”

I let out a low chuckle. “Nah, nothing like that. I actually have something else in mind. Tell me, how good are you and your team at finding people?”

He made a sound of offense. “Shit. *That's* what you're calling for? I was hoping you'd at least give me a challenge. What's the name and date of birth? I'll have an address for you in no time.”

I quickly rattled off a name I hadn't said in nearly ten years, but one I'd thought about every hour of every day. I still had her birthday memorized, along with so many other things about her. She was as much a part of me as my music was, living in my very soul. There wasn't a single thing about her I would ever forget.

“So you want to call me back once you've tracked her down?”

“No need. I can tell you where she is right now.”

My chin jerked back in shock. “Look, man. I get that you're good and all, but you aren't psychic. You couldn't have possibly already figured out her address in the past thirty seconds.”

He chuckled good-naturedly. “Don't need to be psychic when your girl's not only living in my town, but part of my wife's crew. Though, if you're female and in the tri-county area, you're part of my wife's crew, so I don't know if it's so much a coincidence than an inevitability.”

“Wait.” I squeezed my eyes closed and pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to wrap my head around what he'd told me. “You're telling me she lives in Hope Valley?”

“Sure does. Alma Rossi's a bit of a celebrity around these parts. So you want her address? Hell, I won't even charge you.”

“Hell yeah, I do. And I want you to tell me everything you know about her.”

I was going to need every single advantage possible if I had any chance of winning back the love of my life.

ALMA

*A*s I stood in a line surrounded with some of my closest friends, all of them misty-eyed and sniffling, watching our friend Asher say her vows to her soon-to-be husband, all I could think was I hoped like hell the open bar was stocked with my favorite brand of vodka.

There was no mistiness for this girl, no happy sniffles or tears for my friend as she pledged herself to one man—or more specifically, one dick—for the rest of her life. All I really felt as I watched Owen Shields slide that glittery diamond band onto Asher’s finger was hungry. The bride and groom had splurged on the catering for this shindig, keeping the guest list reasonable so they could go all out with beef tenderloin. I was so excited I had skipped breakfast and lunch in preparation.

This marked the fourth wedding I’d attended in less than three years, and the second one where I’d had to don a questionable bridesmaid dress. And there was still another one coming as soon as my friend Sloane’s man popped the question, which I assumed would be any day now. For someone who was as averse to all things holy matrimony as I was, it was ironic how quickly all my friends were suddenly shacking up and getting hitched.

Don’t get me wrong, I was happy for them, and I would certainly never try to discourage any of them from taking that walk down the aisle if their men were good to them and it was what they truly wanted, but commitment and monogamy simply weren’t for me.

At least not anymore.

I’d attempted to go down that road myself in what felt like another lifetime, and the scars from that journey were the kinds that would never heal. I’d shut that part of myself off for good, and I would *never* take that

kind of risk again. At least not in this lifetime.

In my little ragtag group of friends, I was the one willing to try anything crazy at least once, the one who had a bedpost covered in my fair share of notches. I figured if men could go through life having meaningless sex with whoever caught their attention without judgement, I damn well could too, and no way in hell I would let anyone make me feel ashamed for it.

I didn't do relationships, but I was a *huge* fan of the casual hookup. If the man was good enough between the sheets and didn't bore the life out of me, I was even willing for a few repeats, at least until the attraction fizzled out, which was an inevitability. Just as long as we both went into it with complete honesty and the knowledge that it would never go any further.

Funnily enough, that stereotype of women falling for the man they're supposed to be having no-strings sex with also applied to the opposite gender in more cases than not, at least in my experience. If I had a dollar for every awkward conversation I had to have after a dude caught feelings, I'd be even closer to those sexy woven leather Gucci boots I had my eye on.

I was pulled out of my daydream of those shoes when everyone in the ballroom shot to their feet and started to clap and whistle for the happy couple as Owen dipped Asher over his arm and devoured her mouth in a kiss that would have been totally inappropriate had we been in a church.

I let out a laugh at the display and brought my pinkies to my lips to whistle them on, happy for my friend as she laughed, pure joy on her face when Owen finally broke the kiss and righted her.

The Wedding March rang through the ballroom and Asher and Owen took off back up the aisle. Moments later, the rest of us followed after them, and, as the ceremony came to a close, my stomach let out a happy rumble at what was to come.

* * *

I fidgeted in my tall, pencil-thin heels, antsy as I held my plate in a white-knuckled grip and willed the line to move faster. I could smell the food from thirty people back, my mouth watering.

Stupid wedding photos, making me late to the buffet when the DJ announced it was finally open. If I didn't love Asher and the rest of my friends so damn much, I would have clotheslined every one of them and

made a run so I'd have been first in line. When it came to food, I didn't mess around.

My friend and fellow bridesmaid, Marin, teased from behind me. "Jeez, think you could relax for five minutes? With how you're acting, you'd think you were about to starve to death."

I shot her a glare over my shoulder. "I very well might," I snapped indignantly. "I've been waiting for this all damn day. I haven't eaten anything since dinner last night."

She shot me a look that told me she knew I was full of shit. My friends knew me too well. They knew I couldn't go that long without eating unless I was unconscious. I had a serious love of food that bordered on dependency. What could I say? Eating made me happy. Not as happy as sex, mind you, but I'd had a bit of a dry spell lately.

I wasn't sure what was going on. Usually, when the mood struck, it was no problem to hit up a bar or something to find a guy to spend some time with. A quick roll in the hay and I was set. But lately, the urge just wasn't there. It had been months, and nothing. No tingle. No itch. Not so much as a teensy spark.

Just thinking about getting myself all dolled up to go on the prowl was enough to exhaust me. The thought of doing my hair and makeup and finding a dress that was inviting without crossing that line into trashy was painful. I'd chosen comfy sweats, tons of snacks, and streaming my favorite sitcoms over sex. That was so unlike me. I was beginning to worry that there was something deeper going on. Like meningitis or something. Or maybe mumps?

I wasn't sure. All I knew was I'd replaced sex with even more food than usual, and I was having to run twice as much as normal in order to work the junk food off.

"Okay, so I might have had a midnight snack," I grumbled. "But that was *hours* ago. And I haven't eaten a thing today in preparation for this. So this line needs to move already."

I said that last sentence louder than necessary, earning a dirty look from the elderly woman in front of me. At my raised eyebrow, she let out a *humph* and turned back around. A minute later, we shuffled forward a couple feet.

Her brows climbed higher on her forehead. "Okay, you're not allowed to fast anymore. You're a lot hangier than usual, and it's borderline scary."

Our other friend, fellow bridesmaid, and Whiskey Doll sister, Layla,

walked up to join us. I stabbed my finger toward her face, ordering, “No cuts.”

She looked to Marin, wide-eyed, and mouthed, “Wow.”

“She’s hangry.” Marin held her hands up in surrender. “Just ignore her.”

“Okay, crazy. Just relax. I’m not cutting.” She placed her hand on her stomach. “In fact, I’m still a little full from the charcuterie board Asher’s mom prepared for us during mani/pedis.”

My glare grew more severe. As hard as it had been to ignore Gloria’s tasty snack, I’d held out for the bigger prize. As my stomach let out another growl, I was starting to realize that might have been a mistake.

The line moved another foot. For god’s sake, this was torture!

“So.” Layla waggled her eyebrows. “Have you found tonight’s fun-time guy or are you still scoping things out?”

“Oh, I bet it’s the guy over there at the bar,” Marin guessed. “Mr. Tall Dark and Broody? He totally seems like her type.”

Layla hummed thoughtfully. “My money’s on the DJ actually. You see the way he was checking out her ass when she was walking over here?”

I took my time checking both of the men out, but there was nothing.

I lifted my shoulder in a shrug and turned back to face the front of the buffet line. “Meh.”

My mumble was met by bewildered looks from my friends.

“Are you okay?” Marin asked, her voice tinged with concern.

I waved her off. “I’m fine. I think I might be getting sick or something. I just haven’t been in the mood for . . . you know, lately.”

“Not in the mood for what?” Layla asked. Then her eyes went wide with realization right before she yelped, “Sex?”

Heads whipped around in every direction, eyeballs coming right at us.

I wasn’t usually one to embarrass easily, but I knew screaming that a person wasn’t in the mood for sex when little children and the elderly were around just wasn’t done. And if I didn’t already know that, the disapproving look from the granny in front of us would have convinced me. I’d only been standing in that line for a handful of minutes and I was already two for two with the old lady.

“I get it,” I told her with a dramatic roll of my eyes. “We’ll keep it down. Jeez. Anyone ever tell you if you keep looking at me like that, your face is going to freeze that way?”

I didn’t know who the hell the lady was, but I sure hoped I wasn’t

insulting the hell out of Asher's granny or great aunt or whoever.

She harrumphed again, whipping forward and giving me the back of her blue-rinsed head. I crossed my eyes and stuck out my tongue in a childish act of defiance before turning to face my friends as the line shuffled forward again.

"Think you can keep from announcing to the entire wedding I'm in a bit of a rut?"

Layla winced and whispered, "Sorry."

Marin reached up to place the back of her hand against my forehead.

"What are you doing?" I asked as I smacked her arm away.

"Checking for fever," she announced seriously. "I was joking about you being sick, but now I'm starting to worry."

I rolled my eyes at my friend's dramatics. "It's nothing," I insisted. But the truth was, I was a little concerned myself. I felt . . . off. It was hard to describe. There were no symptoms, no aches or pains or fever. I just didn't feel like myself. "I think maybe I'm just in a funk or something. I'll get out of it."

Right?

I mean, this couldn't last forever. Could it? Oh god! The thought of being alone and celibate for the rest of my life sounded *miserable*.

Layla and Marin shared a knowing look. Fortunately, I was saved from having to ask what those two were silently communicating when we finally reached the front of the line. The caterers looked at me like I was nuts when I requested a double serving of the au gratin potatoes and green beans almondine, but my stomach felt like it had started to eat itself, I was so damn hungry. The three of us headed for our assigned table and sat down to eat with the rest of our crew from Whiskey Dolls, the local burlesque club where we performed.

Marin leaned down to place a kiss on her husband Pierce's lips before she took her seat, the two of them sharing a tender look that made my chest feel funny and tight. As soon as Layla's butt met her chair, her husband, Jude, yanked it closer to his, like he couldn't possibly get close enough to her, and placed one hand on the back as he continued his conversation with our other friend Charlotte's husband, Dalton. His fingers lightly caressed the bare skin of her shoulder and the back of her neck, occasionally toying with a loose strand of her hair, as though it was impossible to be near her and not touch her in some way.

Charlotte's man was no different. Dalton kept looking in her direction as she chatted with Hardin, another friend of ours, and smiling like the sun rose and set with his woman, and he couldn't get enough.

Our table rounded out with Hardin's man, Ford, Sloane and her man Silas, who she recently started shacking up with, selling her house that had been next door to his in order to move in with him and his teenaged daughter.

Silas worked as the head of security for our club and was a total badass. And even though he and Sloane were still happily in the honeymoon stages of their relationship, I noticed Ford shooting him the occasional dirty look and couldn't help but laugh.

There wasn't a doubt in my mind that Sloane and Silas were meant for each other, just as there was no one else for Hardin but Ford. However, before any of them had hooked up, Silas and Hardin had been set up on a date by Asher. To say Ford had gotten crazy jealous would have been a serious understatement. It had been the push he needed to get his head out of his ass and make his move.

Out of the whole crew, I was the odd man out. The eleventh wheel. It had never bothered me before, so what the hell was the issue now?

"So, Alma," Layla called from across the table. "What do you think caused this supposed funk?"

That garnered the attention of everyone at our table. I narrowed my eyes and shoved a bite of delicious, buttery potato into my mouth.

"What funk?" Charlotte asked, her gaze darting between me and Layla.

Marin's mouth curved up in a shit-eating grin. "Alma's sex funk," she answered behind the rim of her champagne flute.

"Think I'm gonna hit up the bar," Pierce said, rising to his feet and tossing the napkin that had been in his lap onto the table.

"Think I'll join you," Dalton said.

Silas stood as well, lazily buttoning the front of his blazer one handed in that sexy way men did. "We'll be back when you ladies have changed topics."

Ford and Jude followed suit, with the former adding, "So, say . . . forty-five minutes?"

Jude clapped him on the shoulder. "We'll give it a solid hour. Just to be safe. When these women start talking about sex, they could make three locker rooms full of football players blush."

"Cowards," I called to their backs when they moved as a whole away

from us.

Not a single one of them turned back, leaving me to the wolves, and when I twisted back around, I saw I had the undivided attention of the rest of the remaining table.

ALMA

“What’s going on?” Sloane asked, leaning closer and propping her forearms on the table.

“Nothing’s going on. I just—”

“She isn’t hooking up with anyone tonight,” Layla blurted. “Marin and I pointed out three perfectly gorgeous dudes and she wasn’t interested.”

I bugged my eyes out in her direction. “Jeez, woman. Think you could let me answer for myself?”

She curled her shoulders in slightly, looking properly remorseful. “Sorry.”

“What’s wrong?” Charlotte asked. “Are you sick?”

I rolled my eyes. This was getting ridiculous. “No, I’m not sick! I’m just not in the mood. You guys make it sound like I go around screwing anything that looks in my direction. I’m not *always* picking up men, you know.”

Hardin reached over and placed her hand on my forearm. “We know that, babe. It’s just that when Delilah got married a few months back, you said weddings were the perfect cruising ground. I guess we just expected if you were going to hook up, it would be tonight.”

I gave her a rueful smile and shrugged. “I get it. It’s just that no one’s really been catching my interest. I haven’t really been feeling like myself lately.”

Marin braced her elbow on the cream linen tablecloth and propped her chin in her palm. “How long has that been the case?”

“I don’t know.” I used my fork to push the food around on my plate. I’d gone from so damn hungry I could have gnawed a friend’s arm off to my stomach so knotted I couldn’t imagine putting another bite in my mouth.

“Maybe a few months?”

Sloane’s eyes went big. “A few months?” she squeaked.

Just like that, the vibe at our table went from light and teasing to serious in the blink of an eye.

“Why haven’t you said anything to us before now?” Charlotte asked.

I lifted my shoulder in a shrug. “What was I supposed to say? Guys, I went from being all sex positive and getting laid on the regular to feeling like my libido shriveled up and died and I don’t have a clue as to why.”

“Yeah.” Layla nodded vigorously. “Basically.”

“If that’s how you’ve been feeling, then yes,” Hardin added.

Charlotte held up her hands before she spoke. “Now, I’m going to say something, and I want you to hear me out before you jump in to deny it.”

Well a preface like that couldn’t have meant anything good.

“What if . . . and no interrupting . . . but what if things have changed for you because you’ve watched all your friends fall in love and there’s something inside you—*deep* inside you—that maybe kind of wants that for yourself?”

I opened my mouth, a denial on the tip of my tongue. But I couldn’t get the words to come.

“She’s right,” Hardin started hesitantly. “You said it started a few months ago, right? Well, that’s around the time Sloane and Silas made things official and moved in together. Maybe, on a subconscious level, you want something like that too.”

Oh hell. That couldn’t be the case. Could it?

No. *No!* I refused to accept that the mile-high walls I’d managed to erect around my heart to keep it safe from any more harm had a flaw in their design, letting pesky little things such as feelings through. Not happening. I’d made that mistake once, and I’d learned my lesson.

I scoffed, my face pinching up dramatically as I blew a raspberry past my lips. “It’s like you guys don’t even know me,” I replied.

Fortunately, I was saved from having to argue further when the DJ’s voice came through the speakers, cutting me off. “Ladies and gentlemen. It’s time for the happy couple to make their way to the dance floor for their first dance as husband and wife.”

I twisted around in my seat in order to watch the happy couple make their way toward the dance floor. The smile on my face faltered and the blood in my veins turned to ice as the opening strains of a sweet ballad began filtering

through the ballroom. A ballad I knew all too well.

The mistiness that had been missing throughout the entire ceremony hit me like a sledgehammer to the center of my chest as I watched Owen spin Asher wide before pulling her flush to his chest. But it wasn't the way they were looking at each other like they held the world in their arms as they began to sway to the music that had my chest tightening so hard it felt like my heart was being crushed.

No. The reason I felt on the brink of tears for the first time in *years* was because I knew the song my friends were dancing happily to all too well.

If I closed my eyes and became lost in the past, I could remember the deep, husky voice crooning the classic love song in my ear as we danced around our living room. I could remember his smell, that leather smell with a hint of spice. Like licorice. I could smell the whiskey on his breath from the one drink he'd allow himself at the end of every day. And I could hear the words he'd whispered.

One day we're gonna be dancing like this to one of my songs, baby. And you'll know when you hear me singing about the love of my life that it's you I'm talking about. Only you.

One day never came. We never danced to a song he wrote about loving me. Sure, I'd heard his music. It was impossible not to. Roan Blackwell was one of the most famous country music superstars in America. But he never wrote that love song he'd promised me. I shouldn't have been surprised. That man had broken every single promise he'd made over the course of our relationship. The biggest one being that he'd love me forever.

The scars I carried on my heart were battle wounds he'd given me that had never healed properly. Wounds I received every time I lost, and *god*, I'd lost so much thanks to that man.

No, I wasn't starting to feel things now that all my friends had settled down with the loves of their lives, because I knew better than to set myself up for that kind of pain again. I'd already met the love of my life in a different lifetime, and he'd ruined me.

I blinked quickly against the burn building behind my eyes. I had cried enough over that man to last a million lifetimes. My heart beat staccato against my sternum as I sucked in a fortifying breath and turned to face my friends.

I pasted a smile on my face that felt stiff and brittle. Clearing the lump from my throat, I said, "I'm going to run to the restroom really fast. I'll be

right back.”

It wasn't like me to bail in the middle of something as special as the couple's first dance, but if I didn't get away from that song and the memories it evoked, I was going to lose it, and I hadn't lost my iron grip on my emotions in nearly a decade. I wasn't going to have them slip through my fingers on my friend's big day and cause a scene.

Without looking back, I snatched up my clutch and started toward the exit, silently willing myself to keep a normal pace when my body wanted to break into a sprint. It wasn't until I pushed through the heavy doors that led from the ballroom into the quiet lobby beyond that I was able to release the breath I'd been holding captive in my lungs. On a heavy exhale, my stiff shoulders and rigid spine loosened, bit by bit.

The sharp point of my heels clicked against the tiled floor that had been buffed to a beautiful shine, the sound reverberating through the otherwise empty space. I spotted a door right beyond the corridor, across from the ballroom, that led out onto a veranda overlooking the hotel's gardens.

The sun had gone down hours ago, painting the sky a dark midnight, but the moon was full, looking much bigger in the midnight blue sky than I'd seen in a long time. The icy white glow cast just enough light on grounds below that I could make out the shadows of the waist-high hedges below, trimmed and cultivated to create paths through the extensive gardens.

Asher and Owen really had picked the most beautiful place to have their wedding. A lux mountain resort and hotel tucked into the surrounding woods. Not only did the place know how to throw a kickass wedding, but it also boasted a five-star spa that, after the facial and hour-long massage I'd gotten earlier that morning with Asher and the rest of the bridal party, I could attest more than lived up to the hype.

Unfortunately, the calm that Greta had managed to rub into me as she worked my muscles loose was long gone now, all thanks to one stupid song.

I rested my hands on the thick concrete ledge of the veranda and pulled in a deep breath, filling my lungs with that fresh, clean mountain air. I pressed my palms harder against the ledge, the grit from the rough material pricking at my skin and helping my mind focus on the present instead of the past. That belonged locked deep in the very back of my mind, stuffed in a padlocked, impenetrable box.

I filled my lungs again to bursting, counting to ten as I slowly let it out. “Back in the box,” I whispered to myself. “Shove his ass back in the box

where it belongs.”

In ten years I'd gotten *really* good at pretending Roan Blackwell didn't exist, so when the reminder of him cropped up in my small, well-insulated world, it was a serious blow. But I'd also gotten really good and putting myself back together and moving forward, as I was determined to do, damn it.

Roan Blackwell didn't exist and I wasn't in a sex slump because I was rethinking my strict rule on monogamy. I just needed a reset, that was all.

There was an 8K happening to raise money for the local group home in Hope Valley, and maybe training for that would get my head back in the game.

My shoulders straightened and the tension in my chest finally started to loosen. And with my renewed faith that this was going to work, I turned on my heel and strutted back into my friend's wedding, determined to put that minor episode out of my head for good.

ROAN

*H*ope Valley, Virginia was nothing like I'd expected as I turned my truck off the highway and followed the navigation system's instructions through the farmland and ranches along the outskirts to the very heart of downtown.

The small-town vibe was strong as hell. Tucked deep in the mountain valley, Hope Valley looked like a Thomas Kinkade painting come to life. The farther I drove, the more I could understand why Lincoln would set up his operation in a place like this, what with its gorgeous town square complete with its own gazebo and clocktower.

It was close enough to the bigger cities to keep him and his guys more than busy enough while still being separate from the drama that came with living in a large population. It was the best of both worlds and surrounded by beauty from every direction.

The robotic voice from the truck's navigation system came through the speakers, guiding me to another street just a few blocks from what appeared to be the main drag through downtown.

The Valley Inn, the only hotel in this tiny town, was a well-maintained Victorian that looked to have been converted from a single-family home. The drive and front walkway were made of crushed white pebbles, leading to a well-manicured lawn and garden full of deep greens and colorful flowers. Giant mossy oaks that had to have been planted around the time the historic building had been built bookended the structure, the massive limbs reaching well past the peak of the turret on top of the third story.

I'd counted myself lucky that the place hadn't been fully booked when I called to make a reservation, but looking at it now, I felt lucky just to be

staying in a place as stunning as the Valley Inn. As I walked up the five wooden steps onto the massive wrap-around porch, I could practically feel the place's rich history.

So far, Hope Valley had been a pleasant surprise full of promise. I just hoped my main reason for being here turned out to be as promising as the rest of the town.

On that thought, I grabbed the antique brass handle and twisted, pushing the door open. The inside of the inn was as nice a surprise as the outside, with deep wine-colored carpets and rich, dark wood on the banister of the curved staircase and reception desk.

The walls on either side of the tall windows had picture-frame molding and were painted a deep green that somehow went perfectly with the wood and carpet, as well as the brass accents like the wall sconces, without making the place look dated and stuffy. It all worked, and it worked *damn* well.

The furniture in the small lobby/living area was buttery leather in colors that reminded me of cognac and tobacco, and even without sitting on them, I knew they were comfortable enough you'd want to kick your feet up and stay a while.

"Hi. Can I help y—oh my god." The girl at the front desk dropped her jaw and her eyes bugged so wide I worried they were going to pop out on the wooden ledge in front of her. "Oh my *god!* You're—you—you're him! I mean, he's you." She clamped her mouth shut and shook her head like she was trying to get her thoughts together. "I mean you're Roan. Roan Blackwell. Right?"

I sent a silent thank you out to the universe that the lobby was empty at the moment. I had a feeling if word got out so soon about my arrival my cover would be good and blown, and for this to work, I needed anonymity for as long as possible.

I stepped closer to the front desk, dropping my duffle bag on the ground beside my boots. I rested my forearms on the credenza and gave the girl who looked to be no older than twenty my most charming *aw-shucks* smile. That smile hadn't failed me yet, and I could only hope my luck held through this encounter.

"Yeah, that's me," I started, then lowered my voice and leaned in like we were sharing a secret. "But I'd really love to keep it quiet that I'm in town. At least for a little while longer. You understand. Think you could keep it between us?"

Her eyes widened even more, her lips parting on a gust of breath. “Oh yeah,” she whispered conspiratorially. “For sure! Your secret’s totally safe with me.”

She mimed zipping her lips and locking them tight before tossing the imaginary key over her shoulder.

A chuckle resonated through my chest at the gesture. Usually I would have been in the middle of a silent freak-out about now, but there was something about her expression that put me at ease. She just seemed so damn sincere.

“Thanks . . .” I took a quick peek at the nametag pinned to her shirt. “Claire. I really appreciate it.”

The tips of her ears burned red at my use of her name. “Of course. Sure. Any time.” Her eyes darted all around, like she was struggling to maintain eye contact now that she knew who I was, so I decided it was best to get the ball rolling.

“I have a reservation under Roy Gates.”

It was the alias I always used when I was on the road. It was a name Alma had come up with years ago because she got a real kick out of the fact people were always screwing up my first name. She picked Gates because she’d been so sure that it was only a matter of time before I became famous, and once that happened, I’d be pulling in Bill Gates money. Keeping that alias was one of the many ways I tried keeping Alma with me, even the tiniest pieces, after I lost her.

Claire’s brow furrowed for a moment before realization dawned, then she gave herself a light smack on her forehead. “Of course, you wouldn’t have one under your actual name,” she said in a tone that screamed *duh*.

“Yeah. I kind of like my privacy. Found using a fake name made that easier.”

She hit me with a bright, cheery smile. “I totally get that.” She turned and plucked a key from the rows of hooks on the wall behind her before whipping back around to face me. “And don’t worry, Mr. Black—I mean Gates.” She gave me an over the top wink. “No one’s gonna hear it from me that you’re in town, and I’ll do my best to run interference. You know, at least while I’m on shift. But when it’s not me down here, it’s my mom or dad, and they’re both really discreet, so you don’t have to worry about that. You have my word.”

I took the key from her hand and tucked it into my pocket before bending to grab the handles of my duffle bag. “Appreciate that more than you know,

Claire.”

She beamed and lifted on her tiptoes, doing a little hop in place. “You’re in room 204. Just head up these stairs and make a right. There’s another set of stairs at the end of your hall that will lead you down by the side door, if you find yourself in need of a sneaky exit.” She pointed to the right, indicating a set of French doors that looked like they led out to a side patio. “The Wi-Fi code is at the bottom of the room service menu, and if you’re interested, we serve breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the dining room for all our guests. You just may want to”—she circled her index finger in front of my face—“you know, wear sunglasses or something. Maybe a ballcap.”

I lifted my fingers to my forehead and gave her a mock salute. “You got it.”

“Enjoy your stay, Mr. Gates. And don’t hesitate to call down here if you need anything.”

I climbed the stairs as Claire had indicated, the old wood creaking beneath my boots with each step, and made a right down a long hallway. Antique brass sconces lit the way and cast the perfect amount of light on the black and white photos that hung on the walls. I stopped to inspect the first few photographs. They looked to be old pictures of the town from decades ago. There were a few of the inn itself, back when it was a house, and it was interesting as hell to see how things had changed over the years.

I’d barely been in town, yet I could already tell why Alma had decided to make this place her home. It was her, through and through. It had everything she’d always told me she wanted. Something that Nashville, with its “big city vibes,” had lacked.

She’d talked about finding a small, quiet town to live and raise a family in, some place where you knew all of your neighbors and everyone looked out for each other. Some place where a quick stop at the grocery store turned into an hour-long trip because everyone you ran into was a friend. That had been her dream, growing up.

She’d made at least part of that a reality. One of the first questions I’d asked Lincoln was if she was already married and had a family. All I wanted was to win her back. She was the only woman in the world for me. But if there was already a man in the picture, I refused to be the asshole who tried to tear apart a family for his own selfish reasons. If she was happily with someone, it would have gutted me, but I would have let her be. I was here because Lincoln told me there was no one else, and hearing that had caused a

small kernel of hope to bloom inside me.

In the few weeks it had taken me to set this trip up, that bloom had turned into a weed that shot up in no time, wrapping itself around my insides and taking up every bit of space. That hope was so thick I could no longer see any other outcome than me winning back the woman I had never stopped loving. Not for a single second.

I couldn't let myself think I would fail. It was a road my mind wouldn't travel down. There was no other option for me.

I slid the key into the lock and pushed the door open, stepping into the room that would be my home for the foreseeable future. I was pleasantly surprised by the space. The dark wood four-poster bed in the center wasn't exactly my style, but the fluffy white comforter and fat pillows looked comfortable, and when I walked over to press down on the mattress, I delighted in the cozy yet firm pillow top.

Two high-backed reading chairs were near the far wall, catty-corner to the gas fireplace. Across from the bed, a tall window with a nice view of downtown and the foothills beyond allowed plenty of natural light to fill the space.

I could definitely make this work, a good thing because I'd booked the room for the next two weeks with the option to extend if necessary. And if Alma was anything like I remembered—stubborn and headstrong—it was going to take a hell of a lot longer than two weeks to win her back.

I tossed my duffle onto the bed and yanked the zipper open, ready to unpack, right as my phone began to ring.

I already knew who it was before I pulled it from my back pocket and looked at the screen. Cal had been calling non-stop for the past three days, and I'd blown his ass off every single time. I knew what he wanted, but I couldn't find it in me to give a shit. He was pushing for me to make the album the label wanted. He was going to be in for a very rude awakening.

It had taken too many years for me to finally pull my head out of my ass, but I wasn't going to bend. Not this time.

I swiped my thumb across the screen to answer and tucked the phone between my ear and shoulder as I scooped up a stack of T-shirts. "What?" I clipped out as I carried my clothes to the chest of drawers.

"Where the hell are you?" my manager barked in my ear, his voice thready and slightly high-pitched. "I've been calling for days!"

"I'm aware. I didn't feel like talking. Still don't, but I figured I'd say it

out loud since you're clearly not getting the message."

"What the hell, Roan?" His voice got higher as he ranted, a clear sign he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. "You can't just ignore me."

"Pretty sure I can, Cal. You're my manager, not my mom, my wife, or my girlfriend; therefore, I don't have to answer to you."

His muffled curses carried through the line. "Since I haven't been able to reach you, I went by your place this morning and your cleaning lady said you were out of town. What the fuck, Roan? Where are you?"

It would be a cold day in hell before I told him where I was currently staying. Not only would he throw a shit-fit I didn't want to deal with, but I wouldn't put it past him to blow my cover in order to corner me into doing what he wanted.

"Decided to get out of town for a bit, take a little vacation," I said, the lie rolling easily off my tongue.

"You in the Caymans again?"

Of course he'd suspect something obnoxiously ostentatious like that, because he was used to working with rich, entitled assholes—myself included—who didn't think twice about hopping a jet to some far-off beach for a little R and R.

"Nope."

He let out a huff of annoyance. "You're not going to tell me where you are, are you?"

"Nope," I repeated simply.

"At least tell me you aren't shackled up somewhere with some bimbo we're going to have to pay off after you finish your fuck-a-thon so she doesn't leak the details to the press."

My molars ground together so hard it was a wonder they didn't crack. It really pissed me off whenever Cal lumped me in with his other clients. I hadn't exactly been a choir boy over the past decade, but I wasn't nearly as bad as he made me sound. I didn't run off to private islands to get my dick wet with whatever random woman I picked up at a club or bar.

One time, I'd had a one-night stand with a woman who decided the following morning she wanted a hell of a lot more than I was willing to give her. When I said as much, she decided to exact her revenge by going to a gossip rag and sharing every detail of our night together.

The label had been pissed. I was their token golden boy. The all-American, salt of the earth country boy with a winning smile and a velvet

voice. I sang about pride in my country and voiced my support for our troops. I was the human equivalent of apple fucking pie.

They'd cashed in on my wholesome image, but once word got out I preferred to take my women on all fours while I held their hair wrapped around my fist, that illusion had been shattered.

Luckily—depending on how you looked at it—the women liked that combination of wholesome on the streets and dirty as fuck in the bedroom, and my stock went up. The label re-tooled my branding, sexed up my image a little more, and like the stupid fucking idiot I was, I'd gone with it, a big old smile on my face as the money continued to roll in.

Now that the rose-colored glasses were long gone, I realized not a single person had my back. If that scandal had gone in a different direction, they'd have dropped me faster than a malaria-covered sack of flaming shit.

They only gave a damn when I was making them money. That was why they were pushing back so hard on my next album. Why fix something that, in their eyes, wasn't broken? Stick with the tried and true instead of branching out.

But I couldn't do it. Not this time. Over the years, I'd lost sight of why I wanted to do this in the first place. I'd let the industry change me. Mold me into what they wanted until I completely lost sight of who I was. My sound had gone from unique and heart-felt to watered-down, feel-good bullshit for the masses.

I hated myself for not seeing it until recently. For not listening to Alma when she tried telling me I was losing sight of who I was and what I wanted. In the end, my ignorance had cost me everything that ever mattered. I could only pray I wasn't too late to right all my countless wrongs.

I closed my eyes and silently counted to ten as I pulled in a deep breath through my nose. Once I felt like I wouldn't lose my shit, I spoke. "I'll call you when I'm back in town. Until then, I need a break."

"But the label's expecting to hear some new material from you soon."

My vision coated red, the sound of my blood pumping through my ears temporarily tuned everything else out.

"Thought I made my feelings clear on what the label wants," I gritted out.

"Roan." Cal said my name on a sigh, like he was dealing with a bratty-ass kid. "Be reasonable."

"Fuck reasonable. You know what? My contract with them is coming to an end soon, so I'm going to take this time to reevaluate my current

situation.”

He sputtered through the phone for a good ten seconds before asking, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I’m no longer sure you or the label are a good fit anymore.”

That was met with even more sputtering. “You—you can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I’m dead fucking serious. Never liked you much, Cal. Think that’s been pretty obvious. But I put up with you because you were good at your job. But things have changed. Either you get on board with those changes, or find your ass a new client.”

With that, I hung up and tossed the phone onto the mattress, reaching up with my thumb and middle fingers to massage my aching temples.

I was done dealing with his shit. I had other, far more important things going on in my life at the moment, and I was determined to give them all of my time and attention. My life in Nashville wasn’t even on my radar.

In the past, that might have caused me serious anxiety. But now I didn’t mind leaving all that shit behind one damn bit.

ROAN

I'd taken Claire's advice from earlier and slapped a ballcap over my dark hair and slid on a pair of sunglasses before I headed for the main stairs. I could have taken the side staircase, but I wanted to see if my little disguise worked.

I heard voices coming from the front desk area as I hit the staircase, and ducked my head as I descended the stairs to the first floor. From the corner of my eye I saw Claire talking to a young guy about her age. He was looking at her with a crooked, slightly goofy smile on his face, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans that appeared to be a size too big.

The first thought that popped into my head was that this kid was way out of his league. Claire was a pretty little thing, with long cornsilk hair and smiling blue eyes, and I couldn't imagine the gangly guy with hearts in his eyes had a shot in hell. But a peek at Claire showed her head was ducked, her cheeks flushed a shy pink, and a timid smile played on her lips as she listened to whatever the guy was saying.

I hit the foot of the stairs, drawing their attention my way, and offered a two-finger salute in their direction as I kept my face pointed forward, hoping like hell the kid didn't recognize me.

"Have a good afternoon, Mr. Gates," Claire called to my back. I appreciated what she was trying to do, using my pseudonym to try and keep my cover under wraps, but the way she stressed my so-called name would have come off as weird to anyone who wasn't too busy mooning after her.

I glanced back over my shoulder and caught her exuberant smile and double thumbs-up, like she was silently conveying that the disguise was good. I nodded, a smile pulling at my lips, and headed out into the bright,

beautiful day.

I gave myself enough time to stroll through downtown Hope Valley before my meeting with Lincoln, taking time to get an up-close look at everything the town had to offer. There was a salon near the town square, the large script adhered to the window read Pure Elegance, and as I walked past, I noticed every station had someone sitting in it, and the chairs that lined one of the walls were all full with waiting customers. Seemed it was the salon of choice for the ladies of Hope Valley.

There were other shops, businesses, and boutiques. The parking lot of a local restaurant, Evergreen Diner, was at least half full, even though it was past lunch time and not quite time for dinner, leading me to believe the townspeople believed in taking care of their own.

As far as I could see, there were no big box stores anywhere, no chain restaurants or fast food stops. Not a Starbucks in sight. Instead, there was a coffee shop called Muffin Top that must have been popular, given the fact a line extended more than half the length of the space when I pulled the heavy glass door open and stepped inside for an afternoon pick-me-up.

I tugged the brim of my hat farther down on my forehead and kept the shades firmly in place as I shuffled forward with the rest of the patrons toward that caffeinated bliss.

The shop smelled strongly of fresh-roasted coffee beans, sugar, and spice. The tall glass pastry cases on either side of the front counter were stocked with delicious looking treats that made my mouth water.

I made it to the front of the line without being recognized and quickly put in an order for a large black coffee and a blueberry muffin nearly as big as my face before heading out the door and resuming my casual stroll down the sidewalk.

I took the first sip of my coffee and I let out a mumbled, "Damn." I wasn't sure I'd ever had a better tasting cup of coffee. Wanting to see if the pastries lived up to the coffee, I took a chomp out of the muffin, my eyes nearly rolling back in my head as the flavors burst on my tongue.

Whoever the owner was had used fresh blueberries, giving the muffin a bite of tartness that was the perfect balance to the sweet. Seemed I'd found where I would be getting my coffee and breakfast for the foreseeable future.

I passed a bar cleverly called the Tap Room and turned the corner onto the next block where Alpha Omega, Lincoln's private investigation and security firm, was located.

It was my first time stepping into his domain, and it certainly wasn't what I'd been expecting. The lobby's huge floor-to-ceiling windows looked out onto the sidewalk beyond. Black leather couches for waiting clients faced each other with a gleaming glass coffee table between them. Where the inn was small-town and full of quaint history, this place was modern and top-of-the-line everything. Hell, there was even a coffee bar on the back wall with a machine that looked like something you'd expect to see on a spaceship.

Thank Christ I'd stopped for a caffeine boost before I got here, because I didn't think I could work that machine if I'd had a gun pointed to my head.

"May I help you?"

I was pulled out of my exploration by the woman settled behind the reception desk. If I had to guess, I'd have put her somewhere in her mid-to-late fifties. She had a shock of red hair that couldn't have possibly been natural, because I was pretty sure I'd never seen a color that bright in nature. Her makeup was bold, with bright blue eye shadow, deep pink blush, and a bright red lipstick. From my vantage point beyond the desk, she liked to wear her clothes tight and didn't shy away from showing cleavage. Yet somehow, the woman managed to make the whole thing work without it coming off as gaudy. She had an air to her that screamed she knew who the hell she was and made no apologies for it.

I moved toward the desk, my charming smile in full force. "Hi. I have an appointment with Lincoln Sheppard. The name's—"

"Know who you are," she said before I could give her the alias I'd given Lincoln. "Have a seat and I'll call him for you." Her tone was almost bored as she pointed me over to the couches with a long, blood-red nail.

My chin jerked back, and the shock must have registered on what she could see of my face behind the cap and sunglasses, because she didn't hesitate to explain. "I'm guessin' you expected me to fall all over myself fawnin' after you?" she scoffed. "Boy, I got news for you. I'm far too fabulous my own damn self to care about some celebrity."

Oh, I liked this woman.

I took the sunglasses off and tucked one of the temples into the collar of my T-shirt as my grin stretched wider. "Roan Blackwell," I said as I extended my hand over the credenza of her desk. "And you are?"

She gave my hand a perfunctory shake. "Roxanne. And totally out of your league, so you may as well take that panty-droppin' smile of yours somewhere else."

Okay, I *really* liked her.

A chuckle worked its way from my chest. “Lovely Roxanne, please tell me you’re single and willing to run away with me.”

Her brightly painted lips curled up in a smirk. “Hate to break it to you, but I’m married. And my old man would snap you like a twig.”

“She’s not lyin’,” a voice said from behind me. I turned to find Linc standing in an open doorway, arms crossed, his shoulder resting on the doorframe.

I pushed off the desk and started in his direction. “Hey, man. Good to see you.” We clasped hands and pulled each other in for a quick back slap before separating. “Good to see you too. You’re right on time. Come on in.” He tipped his chin and stepped to the side, making room for me to pass. “Rox, hold my calls,” he ordered as I closed in on him.

Before I made it past him, I turned to look back over my shoulder at the receptionist. “We’re not done yet. Our little meet-cute is to be continued, darlin’.”

She laughed as Linc clapped me on the shoulder. “You’d never survive her, brother. Trust me.”

He closed the door, rounded the large executive desk against the back wall, and lowered himself into the black leather chair behind it. On top of the desk were stacks of files and documents with a layer of dust on the top page thick enough to tell me he wasn’t a huge fan of paperwork. A large calendar covered the center, with two picture frames that sat at a slant at each corner, facing him.

The first was a wedding photo of him and his wife, a stunning woman with big doe eyes you’d expect to see on a cartoon princess, not in real life. He had her tucked deep against his chest, holding her like she was his reason for breathing. Her head rested beneath his chin, a tiny little thing that stood at least a foot shorter than him, and her hair, somewhere between blonde and brunette, pinned up in a fancy updo for their big day.

The other picture was the two of them again. Linc was still holding his woman in that protective way, but in this one, he had his other arm wrapped around a toddler balanced on his hip. The little girl couldn’t have been more than three years old in that picture, with her momma’s big eyes and coloring and Linc’s blond hair. Both females were beaming at whoever was holding the camera, and while Linc’s smile wasn’t on par with theirs, the man had a look in his eyes like he couldn’t possibly have been any happier with his life

than he was in that moment.

I flipped the frame around so it faced me. “Good-looking family you got there, bud.”

His eyes went soft as he looked at his family. “Thanks. Eden, my wife, and our baby girl, Naomi. Girl’s only three years old and already doing my head in,” he said without the slightest bit of exasperation. I was willing to bet he not-so-secretly loved it.

“Happy for you, brother,” I said as I returned the frame to its rightful place and took a seat in one of the chairs in front of his desk. “You built yourself a real good thing here.”

“I’m a lucky bastard, nothing else to it.” He leaned back, resting his elbows on the arms of his chair and interlacing his fingers, his palms resting on his stomach. “So, Alma Rossi.”

Just hearing someone speak her name made my chest constrict.

“Alma Rossi,” I repeated. Saying her name cost me. It had since the moment I lost her, but it was a price I’d gladly pay time and time again. I had so many regrets in my life, but knowing her wasn’t one of them. It never could be.

His demeanor changed just then, his expression turning serious. Time to get down to business. “She’s going to be okay with you showing up in her town?”

My gut told me his willingness to help was going to hinge on my response. I could lie and tell him it would be no big deal, but I knew better than to try. If I wanted to get help from a man like Lincoln Sheppard, I needed to be straight up.

“Honestly? No. Probably not.”

His nostrils flared on a deep inhale. “Thinkin’ I’m gonna need a little more than that, Roan. You’re asking me to hand over what I got on a woman who means something to *my* woman. I can’t, in good conscience, do that until I know a little more. Who is she to you?”

I let out a breath. “She’s everything, Linc.”

“Christ,” he grunted, sitting up to pick up his phone. “Rox, go ahead and clear my schedule for the rest of the day. This is gonna take a while.”

ALMA

“*T*his is bullshit!”

I slowed my pace and glanced back over my shoulder to see Layla a few yards back, hunched over with her hands braced on her knees as she huffed and puffed like she was struggling to pull air into her lungs.

I jogged to a stop and turned on the heel of my running shoe, heading back in her direction. “Hey, you okay?”

She twisted her neck to look at me; the murderous glare in her eyes would have been enough to freeze me to my very core if she weren’t a sweaty, disheveled mess, seconds away from collapsing where she stood.

“No, I’m not okay!” she croaked. “Does *this* look okay to you?” She continued to hold herself up with one arm on her knee and waved the other down the length of her crumpled body.

I rolled my eyes at her ridiculousness. “It’s not that bad. We’ve barely gone two miles.”

She let out an exasperated huff. “Oh God! That was only two miles? Jesus, deliver me. I’m dying,” she wheezed as she lowered her knees to the sidewalk.

“Layla, what the hell? Get up,” I hissed, looking around the quiet suburban street.

“This is how it ends for me,” she whined dramatically as she walked her hands forward until she was spread eagle on her belly, stretched across the sidewalk like a dying starfish. “I always hoped I’d die while having sex with Jude, but this is how I go. Death by running with my sadistic asshole of a friend. Just leave me here.” She lifted her arm an inch off the ground and waved me off with the flop of her limp hand. “Go on without me. But tell

Jude I loved him. And his dick. Especially his dick.”

I scrunched my face in disgust. “I’m not doing any of that, most especially the dick part. Now get up. You look ridiculous. If anyone sees you like this, they’re gonna call for a mental health check.”

She pushed to sitting with an exaggerated groan, kicking her legs out wide and looking up at me with a killing glare. “Tell me again why I agreed to do this run with you?”

I bent and grabbed her wrist, hefting her off the ground. “Because we both agreed it’ll feel good to accomplish something this big. Because it’s for a great cause. Because—”

She held up her hand to cut me off. “Okay, okay. I don’t need you to go through the whole list of excuses you used to get me to do this insane run.”

I smiled in triumph.

“But you never told me you were a freaking robot,” she grumbled. “You said we were going to start out with a light jog. You didn’t tell me you’re Jason fucking Bourne. Meanwhile, I’m over here trying to stuff my lung back down my throat.”

I smiled, propping my hands on my hips as I moved from foot to foot to keep my muscles warm. “I take it that’s your eloquent way of asking me to slow my pace a little bit?”

She responded by flipping me the bird.

“All right,” I said with a laugh. “I’ll take it easy on you from here on out. Now are you ready to get back to it?”

“Fine, but you owe me a coffee,” she bargained. “And a cheese Danish. A *big* one.”

“Deal.”

We started to move, me itching to speed up, her limping along like every joint in her body was displaced. She was hobbling along like my great-grandma before she’d gotten her hips replaced.

I kept pace with her as we hobbled down the tree-lined streets and out of the subdivision toward the town square. It wasn’t a far walk to get to the best coffee shop in the entire freaking state, but at our current pace, it was going to take forever.

I almost offered to give her a piggyback ride the rest of the way there, but I worried she’d back out of the 8k, and I really needed a running buddy.

Ever since Asher’s wedding, the universe had been betraying me with constant reminders of the past. It was really freaking hard to keep all things

Roan Blackwell locked in that metal box in my mind where it belonged when he was being thrust front and center every time I turned around.

Every time I started my car, it was one of his stupid songs playing on the radio. I could *swear* that I tuned the stereo away from any country stations, but somehow, it always turned back. Like it was being controlled by some evil, sadistic bitch ghost. Then, while I had the news playing on the television as I got ready for the day, one of the top stories had something to do with him and a dispute over his label or something. I tried *really* hard not to listen to what the stupid overly-teased and hair-sprayed-to-an-inch-of-her-life news anchor was saying, but I wasn't able to block it out on my dead sprint from the bathroom to the bedroom where the remote was. And there had been no way to *not* see the picture of him they flashed across the screen. It was the one time I cursed buying such a big television.

But the worst part was the owner and main choreographer of Whiskey Dolls, McKenna, had introduced a new routine, and it was to one of that asshole's songs. I would have rather had all my teeth drilled down to nubs than perform to a Roan Blackwell song, but I couldn't exactly say that out loud without having to field a ton of questions from my friends that I absolutely didn't feel like answering.

When I moved to Hope Valley, it was to escape my past. It was my home now, and Whiskey Dolls was my safe place. Or at least it used to be. I felt like the bastard was infiltrating my life. Like there was no escaping him.

We finally managed to make it to the local coffee shop that served the best coffee and pastries I'd ever had, and pushed through the doors into heaven itself.

There were countless reasons why I loved my small town so damn much, but Muffin Top held the number one spot on that list. Some people thought it was ridiculous to spend more than three bucks on a cup of coffee, but I was convinced those people had never tasted the brilliance that the owner, Danika Drake, created. That or they were just plain stupid.

I headed to the counter to order while Layla limped to one of the tables in front of the window and collapsed into a chair.

"Hey, Alma. How's it going?" Dani greeted from behind the front counter. The shop owner wasn't much older than I was, and had married one of the town's detective's, Leo Drake, a few years back. Not only was she an amazing person, but being friends with her meant I got the added perk of her occasionally stashing away whatever the pastry of the week was if she knew

it was a favorite of mine.

“It’s good. Just got finished with a run.”

“Ah.” She leaned to the side so she could look over my shoulder. “That explains why Layla looks like she’s about to have a heart attack in the middle of my shop.”

I turned to look back at Layla. She was still sitting in the chair, but her top half was sprawled across the top of the table. “Yep,” I said flatly before turning back to face Dani. “And we didn’t even go that far.”

She laughed. “I’ll add a water to your order. Just keep her from dying on my floor, okay? I’m pretty sure that’s a major health code violation.”

I ordered our coffees, along with Layla’s giant cheese Danish and a ham and swiss croissant for me. By the time I made it to our table, Layla’s color had turned more normal, and she was sitting up again.

“Here.” I plunked the water down in front of her first and took the chair across from her. “Drink that first.”

She snatched the clear plastic cup off the table like it held the meaning of life and guzzled it down in seconds.

I watched silently as she slammed the cup down on the table with a loud *aaah*.

“Feel better?”

She gave me an angry, scrunched-up look. “Well, I don’t feel like I’m going to die anymore, if that makes you feel better.”

I slid the Danish across the table to her as a peace offering, and brought my coffee to my lips, drinking deep. “It’ll get easier. I promise.”

She scoffed. “I’m having a bit of trouble believing you, given how today has gone, but I’m willing to give it another shot,” she said on a dramatic sigh.

“How magnanimous of you,” I said flatly.

She bit into her Danish, her cheeks puffing out as she mumbled through a full mouth. “I don’t understand how you claim that relaxes you. The only reason a person should run is if they’re being chased by a hoard of rabid zombies or if Nordstrom is offering a half-off sale on all name-brand designers. In that case, not only do you run, but you take out every person in your path.”

I lifted my coffee cup in the air to clink against hers. “Amen to that.”

She arched a brow, eyeing me knowingly. “So, you want to tell me what’s up with you lately?”

“What are you talking about?” My brows pinched together in confusion.

“Nothing’s going on with me.”

She looked at me like she knew I was full of shit. “Really? So what’s with all the running?”

“I told you. There’s an 8k coming up and I want to get in shape for it.”

She watched me over the rim of her coffee cup as she took a long, slow sip. “Alma, it’s an 8k, that’s barely five miles. For me, that sounds like a freaking nightmare, but for you, that’s nothing. You’re a freak of nature that runs three miles a day just for the hell of it. But you’ve become obsessed. Tell me, was this the first time you’ve run today?”

I clamped my mouth shut. I wanted to blurt out a lie, tell her she didn’t know what the hell she was talking about, but I knew it wouldn’t do any good. The perceptive little sneak. And odds were, if she suspected something was going on, so did the other girls. That was my second, and since it hadn’t been enough to wear me out, odds were, I’d go for another one before the day was over.

“I’m fine, Lay. I’ve had a lot of pent-up energy lately.”

That wasn’t the case, of course. The truth was, I’d needed to do whatever I could to exhaust myself. The only way I could manage a full night’s sleep without dreaming of the past was if I exerted myself to the point I crashed the instant my head hit the pillow.

“It’s not that, and you know it. You’ve been weird at rehearsals too. It’s like you’re there, but not really there.”

Well shit. I thought I’d hidden my discomfort a lot better than I had, apparently. But I wasn’t about to go down that road. Not now. Not ever, if I could help it.

I did my best to school my features, to paste on that mask I had been living behind for the past decade. I’d turned myself into a whole new person after Roan, and I wasn’t about to lose her now. She was so much stronger than I used to be.

I was having a couple off weeks, that was all. I’d get myself back to rights soon enough. In the meantime, I would fake it until that happened.

ALMA

I sat in front of my vanity mirror in the dressing room at the back of Whiskey Dolls, preparing to go out for my first performance tonight. I loved everything about performing. The heat of the lights, the applause, the spike of adrenaline that hits your veins the moment that first note echoed out of the speakers to the moment the lights went out at the very end of the number.

I loved the way I pushed my body to its limit, then a little further just to prove I could. And the feeling of accomplishment that came every time I nailed a routine perfectly. For me, there was no greater feeling in the world than being up on that stage.

I'd been dancing for as long as I could remember, and I'd known from a very young age I wanted to somehow make it a career. My parents worried, of course, wishing their little girl would do something safe, something that would guarantee success as an adult. But that wasn't in the cards for me. It was dancing or nothing.

I trained, I auditioned, I took every class that covered every style I found interesting until I excelled at it. There was always the thought in the back of my mind I could start my own dance school, but I kept that tucked away for the future. I wanted the spotlights. I wanted the applause. I wanted to go out with my sisters three nights a week and give epic performances that people couldn't stop talking about. At least for a while longer.

My body couldn't do this forever, and I could always teach once the time came for me to pass my Whiskey Dolls crown on to the next generation.

Leaning closer to the mirror, I dragged the fine tip of my liquid eyeliner across my lid, swiping upward at the very end to create a perfect stark black

wing with a razor-sharp point. For a woman who used to never wear makeup, I'd gotten really good at glamming myself up over the years. I could apply winged eyeliner in my sleep, pop on a set of false lashes, and drag my favorite red lipstick, aptly named Blood Kiss, across my lips without a mirror and still get it right.

It was all part of my mask.

Gone were the freckles, hidden behind a layer of makeup I never left the house without, not even if I was going for a run or to rehearsals. The Alma of the past used to be fresh-faced, wide-eyed, and full of dreams. The Alma I was now wore her signature red lipstick like the armor it was intended to be, preferred cat eyes to doe eyes, and stopped dreaming a hell of a long time ago. She knew better now. She knew what hoping and wishing got you.

A whole lot of nothing.

I'd wised up a hell of a lot over the years. If anyone from my past saw me now, they wouldn't recognize me. And I preferred it that way. I'd turned myself from a young, heartbroken girl into a vamp. A woman who could eat men alive.

With one last coat of Blood Kiss on my lips, I sat up straight and fluffed the pin-curls I wore in my hair for my first performance.

A wolf whistle called from behind me, and I looked past my reflection in the mirror to Charlotte standing behind me. "You're doing the number night? I love when you do the number!"

The number was a solo performance I did with a pair of large feather fans that hid my body most of the time I was on stage. I wore a racy little costume made to look like a slinky negligée made of strings of pearls. Flesh-toned Lycra made up the spaces between, providing modesty but giving the illusion I was wearing nothing underneath.

It wasn't a number I performed often, but I was always excited when McKenna, or Mac as we all called her, put it on the schedule. It was one of the few I had choreographed myself and seemed to be a real crowd pleaser. It made me feel feminine and sexy and totally fierce.

"You always look so damn hot up there on the stage when you do that number," Marin said from a couple stations down from mine. "Like a real femme fatale."

That was exactly what I needed to hear, what I was trying my best to emulate. God, I had the best friends in the universe.

The door to the dressing room was thrown open, and Sloane came

bursting in, cheeks flushed, eyes wide and bright with excitement.

“You’re not going to *believe* what Silas just told me! Okay, well, he didn’t really tell me so much as I overheard him briefing the rest of his security team, but still.”

Asher, fresh from her honeymoon and all tanned and glowy, held up her hand to slow a frantic Sloane down. “Whoa, whoa. Just take a breath.” Sloane did as ordered, her chest heaving with a massive breath. “All right. Now tell us what’s got your eavesdropping panties in such a bunch.”

Sloane rolled her lips between her teeth for a second and hopped from foot to foot like she could barely contain herself. “No one is supposed to know this, but there’s actually a celebrity coming in tonight.” She finished on a squeal so high it could have shattered glass.

A shutter of excitement filled the dressing room. “Did you hear who it was?” Layla asked.

Sloane’s face pinched up with a sour expression. “No,” she answered with a pout. “He caught me before getting to the good part and made me leave. The stupid jerk,” she ended on a grumble.

I turned back to the mirror and went about my routine, uninterested by whatever celebrity felt like coming to our bar. There’d been a time in my life where it wasn’t uncommon for me to rub elbows with famous people or people on their way up. I’d learned enough to know that most of them weren’t nearly as impressive as people made them out to be.

It really was amazing the way a person’s ego could inflate with just the smallest bit of fame. That was all it took to turn a person unrecognizable. To make someone you might have loved once a complete asshole, and I had no desire to set a single foot near that world ever again.

McKenna came into the dressing room just then, breaking up the conversation. “Five minutes to stage, Alma. You ready?”

“Just about,” I assured her.

I placed the finishing touches on my look, made sure my costume was in place, and mentally ran through the number as I made my way to the back of the stage. When the lights went out, I took my first position, my back to the audience and my fans held in such a way as to obscure me until I flicked them closed.

I breathed deeply, waiting for that hit of adrenaline, only tonight it was weakened by a different feeling. One I hadn’t experienced in all the times I’d walked onto this stage. Instead of my blood feeling like it was on fire with

the need to dance, I felt a tingle beneath my skin, as if someone was watching me. Which was ridiculous since I was standing on a stage in front of at least a hundred people. But this was different somehow.

I couldn't quite explain it. It was more centralized, as though one single pair of eyes was piercing my skin and seeing deep inside of me.

I shook off the strange sensation just before the spotlights flared and the opening beats of the song started. Then I pushed everything else away.

* * *

Roan

There was no use denying it, the set up at Whiskey Dolls was impressive as hell. I'd been to my fair share of clubs and bars, but this was a first. The club was done up in dark, rich wood, the walls draped in deep crimson velvet. The ambience gave the feel of stepping back in time, during prohibition. That, coupled with the way the staff was dressed, felt like I was sitting smack in the middle of a speakeasy in the 1920s.

After talking to Lincoln, I'd done a little digging on the Whiskey Dolls, the club as well as the performers who made the place so damn popular, and after what I read, I couldn't believe I'd never heard of this place before.

It was *the* place to be almost every night of the week, to the point I worried about getting in without blowing my cover. Fortunately, one of Linc's guys knew the guy working head of security here, and with one phone call, they set it up for me to come in through a private entrance in the back, and from there, I was escorted to a table in a dimly lit corner of the club.

Everyone in the building was there to see the women who'd made this club famous, so no one was paying much attention to me, thank Christ, since this place had a strict dress code that didn't allow for my sunglasses or baseball caps.

I'd traded in my signature uniform of jeans, cowboy boots, and T-shirt with an unbuttoned flannel over top, and dressed in slacks and a button-down tonight. It wasn't something I was known for wearing. I was branded as a country boy through and through, so it was rare for me to wear suits and even rarer to be seen in a tux. Only for red carpets.

But as I got ready in my room at the inn earlier that evening, I felt the need to do something different. Something special. The Alma I'd known in the past knew how much I hated dressing like some well-off prick, and I wanted her to know that I'd taken our first time seeing each other in a decade seriously. I wanted her to know it was special to me, *she* was special. So I'd done more with my hair than simply running my fingers through it right out of the shower. I'd trimmed up the beard I'd been growing since my arrival in Hope Valley. I wore the goddamn monkey suit, all for her. And as I sat at that table, waiting for my first glimpse of her in ten years, my heart beat against my sternum so fucking hard I thought it might bust right out of my chest and onto the table in front of me. I could barely hear anything over the whoosh of blood pumping in my ears.

Christ, I couldn't remember a time in my life when I'd ever been this nervous, and I couldn't stop the thought that, despite the weeks leading up to this moment, I hadn't fully prepared myself for this night. For what it meant.

The show hadn't even started yet, but I was unable to tear my eyes off the darkened stage, knowing it was only a matter of time. From the corner of my eye, I saw a waitress approach, dressed in a 20s cigarette girl uniform to go with the theme of the club. The head of security, Silas, stopped her before she made it to me and bent to speak quietly into her ear.

Even in the dimly lit club, I could make out the way the woman's eyes flared, but Silas had assured me, everyone who worked at Whiskey Dolls was a professional, and they would be discreet. Clearly, whatever he said to the waitress drove that point home, because when she made it to my table, the surprise was gone and she looked at me the same way I assumed she'd look at any of her customers. She didn't know it yet, but she'd just earned herself one hell of a tip.

"Evening," she spoke with a hint of a Southern drawl in her voice. "What can I get you tonight?"

"Lagavulin. Neat, please," I ordered, only tearing my eyes off the stage for the second it took to offer her a polite smile.

She returned the expression. "You got it. Be right back with your drink." And with that, she spun on custom Mary Janes and made a beeline for the bar. Silas gave me a tip of his chin and disappeared into the shadows, my guess, heading back to his office at the back of the club to keep an eye on everything else.

On the walk to the table, I'd noticed there were security guards

strategically placed all throughout the club, even one not too far from my table, their eyes constantly scanning the crowds, looking for troublemakers. It made sense, given the impeccable reputation I'd read the club maintained.

These guys would have to be on a swivel to keep shit from going down, especially if the dancers were as popular as they appeared to be. And given what I knew of Alma and how talented she was, I knew those stories couldn't have been exaggerated.

Just as the waitress returned with my drink, the lighting lowered. A hush of anticipation fell over the entire audience, and I leaned forward, one hand gripping my tumbler like a vise as my heart lodged itself in my throat.

The stage spotlights blinked on as Gin Wigmore's "Kill of the Night" blasted through the club's sound system.

I couldn't have ripped my eyes from her if I'd had a gun to my head. My heart pounded with the beat of the song, the harsh, painful breaths sawing in and out of my lungs. The woman on stage was a fucking vision.

It was her. My Alma. Not a single doubt about it. But there was something else there. Something unfamiliar tied in with everything that was the woman I remembered better than the back of my own hand. It took me a while to spot it, but when I finally did, it caused a piercing pain in my chest, like a knife had been driven right between my ribs.

There was a hardness in her eyes, in that bright red smile. The way she carried herself now was different. Like a kitten having grown up and discovered it had sharp claws.

She danced and moved like poetry, like always. But the way she drew the audience in with her eyes, seducing them with a single look, well, that was new. At least new to me. It was as if the woman I'd known, the one I'd fallen in love with the moment I laid eyes on her, was wearing a Teflon-coated armor that wouldn't let anyone past.

But still . . . even with the layer of ice she cloaked herself in, my body reacted the same as it always had when I watched her do what she did best. My cock stirred beneath my fly, hardening to steel for the woman who mesmerized me with every move on the stage.

She'd definitely grown up in the past ten years.

She had always been beautiful to me, but there was more curve to her hips now, a more pronounced dip at her waist. She was womanlier now, having filled out in all the right places, and as she spun around on the stage, giving us all a glimpse of that perfect peach of an ass, I felt my cock weep as

my blood filled with a longing only Alma Rossi had ever stirred to life.

I wanted her. I could still remember what it felt like to sink into her wet, velvety heat, to feel her flutter around me. I could close my eyes and picture her face as she took every inch of me, that awe in her eyes, like she wasn't sure she could do it, followed by a pleased little grin once I bottomed out inside her. Or the breathtaking beauty on her face every time I made her come.

Jesus. I could remember how it made me feel every time I put that look on her face, how I felt like I was ten feet tall, fucking indestructible, all because I could pleasure my woman in a way no other man could.

At least that used to be the case.

An unpleasant thought slithered to the front of my mind. In the ten years since I lost her, had she found some other man who could do for her what I used to do? Had she given someone else that little grin? That flare of her eyes right before she sunk her teeth into her bottom lip as those walls of hers fluttered. Had there been other men to make her cry out and moan the way I had?

Jealousy rushed over me, and all of a sudden, I couldn't stomach the thought of all these people seeing her up on that stage, so much of her body revealed in that fucking costume that barely covered her tits.

How many men were sitting in the audience at that very moment, sporting a hard-on like I was?

My molars ground together, my vision turning hazy and red. Lifting my glass, I threw back the scotch without even tasting it, needing the burn it provided to keep me grounded.

The waitress reappeared with another drink before I could even ask, doubling the hefty tip I already planned to give her at the end of the night.

I watched the rest of Alma's number, feeling like a wild animal pacing its cage, desperate to escape. It wasn't until the song ended and the stage went dark that I was able to pull in a full breath.

ROAN

I didn't have a fully formed plan for how I would go about revealing myself to Alma. Just bits and pieces shoved together and held with tape to create a vague, generalized idea. But all of that went out the window after I saw her perform on that stage. In her element.

I hadn't wanted to blow my cover so soon and let people know I was here, but I knew that the hope of doing all of this silently, under the noses of the media and society, was a pipe dream. It was going to be damn near impossible to win Alma back without at least the people of Hope Valley knowing I was here. I could only hope this was the kind of small town where the people stuck close together, keeping most everything else on the outside. After all, that was what Alma had always dreamed of: living in a quiet, closed-off community that looked out for its own.

I wasn't naïve enough to think I wouldn't be found out eventually. I just prayed I managed to accomplish what I set out to accomplish by the time the vultures descended.

I waved the smart, helpful waitress over.

"Is there anything else I can get you, sir?"

"As a matter of fact, there is. Do you know if the owner is on site this evening?"

Her forehead creased in puzzlement. "Well, yeah. I mean, at least one of them is here every night. Usually both."

"Fantastic," I said, laying on the charm. "Do you think it would be possible for me to have a word with one or both of them?"

"Is—is there a problem?"

I waved her off before the panic could set in. "No. Not at all. In fact, I

can't remember the last time I had such amazing service." Her shoulders sank with a relieved breath. "I just wanted to let them know how wonderful this place they built is."

The worry vanished, quickly replaced by a beaming smile. "Yeah, it is pretty great, isn't it? You'd never in a million years believe this place used to be a dumpy strip club, would you?"

My eyes bugged out at that information. Apparently, I hadn't done nearly as deep a dive on this place as I thought. "Really?"

"Oh yeah. It was even named the Pink Palace." She pinched her face up and stuck her tongue out on a *blech*. "Talk about gross, right? Anyway, Mac—McKenna, I mean. We all call her Mac—she was a dancer here back in the day when it was the Pink—well, you know. She was a dancer, and her husband Bruce was a bouncer. Only they weren't married back then. I don't even know if they were dating. But like I was saying, they both worked here, and this big-time criminal guy owned it and was running it into the ground. Using it to launder money and sell drugs, that kind of stuff. It was *really* bad."

I blinked, trying to push my brain into a quicker jog to keep up with everything she was saying. "You're kidding?"

She shook her head, her expression growing serious. "Wish I was. I didn't work here—or there—at the time, but I've heard stories. Apparently, the cops were closing in on the guy and he freaked. Kidnapped Mac and another girl who was working here—there—at the time. Her name's Gypsy. Anyway, he kidnapped them and went on the run. The whole town was totally freaked. Fortunately, Gypsy's guy, Marco, worked with a bunch of badass dudes at this place called Alpha Omega. Them and the cops managed to find where the bad guy was holding the girls and rode in to save the day. After they were rescued, Bruce pulled his head out of his ass and made Mac his. The strip club closed up because it was totally gross and the owner was in jail. But Mac had this kickass idea to buy it and turn it into this. Bruce was totally down with the idea, and, well"—she waved her hands wide—"that was the beginning of Whiskey Dolls."

It took a full minute for me to comprehend everything this girl had dumped on me at a rapid-fire pace.

"Wow. That's—that's some story."

"Yeah, tell me about it," she said with a big smile. "Anyway, I'll go see if Bruce or Mac are here. Be back in a jiff."

With that, she took off and left me to wrap my mind around that story. I quickly pulled my phone out of my pocket and shot off a text to Lincoln.

Me: *Apparently you left out quite a bit when you told me how Whiskey Dolls got its start.*

He didn't take long in replying.

Linc: *Ah, I see you've heard the urban legend. Figured it would be more fun that way.*

Me: *Seems this little town has some pretty interesting history to it.*

Linc: *You manage to convince your woman your ugly mug's worth a second shot, Edie and I'll have you over for dinner. Fill you in on the other stories.*

I liked the sound of that. So much so that I decided right then and there it would most definitely happen. No matter how hard I had to work in order to achieve it.

I'd just tucked my phone back into my pocket when a man and woman came up to my table.

"Mr. Blackwell," the man greeted, holding out his hand. "Pleasure to meet you. The wife and I are big fans. I'm Bruce, and this here's my woman, McKenna."

I stood and took his offered hand, trying my hardest to hide the intimidation the beast of a man made me feel. Christ, no wonder he'd been a bouncer back in the day. The man was a fucking mountain.

"Pleasure's all mine. And please, call me Roan. You've got yourselves quite the establishment here. Never seen anything like it."

"Thanks," McKenna returned. "We're proud of it."

"As you should be." I lifted my brows. "Heard what you created this from and I can't even imagine. I know you've probably got your hands full, but if you have a minute, I'd love it if you'd join me for a drink."

I let out a sigh of relief when they both sat, taking the seats across from me. But there was no missing the shrewd look in McKenna's eye, and I couldn't shake the fact she was studying me closely, seeing something I would have preferred to keep closer to my vest.

My chatty waitress popped back up, carrying a refill for me, plus a bottle of beer and a fancy looking cocktail that she placed with perfect efficiency in front of the couple.

"We appreciate the invitation, but we can't stay long," McKenna began, lifting the cocktail to her lips and taking a sip. "So how about we get down to

business? I've spent my entire adult life learning to read people, and I've gotten damn good at it."

Bruce placed his beer back on the table after taking a pull, his other arm stretched across the back of his wife's chair. It was a move that was not only protective—something I understood even better after hearing their story—but also affectionate. "She really has," he confirmed.

McKenna jumped right to the point. "What do you really want to talk to us about? Because I'm pretty sure you didn't call us out here just to shoot the shit."

The smile I gave the woman wasn't my charming one. It was genuine. I liked this couple a lot. I respected the hell out of people who didn't give a shit about my name and reputation and preferred to shoot straight.

"Well, you see, I'm here for a woman," I started, leaning in to give them a story of my own. "The love of my life, actually. And I could really use your help."

* * *

Alma

The tingle that had burrowed its way under my skin the first time I stepped out on the stage had only gotten worse as the night progressed, and I couldn't shake it, no matter how hard I tried.

With the last performance of the night in the bag, I'd come back to the dressing room with the other girls and plopped down at my vanity, ready to shed my persona so I could drag my ass home and crawl into bed. A three-mile run earlier that day, plus a taxing night on stage had done wonders in wearing me out, and maybe, just maybe, I'd be able to sleep through the night without any dreams. At least that was the hope.

I pulled the pins out of my hair and dragged my fingers through, massaging my scalp before tangling my long, dark locks up in a messy bun. I'd remove my makeup once I got home. No matter how exhausted I was, I was diligent with my skincare routine, and I never missed a night.

I peeled myself out of the slinky costume and hung it up to be cleaned before pulling on a pair of leggings and a cropped sweater to ward off the

chill of the fall nights here in Tennessee. I was in the middle of a jaw cracking yawn when the dressing room door opened and Mac walked in.

“Hey ladies, great show tonight, as usual. I know you’re all ready to go home, but if you’ll just give me a few minutes, there’s a special guest here tonight who wants to introduce himself.”

My brows went up as I looked around at the other girls. Layla caught my eye and mouthed, “*Who do you think it is?*”

I lifted a single shoulder in a shrug, more interested in going home than meeting some bigshot who was probably an asshole when the cameras weren’t turned on him.

I let out a sigh and drooped my shoulders. *Might as well get this over with*, I told myself as I pasted on a fake smile. It was the very least I—or any of us—could do for Mac. I was convinced there wasn’t a better boss on the entire planet than her. Even though she signed our paychecks, she treated us like close friends, never employees, and she went out of her way to make sure we were safe from the moment we stepped on club grounds until we drove out of the lot.

Not only was the compensation more than fair, but she and Bruce had busted their asses to build something amazing here, placing us front and center of that, as the stars of the show. She always had our back if we wanted to choreograph a number ourselves, and provided help if we ever needed it. She pushed us just enough to make us the best, but never too far, demanding absolute perfection. Not to sound cliched, but we really were a family here, so for her, I’d kiss this guy’s ass. Whoever he was.

At least that was what I told myself until the moment that door opened again and the one person I never *ever* wanted to lay eyes on again came waltzing through with that cocky swagger I’d once found so attractive but now set my teeth on edge.

Roan Blackwell.

This had to have been some kind of nightmare. I must have fallen asleep at some point and hadn’t realized it. That was the only logical explanation for why my ex had suddenly infiltrated *my* club. My safe place.

He offered that stupid fucking *aw-shucks* grin of his to the room, setting off a domino effect of swoons as his whiskey and smoke voice rasped out, “Evening ladies. That sure was some show.”

God, I hated that voice. I hated how it vibrated from his throat, how it used to tickle my ear when he’d lean in close and whisper, how it still spread

chills across my arms.

I stood, frozen solid. Even the breath had turned to a solid block of ice in my lungs as those forest green eyes of his landed on me. That lone dimple of his pressed deep into his right cheek.

I hated that dimple.

I hated those eyes.

I hated *him*.

But mostly, I hated that my body still reacted in a very visceral way when he smiled at me.

“Hey there, Freckles. It’s been a long time.”

And I hated, hated, *hated* that nickname I used to love so damn much.

I heard my friends whispering all around me, the shock of this man’s familiarity setting in, but it was all a din beneath the furious rush of blood in my ears.

This son of a *bitch*!

I didn’t think. I didn’t even realize I was moving until I stood only inches away. And before I even realized my fist was balled, my arm cocked and I was letting the punch fly. It landed square in the middle of his face with a satisfying crunch that would have made me smile if I wasn’t seconds away from losing my ever-loving shit.

“Not long enough, you raging asshole!” I shouted, then I stepped around his hunched form and stomped out of the club.

Added to the list of things I needed to do tonight once I got home was ice my hand. But *god*, that had felt good.

ALMA

*M*y running shoes beat heavily against the unforgiving pavement with every step I took. I pushed myself harder on this run than I had in a very long time, forcing myself to go faster, faster, faster. Like I was trying to outrun my past.

Well, the joke was on me, because it was no longer only the nightmares plaguing me. Oh no. The asshole was live and in person! In my town. How he'd even found me in the first damn place was beyond me.

The sleep I'd been so desperate for the night before never came, of course, not that I expected it to after punching Roan Blackwell.

My lips curved at the memory of that perfect arrow-straight nose crunching beneath my knuckles. I wasn't a particularly violent person, but what could I say? The man brought out the worst in me. We brought out the worst in each other. It was inevitably why we'd failed as a couple all those years ago. But the mind is a funny thing. When something ends, it tends to cling to the good, forgetting about the bad times. It had taken years for me to remember all the reasons why Roan and I hadn't worked, what made our relationship so volatile, but once I had, it made letting go of the hope of a forever with him a little bit easier.

It wasn't exactly the healthiest outlook, but hating Roan was easier than being sad. Than missing him. Hating him cut the cord on that niggling hope I'd clung to for longer than I should have. After all, he was the person who'd broken me so completely that I'd chosen never to go down that road again.

My breathing was labored and a stitch had formed in my side four blocks back, but I didn't let up. I let my rage that he'd infiltrated my world push me until my legs felt like rubber and the houses along the quiet tree-lined street

blurred past me.

I kept at that torturous pace as I rounded the corner onto my street, only slowing to a stop once my house was in sight, along with the crowd gathered on my front porch.

“Shit,” I hissed as I wiped at the sweat on my forehead with the back of one hand while I lifted the water bottle I had clutched in the other and gulped down the refreshing, icy liquid.

My crew from Whiskey Dolls had gathered and were waiting. They’d been blowing my phone up all morning, but I’d been putting them off. I’d forced myself out of bed after a sleepless night, ate a quick breakfast, then headed out on a much longer than normal run. All in an effort to not only avoid reality, but also my friends.

I knew it was only a matter of time before these gossips demanded answers for what happened last night, but I didn’t actually think they’d camp out on my doorstep.

It was times like this I thought maybe there was some merit to being a crazy shut-in with no friends.

I worked to calm my breathing as I slowly made my way up the walkway to my porch. “I don’t suppose you’d give me a chance to shower before jumping right into interrogation mode.”

Charlotte hit me with a flat stare that answered the question for me, but just in case I didn’t get it, Layla let out a snort and spoke out loud. “Not a chance in hell.” She held up a familiar pastry box and a paper to-go cup of coffee. “But to soften the blow, we brought coffee and an assortment of sweets.”

I’d definitely take the sweets, and I’d be damned if I planned on sharing.

Hardin, a Whiskey Doll by association, was also there, and lifted her hand hesitantly, “Uh, so I wasn’t there last night, but I’ve heard stories.” Of course she had. Asher was married to her brother now. The two were tighter than blood and didn’t keep anything from each other. “Did you seriously punch Roan Blackwell in the face?”

I couldn’t stop the tiny grin that tugged at the corners of my lips. “I did. And it was one of the most satisfying things I’ve done in a really long time.”

Her eyes went wide, her lips parting on a shocked exhale. It wasn’t every day a famous person wandered into town. That in itself was surprise enough, but to have one of their friends punch that famous person in the nose only added to the drama of it all.

“You know him,” Marin, ever the astute one, pointed out. “It was written all over your face the moment he walked through the door. And he didn’t hide the fact that he knew you, so what I want to know is how in the hell you know one of the most famous men in country music, and why last night was the first any of us has ever heard about it.”

Right to the point, I guess. Like ripping off a Band-Aid. Only the Band-Aid was stuck to a particularly hairy part of the body and ripped all those tiny hairs along with it.

“Um, well . . .”

Sloane threw her arms up in exasperation. “He had a nickname for you, for god’s sake. You don’t have a nickname for someone unless you were pretty close at one point in time.”

I heaved out a breath, bracing my hands on my hips as my head fell forward, like the strain of keeping it up was just too much for my neck. “Fine, you want to get into this, we’ll get into it. But I’m not telling this story without alcohol.”

Delanie, the sweet, innocent, quiet one in our bunch, widened her eyes so much I worried they might fall out. “Um, it’s barely eleven in the morning.”

McKenna elbowed her in the side. “Hey, it’s five o’clock somewhere, and if booze is what it’s going to take to get this story, I’ll do the pouring.”

I started up the three steps that led to the porch. Once I got close enough, I snatched the Muffin Top box out of Layla’s grip and tucked it under my arm while I pulled my keys from the hidden pocket in the waistband of my running tights. “And fair warning, I’m eating all those pastries my damn self, so hands off.”

I stepped over the threshold and was immediately assaulted by my asshole of a cat, Tortellini. He sat on his butt smack dab in the middle of the entryway, and let out the most obnoxious meow that sounded partly like a howl and partly like he’d just gotten his tail caught in a wood chipper.

“Oh, stop being so damn dramatic,” I told him, tossing my keys into the bowl on the entryway table and taking a step around him so the other girls could follow me in. “I’ll feed you in a second. You aren’t going to starve to death in the next five minutes.”

“Uh, babe. He’s not going to starve to death in the next five *months*,” Sloane announced, staring dumbfounded at Tortellini.

I moved into the kitchen as the rest of my friends gathered in the living room. As I got the cat food out of the pantry and poured some into his bowl, I

heard one of them whisper, “That has to be the fattest cat I’ve ever seen in all my life.”

“Hey!” I shot up, looking over the counter that separated my living room from my kitchen and planted my hands on my hips, an affronted frown puckering between my eyes. Meanwhile, Tortellini dove for his bowl like he was on death’s door and it held the cure. “Tortellini’s not fat. He’s just husky.”

Asher didn’t bother to cover her snort with a fake laugh or anything. “You named your cat Tortellini?”

I shrugged, suddenly feeling self-conscious about my plus-sized feline. The vet had even said he needed to go on a strict diet, but I was a sucker for those pained cries. The old guy liked his food as much as I did. Who was I to judge a fellow foodie? And besides, I thought it was kind of cute that he looked like a basketball when he sat down.

“Shut up,” I said on a pout. “It’s one of my favorite foods.”

“And it’s fitting.” Marin’s voice shook with barely-contained laughter. “He’s built just like an over-sized tortellini.”

I looked down at my cat to find he was none the wiser as he scarfed down his meal. “Don’t listen to them,” I cooed to him. “They’re assholes. There’s not a thing wrong with you.”

“Except the fact you can barely see his legs because his gut hangs past them.” I shot McKenna a death glare and flipped open the pastry box, grabbed the first item my fingers touched, which just so happened to be an old-fashioned glazed donut, and took a giant bite.

“All right.” Charlotte lifted her hands in the air, drawing everyone’s attention. “Enough about the monstrously fat cat—”

“Husky,” I said around a mouthful of sweetened and fried dough.

She cut her eyes at me before continuing. “We’re here for something a lot more important.”

“Yeah,” Delanie chimed in. “Stop dancing around it and trying to change the subject. You know why we’re all here, so start talking.”

“Ooh.” Hardin let out a laugh. “You’ve got sweet, fairy-tale-loving Delanie going all hardass on you and putting her foot down.”

“Well, I can’t help it,” Delanie explained, her excitement starting to show through, and I had a sneaking suspicion I knew where this was headed. “Alma’s always been so against relationships and marriage. Always claiming she’s going to be the one holdout out of all of us who will *never* get married.

She's never once talked about being in any kind of serious relationship, so as far as we know, she never has been."

She looked at me, her eyes dancing. "Then this man appears out of nowhere, and we see her have an actual reaction to him. In a way she never has before."

I held my hand up to stop her before taking a heaping gulp of my coffee, burning my tongue in the process. This morning was turning out to be as big a disaster as the night before.

"I'm going to stop you right there. This isn't going to end up being the fairy tale you've got building in your head."

"Why is that?" McKenna asked.

I pulled in a breath, willing my heartbeat to slow back down to a normal level. After ten years, you'd have thought I'd be over the pain that man caused me, but this felt like picking a scab and reopening the wound all over again.

"Because Roan Blackwell is the reason I'll never get married," I admitted out loud for the first time in ten freaking years. "He was the love of my life, and I thought we were forever. Then he broke me in a way there is no chance of healing correctly. There will be no fairy tale for me because he destroyed my belief in them."

A hush fell over the room, and my friends all stared at me in a way they never had before. A way I'd worked my ass off never to experience again. They watched me with pity and sadness. I'd had more than my fill of that shortly after Roan had ended us. It was one of the reasons I'd built that icy wall around me, why I'd created the mask of the vamp I was today. Because I never wanted to be looked at with pity ever again.

But there it was, in the eyes of the people I cared about the most.

And I fucking *hated* it.

Just another thing that asshole had done to me.

I was going to need a *lot* more pastries to get through this morning. "Come on," I bemoaned. "Don't look at me like that. The last thing I want is for you to feel sorry for me. That's why I never told you in the first damn place."

To my bewilderment, Marin sniffled and batted a tear from her cheek. "You think we feel sorry for you?" she asked in a hushed voice. "That we're looking at you like we pity you because you had your heart broken?"

I couldn't understand why she was so sad or why some of the other girls

looked downright pissed. “Well . . . yeah.”

“She’s not upset about that, you, you, jack-faced asshole!” Sloane declared, her own eyes glassy. “She’s upset for the same reason we all are. Because you never once, in all the years we’ve known you, trusted us to tell us about your past.”

My mouth fell open.

That certainly wasn’t the response I’d been expecting.

ALMA

Charlotte shot to her feet and stormed into the kitchen. “I need a damn drink. Where do you keep your booze?” she asked, her voice snappy and indignant, like somehow *I* was the bad guy here.

I pointed over her shoulder. “Vodka’s in the freezer.”

“That’ll have to do,” she grumbled under her breath, then stomped to my fridge and yanked the freezer drawer open. Tortellini, sensing the shift in the air and wanting no part of it, darted down the hall to my bedroom where he’d have his mid-morning nap . . . to be followed by his afternoon nap, then a few hours later by his evening nap.

Charlotte pulled out the bottle of Tito’s I kept in there for the nights I was feeling on edge and a glass of wine wouldn’t cut it. She slammed it on the marble counter top and glowered at me, barking, “Glasses?”

I opened the cabinet next to the microwave and pulled down the shot glasses, lining them up in a perfect row. She filled one and threw it back in a matter of seconds, letting out a hiss as the icy vodka ran down her throat.

“What the hell is happening right now?” I sputtered. “Are you—are you actually mad at me?”

She threw her hands up in frustration. “Of *course* I’m mad at you! Most of us are.” She waved her hand toward the living room, and I turned to look. Judging from the expression on most of my friends’ faces, she was spot on.

“But . . . why?”

“Jeez, you’re hardheaded when you want to be,” Hardin lamented. “We’re mad because each and every one of us has gone through some pretty serious shit. And we let you in on all of it. Because that’s what friends are supposed to do.”

“That’s what *family* does,” McKenna clarified. “And that’s what we’re supposed to be. That’s why everyone in this room knows my story. Why we were all there for Charlotte when she was searching for her sister. Why each of us had Marin’s back when she left that abusive piece of shit ex of hers. We did all of that together. There were never any secrets in this group.”

“She’s right.” Delanie nodded. “That’s why we rallied around Hardin when her ex-husband’s girlfriend turned into a psycho stalker.”

Hardin pointed at Del. “Yep. And why Asher had all of us to lean on when she pulled a runner on her wedding day. And again when that bat-shit crazy bouncer at the club targeted her.”

“And if it wasn’t for you guys pushing me, I probably never would have given Jude a chance,” Layla admitted.

Sloane rose from the armchair by the fireplace and stopped on the other side of the counter, picking up the shot glass Charlotte filled for her and threw it back. “You know, for years you’ve been going on and on about how you’ll never get married. But every single time one of us found our guy, you were there to have our backs. When Silas epically fucked up, you were there pushing me to forgive him and take him back. For someone who claims not to believe in love, you sure as hell rallied each and every one of us when the time came.”

“Yeah, but that’s because I love you guys. Just because it isn’t right for me doesn’t mean I don’t want you to be happy.”

“Exactly!” Mac cried. “That’s the point we’re trying to make. You love us and have our backs. But you didn’t give any of us the chance to do the same for you. While we were giving all of ourselves, you were holding a part of yourself back. How does that seem fair?”

I lowered my head, unable to meet their eyes as Mac’s question bounced around in my mind. How was it fair? These women really and truly were my family. When I left my entire life behind in Nashville, it took me years to find where I fit. I bounced from place to place, nothing ever feeling quite right. Then I landed in Hope Valley. I discovered Whiskey Dolls and these incredible women, and everything clicked into place. I found my home, my people. I found purpose and enjoyment in life again.

“I’m sorry,” I said in a small, quiet voice.

“Sorry, what was that? We couldn’t hear you,” Charlotte chided.

I rolled my eyes and let out an agitated huff. “I said I’m sorry, all right?” I repeated louder. “You’re right. All of you are right, and I feel like a big old

bag of dicks. Happy now?”

Charlotte grinned and slid a shot glass in my direction. I didn't hesitate to toss it down and tap the rim for a refill. That second shot helped loosen me up enough for what I had to do.

With my coffee and donut in hand, I burrowed myself into the corner of my loveseat, pulling my knees up and tucking my feet beneath me.

“I met Roan in my early twenties. Back before he was *The Roan Blackwell*. He was just Roan then. I did a lot of work as a backup dancer: music videos, concerts, things like that when I wasn't waiting tables to actually pay my bills. He was playing at a bar my friends and I were at one night, and there was just something about his voice . . .”

That memory took over. That first meeting. The night that changed everything.

* * *

My friends stopped on the sidewalk outside the entrance of the bar, looking up at the sign with curled lips and open disdain.

“Seriously, Al? This is where you want to go?” Devyn asked in bewilderment. “This place is a dive.”

“It's not even a dive,” Kiera said. “It's a pit.” To emphasize her point, she shuffled from foot to foot. The gross sucking noise of the bottoms of her shoes sticking to whatever was on the ground sent a shiver down all our spines. But I was determined.

“Look, I know this place isn't much, but they have a live band and five dollar wells for the ladies. I don't know about you, but I'm broke as shit.”

The check I'd written for my rent earlier that week had eaten most of the lousy paycheck I received for waiting tables part time while I tried to make a living as a dancer. Nashville wasn't exactly the hub for that kind of thing, but it cost money to get to LA, and it was taking a lifetime for me to save enough for the trip.

My friends let out defeated sighs but followed after me as I pulled the door open and stepped inside. The place was dim, and not in an intentional way, but in a bulbs-burned-out-and-we-didn't-bother-replacing-them way.

If the floor outside was sticky, it was nothing compared to inside. Each step felt like my foot was being suction-cupped to the floor. We headed for

the bar, and I tried not to let the grizzled, beer-bellied bartender freak me out as I placed my drink order. The booze they offered was rot-gut, but it was cheap and it would get the job done.

I sucked back a sip of my vodka tonic, trying my hardest to play it cool and not wince at the terrible taste of the bottom-shelf vodka as I twisted on a torn vinyl stool to face the tiny excuse of a stage.

I'd go just about anywhere for good music, and I'd heard the singer in this band was something else. As soon as he stepped onto that stage, I knew why.

Everything from his thick midnight hair to his chiseled jaw and prominent cheekbones held me captive. Those eyes, the deep green reminding me of a forest floor, scanned the room as he smiled, straight white teeth accentuated by a sexy-as-hell dimple in his right cheek.

He was tall, so damn tall, his figure imposing on that tiny stage. There was a magnetism to him that made the other members of the band fade into the background. The way his biceps strained the fabric of his faded tee as he held the acoustic guitar in front of him made my mouth water. Those long, nimble fingers plucking at the strings, making the cords in his forearms tense and strain, had me imagining what else those hands would be good at.

But then his mouth opened and he started to sing, and my god, it took my breath away. The sound that man produced was out of this world. If he'd been nearly impossible not to watch before, the moment he started singing guaranteed I'd spend the rest of my night under his spell.

As one song bled into another, it was just him and me. I was so mesmerized I forgot everything around me. Where I was, who I was with. My friends had dissolved into vapor. They could have left, abandoning me in this hole in the wall all on my own and I wouldn't have given a damn.

When those deep green eyes landed on me, I could have sworn he felt the same way I felt. I had to tell myself I was imagining things. He probably didn't even notice me. Only, when their first set ended and they went on a break, he hopped off the stage and started right in my direction.

He stopped at the stool beside me, that dimple of his pressing deep as he grinned. His voice was just as sexy as it had been coming through the microphone as he said, "Hey. I'm Roan."

I took his offered hand, sparks of electricity shooting throughout my entire body at that one simple touch. It was as if I'd reached out and grabbed hold of a fallen powerline.

“Alma,” I returned, feeling my cheeks heat as the most gorgeous man I’d ever laid eyes on scanned every inch of my face. I’d always been an outgoing person, but something about Roan made me feel downright shy. And I kind of liked it.

“Alma,” he said softly, like he was testing my name out on his tongue, and damn if that wasn’t sexy too. God, everything about this guy was ticking off every one of my boxes. “Pretty name. Can I buy you a drink, Alma?”

“Sure?”

He signaled the bartender, ordering me a refill and himself a beer. Once we had our drinks in hand, he swiveled on his stool to face me full on, bracing one forearm on the bar and the other on the back of my seat. I felt completely surrounded, but instead of it freaking me out, it made me feel safe, secure. “So, Alma.” *Man* I loved the way he said my name. “What brings a gorgeous woman like you to a shitty bar like this?”

The heat under my skin grew more intense, and I knew without having to look that I was probably blushing from the roots of my hair all the way down to the tips of my toes.

My mouth curved up in a smile so large I had to bite down on my lower lip to keep it in check. “I heard the band that played here was really good. Wanted to see for myself.”

That dimple dug in even deeper, and the smile he gave me just then caused a burst of flutters to come to life deep in my belly. “And? What did you think? We live up to the hype?”

“The singer did, at least,” I answered honestly. The truth was, he didn’t just outshine the rest of the guys with his commanding presence, but with his talent too. The way he sang, the passion that dripped from his honeyed-whiskey voice and oozed from his pores, was leaps and bounds better than the people playing with him.

If I’d offended him, he didn’t show it. In fact, he seemed pleased by my answer, making those flutters that much stronger.

“So, this singer . . . did he impress you enough that you’d be willing to give him your number if he asked?”

A giggle worked its way up my throat. “I think I might let him talk me into it. That is, if he’s as charming in person as he is up on that stage.”

Roan leaned in even closer. “Oh, he can be, Freckles.” He reached up to drag the tip of his finger down the bridge of my nose. “If there’s something worth laying the charm on for, he absolutely can be. And something tells me

you're more than worth it."

* * *

I shook myself out of the memory, forcing my mind to return to the present. I blinked, looking around the living room at my friends, my family. They were all hanging on every word I'd just spoken, silently waiting for more.

"It was like a wildfire from there, the way our relationship took off. We couldn't get enough of each other. Within weeks, he was living in my apartment, and even then, we couldn't keep our hands off each other. I don't know how to explain it," I confessed quietly. "It was like this bone-deep obsession, like we were in each other's blood. We shared *everything*. It was just the two of us against the world. We fought like any young couple struggling to get by, but even when we fought, I wouldn't have given up on him for anything. He was going to be a famous musician, and I was going to be the most popular dancer in the city.

"We talked about it all the time. These crazy aspirations we had. In the back of my mind, I think I always knew there was a chance it might not happen, at least for one of us, but I didn't care. As long as I had him, I had everything I needed. His dreams were my dreams, and he felt the same." I shook my head, sadness washing over me. "At least he said he did. When the time came for him to prove that, he failed." I lifted my shoulder in a shrug, smiling ruefully.

"Oh, honey." Marin's sniffles had gotten substantially worse as I recounted my first meeting with Roan all those years ago, and now there was no hiding the tears streaming down her face. "I'm so sorry."

"I am too." McKenna batted at a lone tear. "And I feel terrible for caving when he asked Bruce and me for help last night."

My head shot around in her direction. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, Sidney was covering his table last night and came to us halfway through the show, saying he wanted to talk to the owners. Bruce and I went out there, and the guy started to lay on the charm."

"Yeah, he's really good at that," I deadpanned.

"I called him on it, told him to get to his point, and he said he was there for the love of his life and needed our help."

The gasps from my friends had to have sucked all the oxygen out of the

room. It was the only explanation for why I suddenly couldn't pull enough air into my lungs. Why it felt like someone had taken a pin and popped them like balloons.

"He actually said that?" Hardin asked, leaning forward on the couch and bracing her elbows on her knees. "He called Alma the love of his life?"

Mac nodded. "That's a direct quote. He didn't specifically say her name at first, but when I pushed, he told us that he'd really screwed up years ago and lost Alma, and that he was here to win her back."

Oh god. *Oh god, oh god, oh god.* This couldn't be happening. It was bad enough he was in my town. But to tell my friend he was there to win me back?

I shot off the loveseat, making a beeline straight for the vodka. Only this time, instead of pouring myself a shot, I lifted the bottle to my lips and drank.

"Uh-oh," Layla mumbled. "Something tells me that's not what she wanted to hear."

It absolutely wasn't.

"It doesn't matter," I declared, slipping that mask firmly back in place. "Because it'll be a cold day in hell before I even *think* of taking that son of a bitch back."

Asher shook her head, a tiny grin playing across her lips. "Famous last words, babe. Famous last words."

ROAN

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror in my room at the inn, I winced and let out a hiss as I gently prodded at the bridge of my nose. It wasn't broken; I'd had my nose broken enough times growing up to know the difference. But *damn*, Freckles had landed one hell of a blow. I was impressed actually, and despite the pain, proud as hell. Her form had been perfect, her fingers curled correctly, just like I'd taught her years ago.

Good to see my instructions stuck, at least.

It had been two days since that run-in—I'd holed up in my room the day before to keep ice on it so the swelling would go down—and it still looked like hell. But at least I could open my eyes all the way now.

I didn't know what I'd been expecting the first time I laid eyes on her after so many years, especially given how badly things had ended between us, but I had to admit, I hadn't seen that punch coming. However, I would be damned if I let that stop me from what I came here to do.

Even with rage and betrayal swimming in those gold-flecked amber eyes of hers, she'd still been the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Sure, the watering eyes and agonizing burn in my nose made my vision a little blurry there at the end, but Alma had always had the kind of beauty you couldn't miss. It was loud, attention grabbing, even when she didn't realize it or wasn't trying.

She'd changed over the years, there was no denying that, and I was eager to study those changes closer.

I'd changed too. I liked to hope I wasn't that same asshole kid who fucked up his entire life by letting go of the best woman he'd ever known, and I was determined to prove that to Alma. I just had to find a way to do it.

Fortunately, I knew where to start.

I'd let enough time pass, giving her a chance to cool down and me to heal. Now I needed to make a move. Moving back into the room, I grabbed the ballcap from off the bed and put it on, pulling the brim as low as possible. Thanks to the swollen nose and double shiners I was sporting, the sunglasses were no longer an option. But I'd made the decision that my stay in Hope Valley was indefinite, so I might as well come out to the town and hope for the best.

I locked my room and headed down the main stairs. Claire was at the desk this morning, and glanced up at the sound of my footsteps. "Morning, Mr. Gates. Hope you slept well—" Her mouth clamped shut, her eyes widening when she spotted my face. "Oh, man. Someone really got to you." She looked in both directions to make sure the coast was clear and leaned deeper across the desk to whisper, "Do you need me to call the police?"

I smiled and shook my head on a chuckle. "Nah. It's all good. Believe it or not, I deserved this," I said, pointing to my face.

Claire's face scrunched up. "Really? What could you have possibly done to deserve that?"

"Did an ex wrong, and now I'm here to make it right. This was just her letting some of that anger out. She'll get past it."

At least I hoped she would. Maybe if I put it out in the universe enough I could make it true.

"In fact, that's what I'm off to do right now. Wish me luck."

"Good luck, Mr. Gates. I hope you get lucky." Her eyes bulged when she realized what she said. "No, that's not—I didn't mean—um . . . That is, I hope you're lucky in that she forgives you, not, *you know*—"

I held up my hand to stop her, putting her out of her misery. "I get it," I told her, humor dripping from my voice. "And I appreciate the encouragement. See you later."

"See you."

I headed out into another bright, gorgeous valley day, going straight for the coffee shop I'd sampled the day I got into town. Hell, my mouth was practically watering at the thought of the coffee and the pastries on display.

More eyes were on me as I stood in line this time, recognition lighting up in their gazes, but no one said anything or approached me. I wasn't sure if I should consider the privacy a blessing or worry that it meant something unpleasant was right around the corner. Only time would tell.

“Hi, welcome to Muffin Top. Can I help you—” The woman behind the front counter trailed off as soon as she looked up at me. “Oh. Wow.”

I pasted my charming smile into place. “Hello.”

“Hi,” she squeaked. “You’re Roan Blackwell.”

I extended my hand over the counter. “I am. Pleased to meet you.”

She took my hand in a firm grip and gave it a shake, the large rock on her wedding ring digging into my fingers before she broke off the shake and dropped her hand back to the counter. “Danika. But everyone calls me Dani. I’m a big fan of your music.”

My neck tensed up and I felt my shoulders creeping up toward my ears. It was the same way my body reacted every time I heard that. Used to be, I lived for shit like that, but something had changed, and I struggled to feel that high I used to get whenever I encountered fans. I used to love it, now it made my shoulders and neck tense up. “Thanks.” I quickly shifted the topic. “This your place here?”

Her smile was wide and proud. “It is.”

“Well, I have to say, I’m not sure I’ve ever had a better cup of coffee in my life. And I had a muffin the other day that was damn near addictive.”

“Thanks,” she chirped happily. “I’ve always loved to bake. Fortunately, my husband doesn’t mind being my guinea pig at home so I can try out new recipes.”

I bet he didn’t mind one damn bit. Not only did the woman know her way around baked goods, but she wasn’t hard on the eyes, either.

“You want the same as day before yesterday?” she asked, reaching toward the tower of large cups stacked on the side of a fancy espresso machine.

My brows went up in surprise. “You remember what I ordered two days ago?”

She shrugged casually, like it was no big deal. “Tool of the trade. I’ve been at this so long I kind of can’t help it. I remember most people’s favorites.”

I leaned forward and braced my hands on the counter. “Dani, you may just be my new favorite person.”

She let out a tinkling laugh. “How do you figure?”

“I don’t suppose you know the regular order for a woman named Alma Rossi?”

Her eyes sparked with recognition. “Alma? Oh yeah! She comes in all the

time. She's a friend of mine." Her eyelids narrowed with curiosity. "Do you know her?"

"Sure do," I answered, leaving out the fact that we weren't exactly on the friendliest of terms at the moment. "Think you could help me out and make her favorite coffee? Maybe throw in a few pastries?"

If I remembered one thing about Alma, it was that the woman *loved* food. It didn't matter what kind, she loved it. But she had a particular sweet spot for anything sugary. Especially if it was deep fried before being dipped or slathered in sugar.

"You know what? Why don't you make it an even dozen, an assortment of whatever you want."

"You got it."

She went about making me two coffees and loading up a bakery box of sweets. "Thanks. I really appreciate this," I said before lifting one of the cups and taking a pull from my coffee. "And I also appreciate you not asking about the"—I waved a finger in front of my bruised and battered face—"you know."

She smiled again, but there was something more to it this time. Something that had me instantly suspicious.

"This is a small town," she said ominously. "And Alma's not the only girl from that club that I'm friends with."

Well, fuck.

"So you already knew about all this."

"Yep. And I also know it'll probably take a lot more than coffee and sugar to get you out of whatever doghouse you're in that earned you those shiners."

Goddamn small towns.

I hefted the box under my arm to free my hands to carry the coffees. "Yeah, well, gotta start somewhere, right? And maybe if I spend enough in here, you'll put in a good word for me," I said hopefully, earning a snort from the mild mannered Dani.

"Hey, you might be famous, but you're still the new guy. I'm team Alma. At least until you've proven yourself."

I should have been annoyed that I'd just gotten schooled by a stranger, but I wasn't. In fact, I really fucking liked it. When we'd been together, Alma had talked to me about never feeling like she'd belonged anywhere. She'd been forced to move from place to place for so long because of her father's

work in the service that Nashville hadn't felt like home for her. Back then she used to say it was all right because once we met, it was obvious she belonged wherever I was. We were each other's homes. Until I ruined everything.

It was a relief to know she found a place where she not only belonged, but where the townspeople had her back, especially when someone they didn't know came calling. I loved that this unassuming coffee shop owner wasn't the least bit impressed by me and cared enough about Alma to put me in my place.

I nodded my head and started moving backward. "Challenge accepted." I lifted one of the cups high. "And thanks for the help."

"You're welcome. And good luck."

I headed back to the inn and loaded everything into my truck to make the drive over to Alma's. It had been like pulling teeth to get her address from Lincoln, and he'd made it clear they would never be able to find my body if I let it slip that he was the one who'd given it to me.

I programmed the address into my navigation system and started in that direction. The neighborhood she lived in was like something out of a postcard. The houses were set back on their lots, providing huge, green front yards filled with plants and flowers and water features. It looked like the whole yard-of-the-month thing was a big deal in this neighborhood, and every house took the competition very seriously. Huge mature trees lined the sidewalks, creating a canopy over the streets. It was beautiful, really; each house was different in size, shape, and color, but the owners took pride in what they had.

I enjoyed the scenery as I wound through the quiet, picturesque neighborhood before turning onto Alma's street. Her house was just as charming as the rest of them. I threw my truck into park and killed the engine, staring at the pretty flowerbeds lining the foundation of the house. Alma's green thumb was well at work with the beautiful shrubs and flowers still in bloom as autumn turned to winter. The front porch, complete with a rustic looking swing, had a beveled glass door, and I could picture Alma inside, curled up on the couch beneath a cozy blanket. I imagined the inside was as warm and comforting and homey as the outside appeared.

A luxury SUV sat in the driveway, letting me know she was home, and since this was the kind of place that looked out for their neighbors, I didn't want to risk the cops being called on me for being that creep sitting in someone's driveway. So despite the twisting in my stomach, I threw the door

open and climbed out.

My heart beat painfully in my chest, the echoing thump matching the thud of my boots on the steps leading to the front door. I blew out a deep breath and sent up a silent prayer for this to go smoother than the last time. Then, with no more reason to delay, I lifted my hand and knocked.

ALMA

When I woke up in the middle of the night with a skull-splitting headache, I first thought it was the effects of all the day drinking I'd done as I opened up to my friends about my past for the first time. By the end of their visit, the bottle of vodka had been emptied and I'd tiptoed past buzzed and straight into sloppy.

Before leaving, my girls had tucked my drunken ass into bed, where I'd been until the heavy metal band raging in my skull had woken me up. I'd staggered out of bed and downed some pain meds, along with two full glasses of water and crawled back under the covers. Only, the medicine hadn't helped. The pounding had never gone away. I'd ended up getting chills that wracked my body so bad my teeth clattered together. No matter how deep I'd snuggled under the covers, I couldn't seem to get warm. With the chills came body aches, and eventually my stomach had started twisting and rolling, wave after wave of nausea crashing into me and sweeping me under the surface.

Between the vomiting and uncontrollable shivers, I'd managed to doze in and out of sleep, but it never felt restful. I'd spent most of the time tossing and turning. My head was a foggy mess, so when I first heard the banging, I thought it was something I'd been dreaming or imagining.

My eyelids flipped open, spots dancing across my vision for a few seconds before clearing. I listened to see if I'd hear it again. I half convinced myself it had been in my head until it happened again. The banging was coming from my front door.

I let out a pained groan, turning to bury my head in my pillow. "Go away," I mumbled into the memory foam, willing whoever was on my front

porch to go the hell away.

I wasn't that lucky. The knocking came again, followed by the tinny ring of my doorbell.

"Son of a bitch," I grumbled as I threw the covers back. The chills had gotten so bad that I'd piled extra throw blankets on top of myself. I managed to push myself out of bed, my limbs feeling completely stiff, and hobbled down the hallway to my front door, hugging my arms around my middle—for warmth and to hopefully keep my stomach from trying to escape up my throat like it had been for the past several hours.

I nearly tripped over Tortellini on my way to the door, but managed to catch myself before I face-planted. Finally, I made it just as the knocking resumed.

"I'm coming," I said through chattering teeth. "Hold your horses."

I threw the deadbolt, turned the knob without checking the side window to see who it was, and yanked the door open. The moment I spotted the person standing across the threshold, I knew I had to have been hallucinating.

"Hey, Freckles," Roan greeted, that single dimple slowly disappearing with his smile as he took me in. "Jesus, you look like shit. What's wrong?"

"This is a nightmare, isn't it?" I croaked just as another wave of violent tremors washed over me. "It's a fever-induced nightmare. It has to be."

"Fuck, Freckles. Are you sick?" Roan stepped forward, crowding into my space and lifted his palm, pressing it against my forehead.

I weakly batted him away, but the movement threw me off balance, and I had to catch myself on the doorframe. "Don't call me that," I grumbled exhaustedly. "And I'm fine. I just need to go back to sleep."

His brows tilted into a deep V of concern, accentuating the dark bruising under his eyes and the slight swelling of his perfect nose. If I hadn't been standing on the threshold of death, I might have taken the time to appreciate my handiwork. Too bad I wasn't much longer for this world.

"Christ, Alma. You can't even stand up straight. And you're burning the fuck up. What are you doing out of bed?"

I gave him the most murderous look I could manage, which wasn't much. "Some asshole wouldn't stop pounding on my door and ringing the bell. Didn't give me much choice."

His features hardened with determination as he placed a large hand on my belly and gently pushed me backward, following me inside. It didn't take much effort on his part, seeing as I could have been bowled over with a

feather just then.

“Come on. We’re getting you to bed.”

“What—I don’t—that’s—” I sputtered in bewilderment as I tripped over my own feet. I would have gone down if Roan hadn’t fisted the material of my shirt to hold me up. It was only then that I remembered what I was wearing.

After the emotionally charged day before, when I woke up with a headache I’d gone in search of an old comfort I hadn’t allowed myself in at least two years. I’d slipped out of my PJs and dug around in the very back of my bottom drawer for an ancient T-shirt that had been washed so many times, the screen-printing on the front of it was indecipherable. But I still remembered what had been there. How the letters spelling out Music City arched over an acoustic guitar.

Roan’s old T-shirt had become a favorite of mine to sleep in when we’d been together. After we broke up, I found it hanging in the closet, forgotten and left behind when I’d forced him to pack his things and leave.

For the first few years after the breakup, I’d slept every night in the damn shirt, needing that piece of him close to me. Finally, over time, I was able to let go of the crutch, but there were times that still crept up on me and I’d need that comfort again. Those times had become fewer and further between in recent years, but I’d needed it again last night.

I couldn’t have possibly known he’d show up on my doorstep when I was at my worst and catch me wearing it. I wasn’t sure what I’d done to karma recently, but it seemed that bitch had it out for me.

“You-you can’t just come in here and—” My pathetically weak argument died on my tongue when I caught a whiff of something. I spotted the Muffin Top bakery box he set down on my entryway table, and at smell of fried dough, my stomach betrayed me.

“Oh god,” I let out as my stomach dropped like I was on the highest dip of the world’s largest rollercoaster. “I have to—”

That was all I managed to say before clamping my lips between my teeth and slapping a hand over my mouth as I spun around and raced for the small half bath off the living room.

I hit my knees as soon as I made it through the door and slid the rest of the way to the toilet, barely making it in time before my stomach won the battle. I didn’t understand how a person could keep throwing up when there was literally nothing left for them to purge.

I vaguely felt the soft brush of fingertips at the back of my neck as Roan gathered my hair into his fist, holding it back as I hugged the toilet. God, talk about humiliating! Every woman wishes the first time they saw their ex after a heartbreaking breakup that they'd be at their best, in a killer outfit that showcased their best features, with flawless makeup and hair that defied humidity and weather to look *killer*.

At that moment I would have given anything to simply be in a clean pair of sweats and *not* hurling my guts up. Unfortunately, that wasn't in the cards.

Once I finally finished, my body sagged with exhaustion. I folded one arm on the toilet seat and laid my head down, unable to do anything else. Thank god I'd just cleaned the other day, or this whole situation would have been even grosser than it already was.

"You finished?" Roan asked, the sound of his voice causing a jolt. I'd been so busy puking I'd forgotten he was there.

"Ugh," I groaned pathetically. "My body is turning on me. And it's starting with my love of food. I think this is the end."

I just wanted to curl up and go to sleep. My body felt like it had been put through the wringer, and I didn't even have enough strength to lift my head.

I heard him chuckle quietly behind me, but didn't have the energy to turn around and tell him to get the hell out of my house.

"Come on, sweetheart," he said softly, rubbing a hand down my back. "Let's get you to bed."

He bent and scooped me up off the floor, and if I'd been in the right frame of mind, I would have fought out of his grip and probably given him a kick to the nuts to go with the black eyes. "Don't call me that, either. And put me down. I don't need your help," I argued weakly, but there was no point to it. My head flopped back like a dead fish and my limbs hung limp.

If only my sense of smell was as foggy as my head, because being in his arms brought me *way* too close to his neck, and the smell of his cologne invaded the one sense that still seemed to be working right. And god, talk about cruel, because it was almost as if I'd just stepped back in time. He smelled exactly as he had back when we'd been together. In those days, we didn't have much money, but I always splurged during Christmas and his birthday to buy a bottle of his favorite cologne, because it had quickly become my favorite too.

When we'd snuggled, I used to press my face into his neck, content to just lie there and pull his scent into my lungs. I'd fall asleep breathing him in

at night. And at that very moment, as he carried me to bed, there was no avoiding the aroma, and it was just as incredible as it had been in the past. Hell, if I wasn't so dehydrated from puking my guts up, I probably would have started crying.

He carried me down the hall, peeking his head past open doors until he found my room. Once inside, he laid me softly onto the bed and pulled the covers over me, tucking them in tight around my body.

He brushed the sweat-damp hair back from my forehead and let his hand linger, checking for fever.

"Alma, do you have a thermometer anywhere?"

I could have told him not to bother, that I could confirm I was running a fever without check my temperature, but I didn't have it in me to fight. Instead, I forced my mouth open and whispered, "Bathroom."

His fingers ghosted over my forehead again, the gentle touch lulling my eyelids closed. "All right. I'll be right back."

In my head I said *don't bother. Get the hell out*, but in reality, I lay like a limp noodle. I hadn't realized I'd dozed off until I was jolted awake by the press and drag of something hard from the center of my forehead to my temple. When I blinked my hazy eyes open, I saw Roan standing at the side of my bed, looking at the read-out on the thermometer with a hard set to his jaw.

"102.4," he said in a voice that sounded an awful lot like a growl. "I think you should let me take you to the emergency room."

Not a chance in hell. Not only because there was no way I would go to the emergency room, but also because there was no way I'd go anywhere with *him*. "No emergency room," I insisted. "I just need some Tylenol to break it."

He put the thermometer on my bedside table and braced his hands on his narrow hips. "Okay, I'll get it. Where do you keep the Tylenol?"

I curled my lips between my teeth as I tried to dig through the cobwebs covering my brain. "Um . . . I don't think I have any."

Roan's head fell forward, and his hand came up to pinch the bridge of his nose. He let out a sharp hiss when he encountered the bruises and let his arm fall back down to his side. "That's fine. I'll go."

The skin between my brows puckered. "You'll go where?"

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a set of keys and swung them around his index finger. "To get you some medicine. Now you lie here and

don't move until I get back," he ordered, pointing at me with an authoritative finger.

I did my best to shoot fire from my eyes. "Don't bother coming back. I don't want you here."

My proclamation was punctuated by a sudden coughing fit that was so bad I thought I might pee myself. By the time it passed, stars were floating in front of my eyes and I was too dizzy to fight.

"Uh-huh," Roan said knowingly. "That's what I thought. Now sleep. I'll be back."

"I don't want you to come back," I mumbled as my eyes grew heavy and the side of my face pressed deeper into the pillow. Before I could threaten him with calling the cops or anything like that, I was out cold. The last thing I remembered was Roan's fingers lightly dragging across my jaw in that familiar way he used to do.

ROAN

I stood in one of the aisles at the family-owned pharmacy, staring at the rows upon rows of medications, feeling like a fish out of water. I'd been so determined when I left Alma's house earlier, but now that I was here, I didn't know what the hell I needed to buy in order to make her feel better, and I began to panic.

When I first laid eyes on her I'd been so shell-shocked she'd even answered the door that I hadn't noticed anything about her appearance—well, aside from the fact she was wearing one of *my* old T-shirts and very little else. When I finally noticed how pale she was and saw the dark circles under her eyes, the bolt of lust that had shot straight to my groin fizzled into nothing as worry set in.

I'd never felt more helpless than when I was holding her hair back as she crouched over that toilet, and when she slumped in my arms, without the energy to fight me the way I knew she wanted to, I nearly threw her over my shoulder and hauled her out to my truck, insisting she go to the emergency room.

Now that I stood here trying to figure out what the hell she needed, helplessness set in again.

"Fuck it," I grunted to myself before using my arm to sweep all the different medicines into the plastic basket I was holding. Better to be overprepared than underprepared after all.

I was in the process of trying to stuff a few bottles of Pedialyte in with everything else when a woman came up beside me. "Son, you look like you're about two seconds from losin' your ever-lovin' mind."

I turned to take in the woman who'd accurately called me out. She looked

like she was knocking on the door of ninety with skin as thin as crepe paper and a permed helmet of hair rinsed blue. She wore a velour track suit and was watching me with a gaze so shrewd it felt like she could see every single thing I was thinking behind her oversized clear plastic rimmed glasses.

She had a basket in one hand like me and a balled fist on her cocked hip, one orthopedic shoe-clad foot kicked out. “You look more out of place than a hooker at a convent. You need help with somethin’?”

“Oh, uh . . .”

She looked down at the contents of my basket before those shrewd, cataract-speckled eyes returned to me. “Constipation *and* anti-diarrhea medicine? You’re not careful with that, you’re bound to explode your insides, child.”

My head whipped down to the variety of pills I’d dumped into the basket and noticed for the first time that I had a bunch of shit that would be useless to Alma.

“Fucking hell,” I grunted, reaching around to massage the back of my neck. Christ, who would have known trying to buy some medicine could be so stressful?

“Okay, so maybe I do need help.”

“Figured as much,” she stated plainly. “I’m Ms. McClintock, but everyone calls me Ms. M. so I guess you might as well too. Now tell me what the problem is.”

I spent the next few minutes telling the slightly aggressive old woman about Alma’s symptoms, and by the time I finished, she was nodding knowingly. “I see. Sounds like you’re dealin’ with the flu. Which means everything you got in that basket, aside from the Pedialyte, is useless.”

She walked me through the cold and flu aisle, pointing out everything I needed to help with Alma’s flu symptoms, to cut the nausea, and to bring down her fever.

“Now, if the fever doesn’t break, or if it gets any worse, you take your lady friend to the emergency room.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered, feeling like I was getting schooled by my great-grandmother.

“And you make sure she drinks that Pedialyte regularly. She has to stay hydrated. That’s very important.”

“You got it.” At her stern look, I quickly amended, “I mean, yes ma’am.”

She gave a single nod. “That’s better. You may be a famous singer, but

you still need to mind your manners and respect your elders.”

I bit the corner of my mouth to keep from grinning, not wanting to come off as insincere when she'd been a huge help. “Consider this a lesson learned.”

“Good. Now, when you leave here, you take yourself over to Evergreen Diner and order up a big thing of Ralph's chicken noodle soup. Ralph's the cook and the owner. Well, him and his wife, Sally. Anyhoo, they might be a little nuts, but the food at the diner is great, and that chicken soup will knock out anything. Freezes good too, so once she's feelin' better you put some of that in her stomach and freeze the rest for later, 'cause she's gonna need to keep eatin' light for awhile.”

It was a damn good thing I had a great memory because she was throwing a *lot* at me. A few minutes later she left me, saying she needed to get her blood pressure taken at one of those big, loud machines older people loved to use, and I checked out, looping the handles of the plastic bags full of flu remedies and hauling them to my truck.

I drove over to the diner and headed inside, hoping I could get in and get Alma's soup without issue. So far, the people of this town who had recognized me hadn't seemed to care all that much, a massive relief. I could only hope that continued.

The inside was quintessential American diner, with red vinyl stools and booths and those shiny rectangular metal napkin dispensers. The bell over the door let out a jingle as I pushed it open, and a short woman with an apron tied around her waist spun on her heels at the sound.

She braced one hand on a rounded hip while holding a plastic pitcher full of iced tea in the other. “Well, the celebrity finally graces us with his presence. Was wonderin' when you'd show up at our humble establishment.”

So apparently the news that I was in town had spread far and wide, and I was shocked and pleasantly surprised that there weren't photographers snapping pictures to sell to tabloids yet. So apparently this *was* the kind of town that kept to itself and looked out for its own.

What a fucking relief.

“Nice to meet you. I'm—”

“Roan Blackwell,” she provided for me. “I'm Sally. I run this place with my husband Ralph. Speakin' of . . . *Ralph!*” She shouted toward the back, so loud it made me jump.

A huge man with a bushy beard popped up in the passthrough window

behind the counter.

“Christ, woman. What are you hollerin’ about?” he shouted just as loudly as the woman.

“That famous singer finally showed!” she hollered . . . *again*.

His head swiveled around until his dark eyes landed on me. “Huh, would you look at that,” he continued to boom. I was starting to think that was his normal volume. One corner of his mouth curled up, making that beard twitch. “And it looks like he’s a little worse for the wear.”

For fuck’s sake. So maybe the whole small-town thing *wasn’t* a relief.

I lifted a hand to prod at my nose as the small woman waved the giant man off. “Oh, don’t you mind him. He gets a kick out of stirring the pot. The man’s a worse gossip than a whole gaggle of old church ladies having lunch.”

“What are you out there blabberin’ about?” Ralph bellowed.

Sally rolled her eyes and shook her head before shouting back, “I’m askin’ him what he’d like to order, you nosy busybody!” Then she looked back to me. “Well? You stayin’ or takin’ your food to go.”

“To go,” I answered quickly, barely managing to swallow down the *please, god*, that wanted to follow. “I’d like the chicken noodle soup to go if it’s not a problem.”

“Sure thing.” She pointed at one of the vacant stools in front of the counter. “Just plop yourself down right there and we’ll get to work on that order.”

I did just that, pulling my phone from my back pocket, intending to play a few levels of Candy Crush while I waited, but before I could get started, the person on the stool next to me spoke.

“Heard you got your butt handed to you by a lady.”

I looked at the man who looked to be in his seventies and raised my brows.

“See the rumor was true.” He pointed at my face. “You deserve those shiners, son?”

What the hell was it about this town where everyone talked to a total stranger with the same bluntness as someone they’d known since diapers?

I decided that answering honestly was probably the best. After all, these folks seemed to know everything about everything any damn way. “Yes sir.”

“Huh.” He looked me up and down. “Takes a smart man to admit when he’s a screw-up.” He lifted his coffee mug and slurped from it. I nearly opened my mouth to thank him when he finished with, “Guess you’re smarter

than you look.”

Well, looked like this place wasn't going to cut me any breaks. Not only was I going to have to prove myself to Alma, but it looked like I was going to have to prove myself to everyone else as well.

I thought on that and quickly discovered I didn't mind at all. This tiny town was so different from Nashville, and the longer I stayed here—the longer I was subjected to the thoughts and opinions of the people who lived here—the more I liked it. I was really glad Alma had found her home here.

Sally appeared in front of me a minute later, a huge plastic container full of soup wrapped tightly in a plastic shopping bag dangling from her grip. “One chicken noodle soup, to go,” she announced, passing the bag across the counter. “You'll have to come back in and let us know what you think.”

I gave her a sincere smile and pushed off the stool, reaching for my wallet in the back pocket of my jeans. “I think I can do that. Thanks so much, Sally.” I passed her some cash to pay for the food and shot her a wink for good measure. I didn't miss the way her cheeks heated just a bit before I turned and headed out of the diner.

ROAN

I stood on Alma's porch, the bags of flu remedies and soup hanging from my forearms as I rifled through the key ring I'd had the forethought to steal from the entryway table before I left earlier.

I slid the key into the lock and twisted, mindful to push the door open carefully. I didn't want to risk waking her up if she was still asleep. Unfortunately, my plans to remain quiet were thwarted the moment the door opened all the way and I stepped inside.

Sitting in the middle of the floor was something that looked an awful lot like a bright orange basketball with fur and big yellow eyes.

"Jesus," I grunted at the thing. "What the hell are you supposed to be?" If it was a cat, it had to have been the fattest cat I'd ever seen in my entire life. "Jeez, Alma," I spoke to myself. "Ever heard of moderation?"

I wasn't sure if cats could have high cholesterol, clogged arteries, or high blood pressure, but I was guessing the thing in front of me had all three.

The animal opened its mouth and emitted a sound that was like nails on a chalkboard mixed with a jackhammer on granite.

"What the fuck?" I winced, lifting my shoulders and trying my best to cover my ears. "What the hell was that?" I asked, like the thing could answer. But the noise that had just come out of that jumbo cat was unlike anything I'd ever heard before. It wasn't natural.

It stood up and waddled closer to me, making the sound again.

"Hey, knock that the hell off," I hissed as I nudged the cat back with my boot so I could come in and close the door behind me. "You're going to wake your mom up."

It meowed again, only it sounded like its vocal cords had gotten caught in

a meat grinder. “Shh! Christ, okay! What do you want?” I whisper-yelled, desperate to get this cat to shut the hell up so it wouldn’t wake up Alma. Not only did she need sleep, but if she wasn’t awake, she was less likely to kick me out, and at this point, I would work with what I got.

When I’d heard her throwing up earlier, this insane need to take care of her had grabbed me by the chest and refused to let go. I wasn’t leaving while she was sick. Not a chance in hell. But we were less likely to fight about that little fact if she wasn’t conscious, so I was going to wait as long as possible before kicking that hornet’s nest.

There had only been one other time in my life when I felt the level of panic I had when I read the temp on that thermometer earlier, and it was when I’d given her no choice but to end us. As much as I wanted to fight it back then, wrap my arms around her and never let go, I’d forced myself to walk away when she asked me to. I thought I had been doing the right thing. Hell, there were even days now when I felt I’d done her a huge favor by ending us. But the panic that had squeezed my chest like a vise when she shouted how much she hated me in my face had almost crippled me. I felt it again earlier, but this time, I wasn’t going to take the coward’s way out and walk away. I was here until she was on the mend, simple as that. She’d scared the hell out of me, getting sick like that, and I needed to see for myself that she was getting better.

The cat tried to wind through my feet but was too fat to make it, forcing me to step wider as it continued to make that god-awful noise.

“Okay, okay. What can I do to make you shut the hell up, huh? You thirsty? Hungry?”

At that word, as if it understood what it meant, the fat-ass cat bolted down the hallway. I followed after him, right to the kitchen, and found him waiting patiently by the pantry.

“You know you need to go on a diet, don’t you?” I asked as I placed the shopping bags down on the counter. “I don’t know if cats can have heart attacks, but if they can, you’re standing on the threshold, my man.”

The thing blinked at me, unimpressed. With my arms empty, I opened the pantry door and looked around until I spotted a bag of cat food, and snatched it up. There was an empty bowl against the back wall of the kitchen, so I picked it up to fill it.

Spotting the name that was painted on the side, I let out a little scoff as I looked down at the cat, now waiting patiently and silently. “You’re name’s

Tortellini?” I shook my head on a chuckle. Of course Alma would name her pet after a food. “Fitting.”

I’d barely returned the bowl to the floor before he shoved his entire face into it. “Christ, no wonder you’re the size of a toddler.”

While Tortellini stuffed his face, I went about emptying my bags and getting everything in order. I wasn’t sure if Alma would be able to eat anything yet, so I poured a single serving of the soup into a bowl and stowed that in the fridge, then put the container that held the rest in the freezer just as Ms. M. had instructed.

I read the back of each box diligently and took out what I needed before heading into Alma’s room.

She was still passed out in the bed where I left her earlier, only it looked like she had thrashed around in her sleep while trying to get comfortable. She lay on her stomach, her arms stretched out at her sides, her face smushed into her pillow. Her lips were slightly parted, creating a rattling snore with each inhale. Her long dark hair was draped over her pillow in long, tangled strands.

The big downy comforter had been kicked onto the floor, and the sheets no longer covered her, but were twisted around her long, bare legs. The T-shirt of mine she’d been wearing when I first showed up had ridden up at some point, revealing a simple pair of white cotton panties against her smooth, tanned skin. I silently cursed my dick for stirring at the sight of her.

Now was most definitely not the time for me to appreciate her form, not when she was in such a vulnerable state, so as hard as it was, I ripped my gaze off her ass and sat the pills and liquid medicine cups on the bedside table beside the thermometer so I could free her from the sheet and pull it back over her body. The second the fabric hit her skin, she stirred, batting at it and rolling to her side.

“Shh,” I soothed, reaching out to brush her hair back from her forehead. I fucking hated seeing her like this. She looked so miserable, and all I wanted to do was make it better for her. “It’s okay, Freckles. I got you.”

Her eyes slowly fluttered open, revealing their gorgeous brown, glassy with fever and sickness.

“Roan?” she asked in a whispered croak.

Unable to help myself, I lowered to sitting on the side of the bed. It was impossible for me to be this close to her and not want to touch her, so even though I had no right, I brushed the pad of my thumb against her cheekbone.

I smiled down at her. “Yeah, it’s me.”

Her eyelids drooped like they had heavy weights attached to them, but she tried her best to force them back open. “It’s not a dream?” she murmured, the slurring speech telling me she wasn’t awake all the way.

“No, baby. It’s not a dream. I’m right here, and I got some medicine you need to take, okay? But first I have to take your temperature.”

I grabbed the thermometer and pressed it to her forehead. She made a small noise of protest as her eyes fell closed again.

The number hadn’t gone down, so I grabbed the Tylenol first and cupped my hand at the back of her neck in order to ease her up.

“Come on, Alma. I need to you wake up just long enough to take your medicine, okay? Then you can go back to sleep.”

A little whimper escaped her lips and damn near gutted me, but she cooperated enough for me to get the pills down her, along with some flu meds and a couple sips of Pedialyte.

I hadn’t realized I’d been holding my breath through the whole ordeal until it was over and I lowered her back onto her pillow. I leaned closer, running the backs of my knuckles across her jaw. “You’ll be okay, Freckles,” I whispered softly, willing the words to be true. “You’re gonna be just fine.”

Her brows pinched together in a deep frown, but her eyes never opened as she shifted beneath the blanket, trying to get comfortable. “Roan,” she said in a hushed voice. “You’re really here.”

My lips curved upward as I cupped her cheek. “I’m really here. And I’m never leaving you again.”

I kept waiting for that frown of hers to disappear, but it only deepened. “You broke me,” she mumbled, still mostly asleep. “Loved you. And you broke me.”

It felt like someone had reached into my chest and was squeezing my heart in their fist. Fuck, but hearing that hurt. I’d been stupid to think that ten years might have been enough time to make the wounds of the past fade. She was still as raw as I was. Because we were meant for each other. Our souls fit together like two pieces of a puzzle, but I’d ripped us apart. There was no healing a wound like that.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” I whispered. “I’m so sorry I hurt you. That I destroyed us. But I swear on my life, I’m going to make everything right.”

She didn’t respond. The only sounds were those small, chuffing snores telling me she was out again.

I don't know how long I sat there, staring at her sleeping form as the pain I'd caused us both radiated deep in my bones. Eventually, Tortellini entered the room, and against all odds and the laws of gravity, managed to jump onto the bed. He curled himself into another fat ball in the bend of Alma's knees, and passed out from a food coma.

I would have been content to sit there all day and night, but I was forced to get up and leave the room when my phone started to ring from my back pocket.

I moved fast, pulling her bedroom door partially closed and moving down the hall to the living room as I pulled the phone out.

I swiped to answer it quickly, ready to tell off whoever was on the other end. "Hello?"

"Mr. Blackwell. My name is Jerry Kent. I've been trying to reach you for a couple weeks now. I've spoken to members of your team, but I'm not sure my messages have been getting through to you. I'm the executor of your father's estate."

At those words, my blood turned to ice. "No offense, Mr. Kent, but this is a private number, and you shouldn't have it," I gritted out, no politeness in my tone whatsoever.

"Oh, um . . . well, I do apologize. I spoke with a man by the name of"—there was a pause and a ruffle of papers—"Cal Stark. He's the one who gave me this number. Assured me I'd be able to reach you here."

I mentally added a tally mark on the cons side of the list I was keeping in my head on whether or not Cal was worth keeping around.

"Yes, well, he shouldn't have done that. So do us both a favor and lose this number, yeah?"

He sputtered through the line. "But—but, Mr. Blackwell, your father left you—"

I cut him off. "I don't give a shit what that son of a bitch left behind. If he left anything for me, do me a favor. Take it out back and set it on fucking fire."

With that, I disconnected and threw the phone onto Alma's coffee table as I collapsed onto the couch. I leaned forward, bracing my elbows on my knees and dropping my head into my hands as unpleasant memories from my past rushed over me.

The day that bastard finally died, I didn't bother attending the funeral. Instead, I went out and celebrated by getting shitfaced drunk and throwing

every picture of him from the photo albums my mother had given me years ago, before she passed away, into the fire. It was my attempt at erasing him from the world altogether. If only it had worked. But apparently, the motherfucker wasn't done haunting me.

Even in death he had the keen ability to sense when things seemed to be going well for me and pop up to ruin it.

ALMA

I woke up disoriented. My eyelids felt like they were made of sandpaper as I peeled them back and blinked into consciousness for what felt like the first time in an eternity. It was dark outside beyond my window, and I didn't know if it was night or early morning.

My brain was still foggy, but I could tell by how damp my shirt was that my fever had broken, and my stomach no longer felt like it wanted to escape my body. I slowly pushed to sitting and tried to get my bearings. My joints still ached a bit, but a nice, hot shower would help loosen them up. And fortunately, I felt well enough to bathe, because my whole body felt gross, and I could think of nothing I wanted more than to scrub the sick off me.

I pushed out of my bed with a groan, leaning side to side to stretch my muscles before starting for the bathroom. I still didn't feel anywhere near one hundred percent, but it was a vast improvement to how I'd been earlier that day.

It felt good to strip out of the grimy T-shirt, and as soon as I felt up to it, I'd wash it and stuff it back down in that drawer where it belonged. I twisted the knobs in my shower to make the water as hot as I could stand it and stood beneath the spray, letting it massage all the aches and pains that still lingered.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd gotten so sick. I was downright delirious. I'd actually dreamed that Roan had shown up on my doorstep and insisted on doctoring me back to health. There were even a few times where I lingered between being asleep and awake and imagined him tenderly giving me medication and whispering about needing to stay hydrated. It was ridiculous. A dream induced from opening up to my girlfriends about my ex, then being wracked with fever.

I laughed at myself as I scrubbed my body down and went about washing my hair. By the time I got out of the shower, I'd managed to zap most of what little energy I'd built up and wanted nothing more than to crawl back into bed, but I knew I probably needed to try and put something light in my stomach and drink some water so I didn't dehydrate.

I moved toward my dresser, pulling on a pair of underwear and another baggy tee. When I turned and spotted the items littered across my bedside table, I froze. There was my thermometer, a half-full glass of water, and several medicine bottles I knew for a fact I didn't have on hand.

A memory popped up in my head, one of Roan holding my hair back as I got sick. I cringed as the memory changed to him carrying me to bed and telling me he was going to buy me some medicine, and that he'd be back.

"Oh god," I groaned, lifting a hand to cover my mouth. It hadn't been a dream. He was really here. He'd really taken care of me while I was sick. I hadn't imagined any of it.

Suddenly awash with nerves, I crept closer to my bedroom door and pressed my ear to it, trying to hear anything on the other side. I should have known something was up. Tortellini wouldn't have let missed meals slide just because I was knocking on death's door. When he was starving and felt like I'd slept too long, he had a habit of jumping up onto the bed and laying flat across my face, suffocating me until I woke up, desperate for air. It was his way of forcing me out of bed to feed him.

When I wasn't still recovering from the bubonic plague and silently freaking out that my ex was in my house somewhere, I might take the time to think about what it meant that I had a cat who occasionally tried to kill me in my sleep. In the meantime, I had more pressing things on my mind.

I moved closer to the door until I was smooshed right up against it, but I couldn't hear anything. My heart thumped out a frantic beat in my chest as I turned the knob and slowly pulled the door open.

I inched my way out on my tiptoes, my ears straining for sounds of life. Then realizing how ridiculous I looked, I lowered onto my feet. This was *my* house, after all. There was no reason for me to creep around like a thief in the night. In fact, now that I was thinking more rationally, I realized Roan had absolutely no business being here in the first damn place.

It didn't matter that he'd played nursemaid for however long I was delirious and on the verge of death. This was my house, and he wasn't welcome here.

I squared my shoulders and lifted my chin, renewed determination coursing through me. I was going to find him and kick him the hell out. Who did this asshole think he was, coming into my house without an invitation? I had a mind to teach him a lesson—. My train of thought came to a screeching halt when I neared the kitchen and caught a whiff of something that smelled divine. I stopped in my tracks, closing my eyes and inhaling deeply. My stomach let out a pained rumble at the delicious, savory scents. It felt like it had been a lifetime since I'd eaten anything, and I was suddenly starving.

I moved farther down the hall and turned the corner into the living room. From there, I could see straight into my kitchen, and what I saw made my mouth go dry.

Roan stood at the stove, his back to me. Even after all these years, I would have remembered that long, strong frame anywhere, those broad shoulders, the muscles that worked beneath the fabric of his shirt as he moved about. All this time, and his body still had the uncanny ability to call to mine like it was its other half. It had always been like that with us. We'd know the instant the other walked into a room by feel alone. I'd loved it back then, but now it felt needlessly cruel.

As if he sensed me, he turned to look over his shoulder. The instant he spotted me, his lips curled up in a smile that made that dimple press deep enough I could see it, even beneath the trimmed beard filling in along his jawline.

“Hey, you're finally up. How are you feeling?”

I opened my mouth to say all the things I'd rehearsed, but the words disappeared like a puff of smoke caught on the wind.

“While I was out getting your meds, I also stopped in at the diner and got you some chicken soup. I was just heating it up for you, if you're hungry.”

If I was hungry? Other than when I was hurling my guts up, I was always hungry. There wasn't much in life I loved more than food.

“You went to the diner?” I asked. I wasn't sure if it was the lingering brain fog from still being a little sick, but I was struggling to wrap my head around what he'd just said. “To get me chicken soup?”

A tiny grin played on his lips as he placed the spoon he'd been using to stir the soup onto my cute little spoon rest before turning to face me. He leaned his hips back against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest, giving me a perfect, unobstructed view of his upper half, and *damn*, what an upper half it was. I wasn't sure how it was possible, but he was even bigger

than he had been when we were together, and he was no slouch back then. His chest was wider, the muscles there and in his biceps more pronounced. Even his forearms seemed more muscular than before. I didn't know if it was a trick of the mind, but he also seemed to be a little taller than I remembered.

But that was where the changes ended. His dark hair still looked as silky as it always had, and I knew from experience that it felt as soft as it looked.

His moss-green eyes still had the ability to look straight into me, seeing more than I was comfortable with while holding me captive in their snare.

Ten years. Ten *fucking* years, and the memory of him still hurt as badly as it had that day when I'd watched him walk away from me and the life I thought we were going to build together.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I gave my head a shake and cleared my throat, trying to push the pain away.

"I ran into this little old lady at the pharmacy. Ms. McClintock? Anyway, she saw me having a tiny meltdown in the cold aisle trying to find the right meds and helped me out. Then she recommended the soup from the diner. Hey, did you know the owners are downright crazy?" he asked in a conversational tone that made me laugh.

The pull of those yummy smells was too hard to ignore any longer, so I allowed my feet to unglue themselves from the floor and shuffle closer to the kitchen. *Closer to danger*, a voice in my head spoke out, but the need for food was stronger.

"They aren't crazy," I told him as I hefted onto a stool. My energy reserves were still at an all-time low, so I braced my elbow on the counter and propped my chin in my hand. It was the only way to keep my head up, or else I would have probably fallen asleep right at the bar. From the corner of my eye, I spotted movement and looked to see Tortellini standing at his food bowl, scarfing down his dinner.

For the love of god, the man had taken care of my cat too? I pushed that thought away.

"Shouting is their love language, that's all."

He let out a snort as he ladled soup into one of my pretty white stoneware ceramic bowls. "I'm pretty sure that's their only language."

"It's kind of what they're famous for. Apparently that's how they've always been. Eating in at Evergreen diner is kind of like getting a show with your meal. They're entertaining as hell."

"No denying that." He plopped a spoon into the rich golden broth and

pushed it my way before cutting into a delicious-looking loaf of rustic bread sitting on the counter and placing a thick piece on a napkin beside my bowl.

I tore off a smaller bite-sized piece and dipped it into the soup before popping it into my mouth. The instant the flavors exploded on my tongue, I let out a groan. The soup was as flavorful as always, but the bread was out of this world. Light and fluffy on the inside with a perfectly crunchy crust. I took another bite, trying to identify the flavors. Rosemary and garlic, a perfect complement to the hearty soup. “Oh my god. Where did you get the bread, because I need a million more loaves of this stuff?”

“Glad you approve, Freckles. I made that myself.”

I choked on the spoonful of soup I’d just taken, coughing and sputtering until I could pull in a full breath. It took a moment, but I finally managed to clear my esophagus and breathe normally, and when I looked back at Roan, he was watching me with a knowing grin tugging at his lips.

“You made this?” I asked in disbelief. “You actually *baked bread*? You don’t even know how to cook!”

He let out a husky chuckle, the sound reverberating through the kitchen and hitting me right in the belly. I spooned up more of the soup and bit off another chunk of bread, hoping the food would shove the feeling down.

“Well, darlin’, a lot’s changed since the last time we saw each other.”

He’d meant the statement to be carefree, but to me, it had the same effect as dumping a bucket of ice water directly over my head.

As if sensing a sudden change in the air around us, Roan stiffened. He dropped his arms and stepped closer, closing as much of the distance as the counter between us would allow. “Listen, Alma. We need to talk.”

That was the very last thing we needed to do. I forced my gaze to drop away from him and stared down into my bowl as I dragged my spoon through it. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I said quietly. “You should go.”

“Freckles, please.”

My head shot back up, my eyes narrowing angrily. “I know I’ve been pretty out of it today, but I’m almost certain I’ve asked you not to call me that.”

He let out a heavy sigh and dropped his head, reaching back with one hand to massage his neck.

“Look, I know I have a lot to make up for, but that’s why I’m here. I want to make it up to you.”

Something inside me snapped, and the pain that coursed through me was

too much to bear. I leaned on anger, not wanting him to see how much I was still hurting, all because of him.

I shoved the bowl and the last of the bread away from me and pushed off the stool, stumbling back a few feet to put some distance between us. When he started to round the counter, reaching out as though he wanted to catch me, I held up a hand to stop him.

“You had years to explain, Roan. *Years*. What you did crushed me, but if you had come to me shortly after and tried to explain why you ended us, why you broke my heart—” My voice broke on that last word, but I swallowed past the lump forming in my throat and soldiered on. “If you had come to me and told me *why*, maybe it would have been enough. But too much time passed. You let me go.” I shook my head, fighting back tears. “No, that’s not right. You threw me away. And you think I’m just going to sit back and listen to your pathetic excuses now? A fucking decade later? No. No!”

“Alma, baby, I know I hurt you. I hurt *us*. Believe me, these past ten years have been a nightmare. There’s never been anyone but you. That’s what I’m here to prove to you.”

“Why?” I crossed my arms and lifted my chin, determined not to break, not to let down the walls I’d built around myself. “Why now, huh? Got too bored of living the high life? Is being famous starting to get dull? Your precious career sure as hell was more important than me back then, so what’s changed now?”

Something moved over his face that had every muscle in my body going tense. Anguish swam to the surface of his eyes before he blinked it away. His shoulders sank, his posture sagging like he couldn’t bear the weight of it.

“Randall died.” He spoke those words so quietly, but the impact of them was like a gunshot echoing through the entire house.

“Roan,” I said on a breath, my eyes going wide. “I—I don’t know what to say.”

He gritted his teeth, curling his lips back on a hiss as he raked a hand through his hair. “Nothing to say. It was too long coming, and I’m glad the mean old bastard’s finally gone.”

Something inside my chest splintered. “Roan, don’t say that. He was your dad.”

He held up a hand to stop me. “If there’s one person in this world who knows the truth about that man, it’s you. You *know*, Alma. The world is a better place now that he’s gone, and I’m not sad about it.”

I curled my lips between my teeth and bit down to keep silent. I couldn't say he was wrong. Randall Blackwell was a piece of shit. Lower than the mud on the bottom of your shoe. He was the only man on the planet I could say without hesitation I hated. I believed down to my very bones the man was evil incarnate. Maybe it made me petty, maybe I was a bad person, but I couldn't drum up even an ounce of sadness that he was gone.

"I'm not sad either," I confessed in a hushed voice.

At my words, Roan's eyes rounded, something sparked in the forest green depths, and before I could react, he moved, quick as lightning. One moment he was across the room from me and the next he was cupping my face in his hands, leaning in so deep he was all I could see. Earnestness was etched into every inch of those strong, chiseled features.

"You were the only one who ever knew. Who understood how I felt. And you were the only one who never tried to change me or talk me around. That was why I loved you so goddamn much. Why I still—"

My hand shot up, slapping over his mouth before the words could spill out. "Don't," I rasped hoarsely, the lump in my throat making it a struggle to breathe. I'd barely survived losing him the first time. If he told me he loved me, I knew there would be no coming back from that. "Don't say it. Don't you dare."

He took me by the wrist and gently pulled my hand away. "But—"

"I'm telling you right now, I don't want to hear it. So if you say it, you're saying it for yourself. Not me."

He squeezed his eyes closed, his brow furrowing as sadness etched into the planes of his face. When he opened them again, pain shined back at me, but I could deal with pain. I couldn't deal with lies and false promises. Not again.

I did my best to school my features, sliding that mask right back into place, only this time, it was a struggle to get it to stick. "It's time for you to go," I said as I pulled my wrist from his grip and took two large steps backward. "I need you to go, Roan. I appreciate everything you did for me while I was sick, but nothing has changed between us. You need to leave." The implication echoed in my words. We both knew I meant not only my home, but my town as well.

The sadness melted away, quickly replaced with a resoluteness that I knew would only mean problems for me.

"Okay, Alma. I'll go. For now. But make no mistake. I'm here for you,

and I have no intention of leaving Hope Valley until I've proven myself to you."

On that declaration, he started toward the door, pausing at my side to say, "You're due for another dose in an hour, sweetheart. Take it. And finish your soup."

I stood frozen in place, breathing raggedly through my nose as I waited to hear the door close, announcing his departure. I didn't know how, but somehow I managed to keep my eyes from watering over until he was gone. As soon as I heard the latch click, my shoulders slumped and I bowed forward. It took thirty seconds—I counted each slow, painful one—for me to get control of the tears that wanted to rip themselves free, but eventually I won.

A brush against my ankle caught my attention, and I looked down to see Tortellini plopped down beside my feet, only, he wasn't looking up at me. He was staring toward the front door with a forlorn expression on his kitty face.

"Traitor," I grumbled. Then I headed back to the kitchen for more of that incredible bread.

ALMA

*T*hen

The first thing I did when I stepped through the front door of our apartment was kick off the torturous shoes my demented boss made us wear and let out a satisfied groan. Who the hell ever heard of waitressing in high heels?

He said it was so we could get better tips, but the women on staff knew it was only because he was a disgusting pig who liked to leer at our asses in our short skirts and stiletto heels. Each shift was like torture, but until I started getting callbacks from all the auditions I'd had, I was stuck with that shitty serving job to pay the bills.

"Hey baby," I called as I hung my purse on the hook I'd installed beside the door and headed for the kitchen. "I'm home."

I opened the fridge and pulled out the bottle of cheap chardonnay I'd opened the day before and poured myself a glass.

"Roan?" I tried again. When he didn't answer, I headed for the bedroom. He was sitting on the bed with his elbows resting on his knees and his head hanging in his hands. I set my wineglass on the tacky dresser we found in the alley behind the apartment building and rushed to him, dropping to my knees in front of him. "Baby, what's wrong?"

I got nothing. He remained deathly silent and still. I cupped his cheeks when he wouldn't look up, tipping his head so I could see his face. When I finally got a look at him, I sucked in a sharp breath at the state of his face and clapped my hands over my mouth in shock. His lip was busted open, dried

blood flaking in the corner of his mouth. His cheekbone was split open and swelling below a black eye.

“Oh my god! What the hell happened?”

He shoved up to his feet so fast I nearly tumbled backward onto my butt. “Don’t want to talk about it,” he gritted out as he stormed out of the bedroom. I jogged after him, catching him in the kitchen where he was unscrewing the cap on a bottle of bourbon we kept in the cabinet above the fridge. He pulled down a squat plastic cup and filled it halfway before tossing it back in a couple short gulps and refilling the cup again.

“Roan, honey.” I stepped up beside him, placing my hand on his arm to keep him from shooting back the second dose of bourbon. “Just stop for a second and talk to me. What happened to your face? Who did this to you?”

He set the cup down on the cheap laminate counter with a *clunk* and braced his palms on either side of it, lowering his head as he sucked in a deep breath.

“Went to see my mom today,” he said in a voice so low it was practically a whisper.

I knew the moment those words left his mouth that this was going to be bad. In the year and a half we’d been together, Roan had shared about the tumultuous relationship between him and his family. His father, Randall, was a twisted, evil, abusive son of a bitch. I’d only met the man twice in the time Roan and I had been living together, and neither of those times had been anywhere near the ballpark of pleasant. If I could go through the rest of my life with Roan and never have to lay eyes on that man again, I could die a happy woman.

The problem was Roan’s mother refused to leave the asshole, even though he beat on her regularly, and had beaten her own son when he was an innocent kid. Any time Roan confronted her about why she stayed with him, she had one excuse after the other. I’d tried putting myself in her shoes more times than I cared to admit, knowing that enduring years of abuse took a toll on a person mentally. I tried to understand why she would stay, why she would still claim to love a man who hurt her over and over again. If I tried really hard, I could empathize. But what I couldn’t possibly wrap my mind around, what I refused to understand or excuse, was not protecting your own flesh and blood, the child you brought into this world, from the monster you’d made the choice to share your life with.

Elenore had chosen Randall, but Roan had no control over who his

parents were. He'd been born into a situation completely beyond his control. Every time the topic of his parents came up, I couldn't help but think about my own kids. I might not have had any yet, but Roan and I talked about our future family all the time. I couldn't fathom letting someone hurt my own child, whether that person was its father or not.

Roan loved his mother with every bit of his big, accepting heart, making things harder for him. As much as he loved and adored his mother, he hated his father just as much. He tried constantly to help her see she deserved so much better, but it never seemed to penetrate with her. Or if it did, she simply didn't care.

It never failed that he'd come home from a visit with her feeling like a failure when he wasn't able to talk her into leaving the bastard she called husband. That made the visits he tried to schedule regularly harder and harder, because he refused to be in the same house as Randall, so he only got to see Elenore when he was at work.

I moved to the fridge, filling a plastic baggy with ice and wrapping it in a towel. I squeezed my way between him and the counter and lifted the icepack to press it against his cheek. I implored his eyes to meet mine and hated the pain I saw lurking inside them when he finally did. "Talk to me," I pleaded, wishing I could somehow take his pain away.

"He wasn't supposed to be there," he rasped. "He was supposed to be at work, but apparently the fucker's temper isn't only relegated to his family. He got into it with his boss and ended up getting fired. He took himself to a bar afterward and got shit-faced, then came home to take his bad mood out on Mom."

I pulled in a breath and pressed my free hand to his chest, right over his heart, as I lowered my forehead to rest right beside it. "You put yourself between him and her, didn't you?"

He reared back at my question, his face pinching up with disbelief. "What kind of question is that, Alma? Of course I did. She's my *mom*."

I swallowed down the words that wanted desperately to come out. I wanted to scream that she never showed him the same devotion and safety, even when it was *her* job to do it. Not his. My anger at the woman was growing more bitter with every passing month, and keeping my thoughts and feelings on the matter to myself was getting harder and harder to do.

"I let the piece of shit get a few hits in, just like he's been used to all my life. But I ended the fight when I put his ass on the ground." His eyes grew

distant, like he was lost in the memory, and a tiny grin played on his lips. “He hadn’t been expecting that.”

I fisted my hands in his shirt and gave him a little jerk. “Good, Roan. *Good*. The son of a bitch deserves that and so much worse. You stood up for yourself and your mom, and I’m so proud of you for being so strong.”

The grin fell and his eyes went dark, and I knew the worst was yet to come. “You’re the only one who feels that way, Freckles,” he said as he traced his finger down the bridge of my nose, across my freckles he loved so much.

“What do you mean?”

“After I knocked him on his ass, my mom kicked me out.”

The air froze in my lungs, my vision went hazy and tinged with red as the blood started to rush in my ears. “I’m sorry. *What?*”

I didn’t realize I was gripping the fabric of his shirt to the point of ripping until his fingers wrapped around my wrists and gently pried me off. “Easy, Alma. You look like you’re about to go feral.”

“Oh, that’s because I am,” I growled, pushing away from him so I could start to pace our tiny galley kitchen. “I’m so freaking pissed I can’t see straight!” I cried, losing my hold on the calm I’d been trying to hold on to for Roan’s sake. All the words I’d been swallowing down for the past year and a half came spilling free, like a dam breaking. “How *dare* she,” I raged. “How dare she kick you out when you’ve been nothing but supportive of her!”

“Freckles—”

I stopped mid-pace and spun around to jab my finger in his face. “I didn’t say anything when you told me about your childhood. I didn’t say a word the first time she called you for money because your waste-of-oxygen father lost *another* job, or again when they were late on their car note.”

“Alma—” he tried again, but I was too far gone.

“You’ve worked your ass off trying to make a career with your music, and every time you come into a little money, she’s there on your father’s behalf, with her freaking hand out. And I’m done! You’ve bent over backward for a woman who’s never returned the gesture.” I pointed at his face and barked, “And you’re still bending! And you know what, Roan? She’s the *only* one in your relationship that should be bending! You’re her son, and she never once tried to protect you the way you protect her. I know you love her, baby, and it kills me to see how you are in pain every time you come home from a visit with her. It kills me every time you get that faraway

look in your eye when you're thinking about your father and the terrible things he's done to you."

I clutched my chest, feeling helpless and sad and pissed and so many other things I couldn't put my finger on. "I want to take it all away, but I know that's not possible. I look at you right now, see your busted lip and split cheek, and I want to drive over there and have a go at him with a baseball bat for hurting you!"

"Don't—" Roan barked so loudly it startled me. I jumped as he lunged at me, grabbing hold of my upper arms in a grip so tight it almost bordered on pain. Something frantic flitted over his features just then, drying the rest of the rant I had stored up on my tongue. "I mean it, Alma. Don't ever put yourself in front of that man. You hear me? You stay as far away from him as possible. Promise me."

"Roan—"

He shook me hard enough my teeth clacked together. "Promise me, Alma. Right now."

I couldn't recall a time when I'd ever seen him so scared or anxious. "Okay," I whispered, wanting—no, needing—to chase that fear from his eyes. "I'll stay far away from him. I promise."

His shoulders sank on a deep, gusty sigh of relief. He used his grip on me to pull me against him and wrapped me in his arms like he wanted to hold tight and never let go. "Thank you, baby. Thank you for caring and for being pissed for me. Thank you for being you."

"Always," I murmured into his chest. "I love you, Roan. That's what a person does when they love someone."

He pulled his head back so he could look down at me, smiling for the very first time since I got home, but I could still see the struggle he was battling inside.

"You know, this bullshit won't matter much longer. You have my word. I'm going to get signed to a label soon, I can feel it in my bones. It's going to happen. They're going to put my songs on the radio and they'll be a hit and we'll be rich, baby. It'll be you and me against the world." He locked his fingers together at the small of my back as I smiled up at him. "I'll buy you a mansion and give you everything you could ever want, and you'll give me babies. We'll have our own family, Freckles, and mine'll be nothing more than a bad memory we left behind."

"I don't need the mansion," I said through a smile as I hugged him tight.

“I don’t need material things. As long as I have you, that’s all I’ll ever need.”

He pressed my head back to his chest and rested his chin on top of it. “I know, baby. But that won’t stop me from wanting to give you the world. And I swear to you, that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

ROAN

Well, last night certainly hadn't gone how I'd hoped. Expected? Abso-fucking-lutely. But I'd hoped for a better outcome. Wishful thinking, I knew that. I might have been a dumbass for letting her go in the first damn place, but I wasn't a complete moron. I knew I couldn't expect her to just embrace me with open arms ten long, lonely years after I'd broken her heart, but a man could dream, right?

And besides, I hadn't walked away from Alma's house completely discouraged. There had been signs. Signs I still had a chance. Something was still in her heart for me other than disdain, hatred, or indifference. When she first opened her front door and I saw my old Music City tee hanging on her, my heart swelled so goddamn big there wasn't room in my chest for anything else.

When I told her about Randall dying the pain that flashed in those intoxicating whiskey eyes was for me, and her fierce whisper that she wasn't sad he no longer walked this earth . . . well, as sick as it might have made me, it had been damn near impossible *not* to kiss her when I heard that. She was the only one I'd ever trusted enough to share most of the horror stories of my family. The only one who really and truly understood. And even though I'd hurt her—broken her, she'd said—she was still on my side when it came to him.

When I held her face in my hands I'd felt it. That same spark had lit me up from the inside every time we touched. Hell, I'd even felt her enter the room before I turned around and saw her there. My body and soul still recognized its other half when it came near, even all these years later. I had to believe that meant something.

I would have gladly given every penny I had to go back in time and change what I did. If only that were an option. All I could do was berate myself for fucking up so epically in the first place.

After spending more than twenty-four hours in Alma's space, the warm, cozy little space she called home, coming back to the inn had proven harder than I'd expected. At Alma's house, I slept on the couch with the alarm on my phone set to wake me up every hour so I could check on her, and still, I'd slept more peacefully under her roof than I had the night before at the inn.

I'd tossed and turned on the pillowtop mattress, beneath the downy cloud-like pillows and blankets. Because I couldn't hear her soft, chuffing snore coming from the other room. Because she wasn't there for me to check on to make sure the fever didn't return. Hell, even because I didn't have her fat-ass cat to nearly crush my chest when it jumped up to sleep on the too-short sofa with me.

I finally gave up on sleep around five earlier this morning. I pulled one of the large chairs by the fireplace over to the window and sat down with my guitar. I didn't have a view of the stars at home like the one right outside my window here in Hope Valley. The city lights made it impossible. But here, the dark night sky was speckled with millions of tiny white dots. It reminded me of the freckles that ran along the bridge of her delicate nose and the tops of her cheekbones.

I spent so long in front of that window I'd managed to come up with a brand-new melody for a new song as the sun was rising over the mountain peaks in the distance. Christ, it really was pretty here. I probably could have sat at that window all day, looking down at the town while coming up with music I was actually excited about playing. The songs I had been coming up with since arriving in Hope Valley sounded more like the album my label didn't want from me. More like the music I created before being signed. It sounded more like *me*. I hadn't been this excited to play and sing in I didn't know how long.

Once the sun had lifted fully over the mountains and the rest of the town started to wake up, I dressed and headed downstairs. Like most everyone else in this town, the rest of the people staying at the inn didn't seem to care one way or another who I was. I'd signed a few autographs here and there, posed for a couple pictures once the person assured me they weren't going to list the location on social media, but that had been the extent of it.

I was shocked to find I actually enjoyed going down to the main dining

room and having my meals there with the other guests. I liked catching up with Claire or her parents, Paul and Diane, who'd inherited the inn from Diane's parents, who'd inherited from theirs, and so on and so on. The Valley Inn had been in their family for generations, and they had some incredible stories that only made the history of this place all the richer.

I enjoyed watching the young kid, Brett, who worked on the grounds, get all flustered and nervous as he attempted to flirt with Claire. There was something between the two of them, and as odd as it was, I found myself hoping it played out while I was still around so I could witness it.

Back in Nashville, I kept to myself. I didn't have many friends, mainly because it was hard to trust people when you had as much money and fame as I did. In the early days, I'd been way too fucking trusting, and the vultures had descended. It was too damn hard to know who to trust; it was easier to keep myself closed off.

It wasn't until I got here that I realized how boring and lonely my life had become. Or maybe it had always been that way, but I'd been young and stupid at first, thinking that the relationships I built at events and parties with other celebrities actually meant something. But like the people I was told I needed to socialize with, they were hollow and self-serving.

I'd actually stopped to give it some thought the other night while I lay on Alma's couch, waiting to give her the next dose of meds. I tried to think of anyone in my life who was there because they really wanted to be, not because they were being paid or wanted to get something out of being seen with me. And I couldn't come up with a single goddamn person.

The closest thing I had to a friend was Lincoln. And he was here, in this small town. It made me start to question what was left in Nashville for me.

My boots clomped on the stairs as I made my way down to the front lobby. I'd gotten so used to this place and felt so much at home now that I no longer bothered using the side stairs for more privacy.

Brett stood in front of the desk in the lobby, clutching his ballcap in his hands as he stared at Claire like a lovesick puppy.

"Mornin' kids," I greeted as soon as I hit the landing.

"Uh, morning—good morning, sir. Mr. Gates, I mean," Brett stuttered, his face growing even redder.

While Brett was nervous and sputtering, Claire was comfortable enough with me to be herself. "Hi, Mr. Gates," she said with a cheeky smile.

The whole Roy Gates was a running joke now. Everyone at the inn knew

who I was, but they still referred to me as Mr. Gates as a way to tease. Funnily enough, it made me feel more like I belonged.

“Hope you had a good night’s rest. You joining us for breakfast this morning?”

“Rested just fine, Claire, thank you. And breakfast depends. Did your mom make those banana pancakes again?”

Claire’s smile grew even wider, pride in her mom and her mother’s insane talent in the kitchen, shining bright in her eyes. “You know it. They’re a crowd favorite so they’re on the menu at least three mornings a week.”

I clapped my hands and rubbed them together. “Then I’m in. Hell, I may end up moving in indefinitely if you guys keep feeding me so damn well.”

I started toward the dining room when a thought occurred to me. I jerked to a stop and reversed back to Claire’s desk. “Is it possible for you to get me the number of a local florist?”

“You want the number to one *here*?” she asked. “Not back in Nashville?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Remember that woman I told you I was trying to win back? Well, I’d like to send her some flowers.” Another idea hit me just then, and I turned to look at Brett. “Women really do love getting flowers. Am I right, Claire?”

Her eyes widened a bit as she looked Brett’s way, a dreaminess taking over her blue eyes. “Oh, I know I do,” she said softly. “I love getting flowers. Let me get you that number. I believe I have a business card around here somewhere.”

I sure as hell hoped that little kernel I dropped sprouted into something for the two of them.

I scarfed down three of Diane’s pancakes before heading into the day. On my way to Muffin Top for my daily cup of coffee, I called the number Claire gave me and set up to have two bouquets of peonies and hydrangeas—her favorite flowers—delivered to Alma. One to her house and the other to the club to guarantee I didn’t miss her.

After that, I took some time to explore more of the town, every new discovery making me like the place even more. Linc had mentioned meeting up for lunch, so with nothing else on my schedule, I headed in the direction of his office.

The moment I pushed through the glass door and into the lobby, I hit Roxanne with a smile and laid on the charm. “Ah, if it isn’t the future Mrs. Blackwell. Have you come to your senses yet and decided to run away with

me?

She laughed and shook her head. “Ooh, boy. You’re just lookin’ for trouble, aren’t you?” She pointed at my eyes. The bruises were fading, but they were still noticeable. “Word around town’s you already got yourself enough of it as it is.” I prodded at the skin around my nose. It was no longer tender to the touch, so I figured that was something.

“What can I say? I like them feisty.”

“Oh, believe me, I know. I know the one you’ve got your sights set on, and not real sure there’s a feistier one in the bunch. That girl’s got herself some claws, and if you don’t watch out, you’re gonna be shred to ribbons.”

That was a chance I was more than willing to take. Hell, I welcomed it.

The door to Lincoln’s office opened and he stepped out. “Perfect timing, man. You ready for lunch?”

“Whenever you are.”

“Hold my calls, would you, Rox?” he asked his receptionist. “Unless it’s important, then put it through to my cell.”

We headed out after that, walking in the direction of the diner where we planned to eat.

“So, how’s the plan going to win back your woman?” he asked conversationally.

I let out a sigh and stuffed my hands in my pockets. “It’s going, I guess. It’s not like I didn’t know this would be hard, but being this close to her and not having her is killing me.”

“I figured you might need a hand, so I did a little askin’ around and I might just know where she plans on bein’ tonight. That is, if you’re interested.”

My head whipped in his direction. “Fuck yes, I’m interested. Where will she be?”

“Well, bud, how do you feel about live music?”

ALMA

*I*t felt great to be back to my normal routine after being sick. The fever hadn't returned after I'd kicked Roan out of my house, but that might have had to do with the fact that I kept up with the strictly regimented medicine schedule I found written on the notepad I used for grocery lists. I still hadn't had the energy for anything serious yesterday, so I spent it resting my body, watching Netflix, and yelling at Tortellini for standing at the front door and meowing every few minutes, like he was waiting for Roan to come back.

Now I was back at rehearsals, and some of the girls and I had made plans to meet up with some friends from outside of work to listen to the band playing at the Tap Room later tonight.

After roughly forty-eight hours of stressing and thinking about Roan, Roan, Roan, I was looking forward to getting him off my mind with a girls' night out.

I still wasn't fully back to one hundred percent, so after we finished rehearsing the last number, I collapsed onto the floor of the studio and spread out on the cool wooden floor, letting the chill sink into my aching muscles and overheated skin.

Asher plopped down next to me and handed me a water bottle before taking a long pull from her own. "Still feeling a little draggy?"

I forced myself up to sitting and gulped back the water. "Yeah, but I'll get over it soon. That flu kicked my ass, but I bounced back pretty fast."

Marin stopped in front of us and slammed a hand down on her cocked hip. "I still can't believe you didn't call a single one of us to help. What had we *just* talked about the day before?"

I swallowed the huge gulp of water I'd just taken and glared up at her. "In my defense, I wasn't really in the state of mind to call anyone for help. I don't even remember most of it. When I wasn't sleeping, I was practically delirious."

McKenna's brows pinched. "God, babe. I didn't realize it was that bad."

"Oh, yeah. I haven't been knocked on my ass like that in a long time. The fever alone made me shake so bad, every muscle in my body ached. And I didn't have anything at the house to break it. I didn't have anything."

"Then how in the world are you here right now?"

A record scratched in my brain at Asher's question. I blamed it on the lingering effects of the flu that had knocked me on my ass and made my mouth run away with itself before my brain could catch up.

"What?"

"Well, I had the flu like that last year, and if I hadn't had Owen there to take care of me, I probably would have ended up in the hospital. Sickness like that doesn't go away if you don't treat it, and you just said you didn't have medicine at home and were too delirious to drive."

I knew I had a tendency to sing my friends' praises, but it was times like this when they were more of a pain in the ass than anything else.

"Oh, uh, well . . . I think maybe I just have a really strong immune system?"

It was easy to see by the looks on their faces they didn't believe me, but before I could double down on my lie, the door to the studio opened and our head of security, Silas, came in, carrying an obscenely large arrangement of peonies and hydrangeas in a pretty vase decorated with twine and lace ribbon.

"This just arrived for Alma," he said with a knowing glint in his eyes.

Sloane jumped up and jogged over to her man. "For *Alma* you say?" She looked back at me with mischief in her gaze, and I knew what she had planned.

I wasn't sure I'd ever moved faster in my life. Before she could go scrounging for a card, I darted off the floor and raced toward them both. If not for the fact that Silas was strong as hell, thanks to a past in the military, I would have bowled them both over as I scrambled for the arrangement. I didn't need to read the card to know who my favorite flowers were from. Other than my family, Roan was the only person on the planet who knew that little bit of info. I could only imagine what the card said, and I sure as hell didn't want my friends reading it. Especially before I did.

I wrapped an arm around the vase, holding it to me as I fished the little card from the plastic stand in the center of the arrangement and stuffed it down the front of my sports bra. Because *that* wasn't obvious!

McKenna looked at me with suspicion etched into her face. "You know, you're being really cagey. Almost like you're trying to hide something."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said on a laugh that wasn't believable in the slightest. "I'm not hiding anything."

Sloane crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyelids at me. "Then tell us what the card says."

"Oh, I already read it." All eyes whipped his direction at Silas's pronouncement. "I read it as soon as it was dropped off. It said: 'Hope you're feeling better, Freckles. If you need me, you know where to find me. R.'"

"I can't believe you read my card!" I cried. "That was mine! You had no right!"

Sloane raised up on her tiptoes and cupped his cheeks, pulling his face down for a loud, smacking kiss. "And *this!* This right here is one of the main reasons I love you. You understand my craving for gossip and you feed my habit."

All eyes whipped away from Silas and swung to me like they were watching a tennis match.

"I read the card to make sure there wasn't any kind of threat. I was doing my job," Silas stated calmly.

I arched a brow and drilled him with a murderous look. "And telling everyone what it said? Was that part of your job too?"

He lifted a single shoulder in a casual shrug. "Nope. That was just fun." With that, he pulled Sloane in for a quick, hard kiss. "See you later tonight, baby," he stated before he smacked her on the ass and turned on his heel, heading out of the studio without a care in the world.

"God, that man just gets me," Sloane breathed out, a glazed-over look in her eyes as she stared at the closed door he'd just walked through. "I'm one lucky lady."

Marin gave me a look that I imagined she used on her step-son daily. It was that disappointed mom look that made every person on the receiving end feel like the scum of the earth. "Start talking, woman."

"Fine, okay," I relented grudgingly. "Roan showed up on my doorstep while I was sick, and he basically forced his way in."

An eerie silence fell over the practice studio. McKenna's gaze went stony

as she asked, “He didn’t force himself on you, did he? So help me god, they’ll never find the body once I’m done with him.”

“What? No! God, no,” I cried. I bent to place the gorgeous flower arrangement on the floor. Roan didn’t make a half-assed gesture with that one, and they were getting really heavy. I let out a sigh and pulled a hand through my hair. “No, it was nothing like that. He showed up with food, and the smell of it turned my stomach. I had to run to the bathroom before I got sick all over my floor. He followed me in to hold my hair back while I was puking. Then he carried me to bed and took my temperature. It was really high, so he went to the store to buy me a whole bunch of medicine, then went to the diner for some chicken soup. I was out of it the whole day he was there, didn’t even wake up until the next evening. He stayed to take care of me and Tortellini.”

“He carried you to bed?” Sloane asked.

“He stayed the whole time,” Asher said in a way that wasn’t a question, but like she was pointing out something incredibly important.

“Yes,” I confirmed in a hushed voice. “He stayed the whole time. I found a pillow and blanket on the floor by my couch. I guess he slept out there between checking my temp and forcing medicine down my throat.”

“That’s actually kind of amazing,” Marin said. “The stories are already flying all over town. Everyone’s talking about the famous singer who’s in town to win back the love of his life and how she punched him in the face. I know we’re supposed to hate the guy, but I gotta tell you, it takes serious balls that he’d willingly show his face in this town when everyone’s speculating how he did you wrong.”

I dropped my head backward on a groan. That was just great. The last thing I needed when I was trying so hard to keep my walls up around him was for everyone I knew to be talking about it.

“Look, it’s not a big deal, okay? He stayed while I was sick, then he left. That’s all there is to the story.”

McKenna canted her head to the side and narrowed her eyes as she studied me closely. “But it’s not, is it? Not like you’re trying to convince yourself there is.”

Now that my boss knew about my past with Roan, it made it that much easier to see past the façade I’d been wearing like a shroud for years. Out of all my girls, she could probably relate to my past the closest. After what she’d gone through, being kidnapped and all that ugliness, she’d pushed

Bruce away, refusing to let him get close. She knew all about walls and trying to protect your heart.

“He managed to get in there, didn’t he? At least a little bit.”

There was no use denying it, and now that I’d opened up to my girls, I didn’t want to lie to them anymore. “He did. I don’t know if it was the way he was so gentle with me, or the fact that I walked out of my room and found him in the kitchen, reheating the soup and baking bread, all for me. Or how he managed to get Tortellini to fall completely in love with him, but he did. And I’m trying really, *really* hard to force him back out.”

Sloane closed the distance between us and took my hands in hers. “Honey, I’m not trying to overstep here, and whatever you decide, you’ve got all our support, no matter what. But do you really think you need to force him back out? Do you even *want* to?”

It was a question that had been running laps in my mind since I’d kicked him out of my house, and I still didn’t have an answer.

I shook my head resolutely. If I couldn’t feel it on the inside, the least I could do was fake it. After all, I’d gotten really fucking good at it over the years. “It doesn’t matter. Nothing is going to happen between us. Not again. That bridge was burned. We’re over.”

McKenna lifted a brow. “You really mean that?”

No.

“Yes,” I said, and the moment that word past my lips, my chest clenched.

“Uh-huh,” she muttered like she didn’t believe me. Hell, I didn’t believe myself. “You said the man baked you bread?” She let out a snort. “Bruce is the love of my life, and I’d never give him up for anything. But I’ll tell you, he’s never baked bread for me. I’m pretty sure the man doesn’t even know how to use the oven.”

“Silas can cook, but his menu is very limited. And bread sure as hell isn’t on it,” Sloane chimed in.

“I think Owen could pull it off if he put his mind to it, but he’ll never put his mind to it,” Asher said.

“Pierce and I both failed beginners cooking class,” Marin reminded us. “I’d give my left arm for some homemade bread. That sounds heavenly.”

A chorus of agreeable noises went up in the air.

Damn these intuitive women and their uncanny ability to get into my head!

* * *

I loved the Tap Room always, but especially when they had a live band. The guys up on the small stage weren't famous or anything—nowhere near, actually—but they sure knew what they were doing. They called themselves the Makin Hardware Store Guys. What the name lacked, they made up for with sheer talent.

There were countless nights since I first arrived in Hope Valley that my friends and I had burned up the dance floor as these guys played, and tonight was one of many.

I was hanging out with Hardin, Layla, Eden, Danika, and my hairdresser extraordinaire, Nona. Another friend of ours, Rory, owned the bar, so we were visiting with her as she worked the bar between dancing and drinking—well, drinking for the rest of the girls. I didn't want to risk getting sick again, so I was sticking with sparkling water with lime.

By the time the band took their first break, I felt great. The stress and anxiety of the past several days drifted away. There was nothing but the here and now. Me, my friends, good music, and fun.

The dance floor started clearing and the girls and I headed back toward our table, but before we could get there, a crowd gathered in front of us, blocking our path. I wasn't sure what was happening, but the noise in the bar raised a few decibels, the air growing electric with excitement.

I rose up on the tiptoes, trying to see around everyone. "What's going on?"

Layla worked her way through the throng, creating a path to our table for the rest of us to get through. "No idea, but whatever it is sure has everyone riled up."

Finally the crowd parted the rest of the way to our table, but before we reached it, Layla jerked to an abrupt stop so fast I walked right into her back, nearly sending us both to the ground.

"What the he—?" The words dried up in my mouth when I spotted the person sitting at our table, the cause of the sudden commotion.

Roan smiled big and bright, those straight white teeth showcased by the dark stubble lining his jaw and that damn, damn, *damn* dimple.

"Well, hey there, Freckles. Fancy meeting you here."

Fancy my ass.

ROAN

The Tap Room was cool as hell. Well, what I could see of it anyway, through the massive group of people gathering around me the moment Linc and I pushed through the door.

Turned out there was one place in this town where people cared about who I was and what I did for a living, and it was here. I'd been stopped to sign more bar napkins and pose for more selfies in the past five minutes than I had since my arrival in Hope Valley. I'd given up worrying about word getting out where I was. I needed to put all my energy and focus into winning Alma back, and I couldn't do that if I was busy worrying about being found out.

I went with the flow and trusted the people of this town. So far, they'd proven themselves pretty damn trustworthy.

We made it to the table easy enough since the gathering crowd parted like the Red Sea for Linc, but given the man's size, it made sense. The band was finishing their song, and from what I heard, they were pretty damn good. Alma was on the dance floor with some of her girls with a few more of them hanging at the table we were heading toward. When they spotted us, there was a mix of trepidation, curiosity, and humor on their faces.

I grinned and tipped my head. "Ladies. You're all looking lovely this evening."

One of the women at the table burst out laughing. "Oh, this is going to be fun!" I had a feeling I knew what she was talking about, and with the mood I was in, I had to agree.

The woman I recognized as Lincoln's wife, Eden, shot her husband a killing look. "Have you lost your mind?" the pint-sized woman snapped at

her husband.

I took one of the empty chairs as he rounded the table to get closer to his woman and leaned down to press a kiss to her cheek. “I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about, darlin’. I was just missin’ you, that’s all, so I came down with a buddy to hang out.”

His particular brand of bullshit wasn’t working on her. “Uh-huh. You’re so sleeping on the couch tonight. And who’s with Naomi?”

He sat down beside her and yanked her chair closer to his before stealing the beer sitting on the table in front of her and drinking it down. “She’s at home alone, playing with old rusty beer cans and broken glass.” Her expression screamed murder. “Relax, sweetheart. Rox and her old man offered to babysit. She’s with them.”

That seemed to placate her, and she relaxed against her husband’s side before turning to look at me. “Sorry for being rude,” she said with a smile that made me understand why a man like Linc would fall ass over end for her.

“It’s okay. Believe me, I get it.”

“Well, I’m Eden. This is Hardin.” She pointed to the woman who’d laughed just a second ago. “And this is our friend, Nona,” she introduced, pointing to a stunning redhead at the end of the table.

I tipped my chin. “Nice to meet you. I’m—”

Hardin cut me off with another laugh. “Oh, we already know who you are. And it has nothing to do with being a fan.”

I didn’t imagine it did. I was starting to understand that small town living was very different from what I was used to. Earlier at lunch, a few people had taken it upon themselves to stop at our table and give me a piece of their minds. Everything from threats to do right by Alma to suggestions for how to win her back. Some were helpful, some were ridiculous, and some of the threats were downright scary.

I noticed the group of people gathered across from our table separate, and the woman who was pushing her way through jerked to a stop. Alma was right behind her, slamming into the woman’s back.

“What the he—?” she started, then those honeyed amber eyes came to me and went wide. “Well, hey there, Freckles. Fancy meeting you here.”

She shook off the surprise and glared as she and the rest of her crew joined us at the table. *Their* table. The one I’d just horned in on. And as soon as I got a good look at her, I didn’t regret it one single bit.

Christ, she was beautiful. I thought so even when she was sick, but seeing her standing in front of me now, done up for a night out on the town with her girls, only drove that truth deeper.

Her jeans hugged her ass and thighs to perfection, showing off those curves that made my mouth water and my dick stir to life. The deep, wide V of her neckline showed more than it left to the imagination, and when she moved just right, I caught a flash of black lace hugging her breasts. I remembered those perfect little handfuls with such clarity, it felt like I'd had my hands and mouth on them only yesterday. How they fit so perfectly in my hand, how her dusky pink nipples would pinch up whenever she was aroused.

She really had the most perfect body. All woman.

The bootcut of her jeans trailed down to the high-heeled boot she walked in with the comfort and ease of a pair of tennis shoes. Like she was made to wear fuck-me heels. I couldn't help imagining those heels digging into my ass as her long, strong legs wrapped around my waist, or scratching up my back as I threw her legs over my shoulders and feasted on her pussy.

Her eyes were done up in deep, smoky taupes and shimmery coppers, and her sinful mouth was painted the kind of red I dreamed to see rimmed around the base of my cock. There was only one tiny problem. She was wearing her makeup thick enough to cover all those little starbursts of freckles I loved so goddamn much. Back when we'd been together, all she wore was a bit of mascara and some lip gloss. But the woman standing in front of me was vamped out, a vixen beneath artfully applied makeup that *my Alma* would never have worn.

I wanted those freckles back.

She popped one hip out and planted her hands on the dip of her waist. "How did you know I was here?"

I feigned innocence, placing my hand on my chest. "I don't know what you're talking about. This is purely coincidence. I heard this place had live music and wanted to check it out. That's all."

Her cat eyes narrowed further as she plopped down in a seat across from me. "Bullshit," she hissed as she snatched up a glass of clear, fizzy liquid and tossed it back.

The rest of her friends followed suit, and more introductions were made. I recognized Dani, and also met Layla, who was also a performer at *Whiskey Dolls* with Alma.

"It's the truth," I lied as a waitress in a shirt that read *Tap It Real Good*

stopped at the table. “Buy you another drink?” I pointed at the empty glass she’d slammed onto the table. “As a matter of fact, next round’s on me.”

That seemed to go over well enough with Alma’s friends; they had no issue giving the waitress their order. Alma and I stood locked in a staring contest of wills until the woman finally got to her. “And for you?” she asked politely.

It took her a second, but finally she answered grudgingly. “Sparkling water with lime. Thanks.”

I ordered a beer and handed my credit card over. Once the waitress was gone, I leaned deeper across the table. “You look a hell of a lot better, Freckles. How are you feeling?”

She cleared her throat and looked down at the tabletop, dragging her finger through the ring of water left behind by the condensation on her empty glass. I didn’t miss the way Hardin and Layla were watching her closely, and I got the impression the two of them might have been filled in on my playing nursemaid while she’d been sick.

She cleared her throat awkwardly, her gaze darting between her friends. “I’m good. Thanks. For asking, and for, you know.”

“Good.” I smiled, it wasn’t the charming one I used to try and get my way or the *aw-shucks* good ol’ boy grin the label had wanted me to use. It was a real, genuine smile. I was glad she was okay. I hated seeing her sick more than anything.

The song on the jukebox changed to a slower number, and I decided it was time to shoot my shot. Pushing out of my chair, I rounded the table and extended my hand down to her. “How about a dance?”

It was a risky move, I knew that. But I needed to start taking big risks if I was going to get her back.

Her gaze bounced between my hand and my face, her mouth gaping open like she had no clue what to say. The table around us had gone deathly quiet. It was almost as if they were holding their breaths, waiting for a response.

“What do you say, sweetheart? One quick spin around the floor. That’s all I’m asking.”

She hesitated before finally placing her hand in mine. My fingers snapped closed around hers, partly from the bolt of electricity that shot through me at the innocent touch, but also out of fear she would change her mind and pull away.

I could feel people staring as I pulled her to her feet and led her to the

dance floor, but I didn't pay them any mind. There was only one person who could hold my attention, and it was the woman whose delicate hand rested in mine, where it belonged. Where it had always belonged.

I turned to face her, giving her a little spin beneath my arm before pulling her into me, the twirl making her giggle before she placed her free hand on my shoulder. When those eyes came up to meet mine, everything else in the bar faded away. It was just me and her. Nothing else existed.

I looped an arm around her waist, holding her securely against me as I began leading her around the perimeter of the floor. The music continued, but I couldn't hear it. It was as if nothing else existed on this planet but her. No sound but that of her breathing. No smell except her subtle floral perfume.

We flowed like water, falling in step together like we used to. So easy it was like breathing. One of our favorite pastimes had been dancing, and falling back into that was as simple as riding a bike. Looking at us, you would have thought no time had passed at all.

She looked down at my boots, a tiny smirk curling one side of her mouth. "You're still pretty good at this," she said in a teasing tone.

"I had an excellent teacher."

Alma had loved to dance so she taught me so we could enjoy it together.

A single laugh bubbled from her throat, but it was music to my ears. "You did, didn't you? As I recall, you were pretty terrible before her."

I tightened my hold on her, crushing us together so I could spin us twice before falling right back into the steady, sedate pace. "I wouldn't say terrible." I frowned with mock offense. "The skill was there, it just needed to be honed."

She let out a scoff and rolled her eyes. "Please. There were no skills at all." Humor dripped from her words. "First time we went dancing, you stepped on my feet so many times I couldn't wear shoes for two days because of the bruises and swelling."

My head fell back on a deep laugh. It was the kind of laugh that engaged all the muscles in my stomach, the kind that locked my arms tight. The kind of laugh I hadn't felt like laughing in longer than I could remember. And goddamn, but it felt good to laugh like that again.

When I finally got a hold of myself and righted my head, the smile Alma was giving me slammed into my chest with the force of a wrecking ball, throwing my world off kilter.

"I wasn't that bad."

The playfulness that danced in her eyes was the very same way she used to look at me before I broke her heart. “Says you. I’m the one who was nearly crippled.”

“Yeah, well. I still remember that night. And I remember taking you back home and making it up to you for hours and hours.”

Her smile fell away and her body went tense in my arms. It was the exact same thing that had happened at her house after I’d nursed her back to health. One second everything was going right, then I made a comment that flipped some internal switch, and that wall shot back into place.

I hadn’t noticed the song had come to an end until Alma pulled from my arms and took a step back, her gaze darting anywhere but at me. “Uh, thanks for the dance. I should”—she threw a thumb over her shoulder—“I should get back to my girls.”

She turned on her heel and practically ran away from me. But it wouldn’t do her any good this time, because I was determined to follow after her.

ALMA

Shortly after my dance with Roan the other night, I'd made an excuse about still not feeling quite right and hightailed it out of the bar. To run home and hide. To lick the wounds from the past and guarantee they wouldn't heal. If they healed I wouldn't have anything to hold on to, so there would be no reason for not forgiving him for the past.

And I couldn't allow that.

I'd run like a coward that night, but it hadn't done me a damn bit of good. Because Roan was nothing if not persistent. Over the past week, he'd shown up at Whiskey Dolls every night I was performing. He'd sit in on the show, have a couple drinks, then, when I headed out to the staff parking lot at the back of the building, he'd be there, waiting against my car. He said he was making sure I made it safely, but I knew his game. He was attempting to wear me down.

He showed up at the end of rehearsals with a coffee and almond croissant from Muffin Top as a "post-workout snack" and when I was having dinner at the diner with Marin, he coincidentally had a hankering for Ralph's chicken fried steak.

Coincidence my ass. I knew my friends had a hand in it somehow, but I didn't have proof. I was certain they were feeding him information on my location so he could "randomly" pop up wherever I was going to be. He'd even popped up at the end of the aisle as I was pushing my cart at the grocery store, claiming he'd just popped in for a few items.

He was staying at the inn indefinitely, for Christ's sake. What could he have possibly needed from the grocery store? They didn't have mini fridges in any of the rooms.

As if that wasn't bad enough, he seemed to be winning everyone in town over to his side. The bastard.

Sally was smitten with him, and the whole time we'd been at the diner, he and Ralph had shouted their conversation back and forth for everyone to hear. If he wasn't making friends, he was telling anyone who listened how he was in town to win the love of his life back. And foolish people that they were, they'd fallen for his charm: hook, line, and sinker.

Hell, even Ms. McClintock, the ornery old lady, had fallen under his spell. And that woman wasn't nice to anyone.

I didn't understand it. It wasn't like he belonged. Not really, anyway. His stay was temporary. Hope Valley wasn't his home. It was back in Nashville, along with the career and fame he'd chosen over me. How was it that he could fool so many people so easily into thinking he was Prince Charming, coming to rescue the damsel in distress?

Even Tortellini was still pining for him!

It wasn't fair, and it was really starting to piss me off. Which was a bad frame of mind for me to be in when I pulled up to my house after rehearsal and spotted his truck sitting in my driveway like it belonged there.

I pulled in beside it—at least he'd had the forethought to park on the side farthest from the front door—slammed on my brake, and shut my car off. “You've *got* to be kidding me,” I hissed as I glared, shooting daggers at the top-of-the-line Chevy in my driveway.

He wasn't sitting in the driver's seat, and he wasn't on my porch. Which could only mean one thing.

I growled under my breath as I snatched my purse from the passenger seat and threw the door open.

It felt like steam was pouring from my ears as I stomped up the front walk and the steps to the door. I slid my key into the lock, but there was no point. The asshole had left it unlocked when he'd let himself in!

I shoved the door open and stepped over the threshold, tossing my purse and keys on the entry table so haphazardly I heard them clatter to the floor, but I didn't stop to collect the items that had scattered everywhere. I rounded the corner from the entryway and stopped in the middle of my living room, legs shoulder-width apart, hands planted on my hips.

Roan graced me with a casual smile over his shoulder before turning back to whatever he was working on at *my* stove. “Oh, hey. You're home. You have a good day, baby?”

My mouth gaped open like a fish out of water. I sputtered for a few seconds before my brain finally reengaged. I spotted my traitorous cat lounging on the floor near his new favorite human and gave him a scowl that promised he'd be going on a diet starting *tomorrow* before looking back at Roan. "Did I have a good *day*? Did you really ask me that while standing in my kitchen for some insane reason after *breaking into my house*?" I finished on a shriek.

"Didn't break in." He reached into his pocket and produced a key ring. "I got a key. See?" Before I could unglue my feet from the floor and stomp over to snatch the key away from him, he slid it right back into his pocket. "And I'm not in your kitchen for some insane reason. I'm here to make you dinner."

It was then that the smells filling my house penetrated my senses. I didn't know what the hell he was making, but it made my mouth water and my stomach rumble. And, *damn it*, he looked way too sexy standing in my freaking kitchen.

"So you committed a felony to make me *dinner*?" I asked in bewilderment. "Roan, you have to see how insane that is."

He stirred something in a pan on the stove before lifting a wooden spoon to his lips and giving it a taste. "Mmm," he hummed, the rich, pleasant sound sending a rush of arousal to my core. "That's perfect," he declared proudly before placing the spoon on the rest and wiping his hands on a small kitchen towel as he turned to face me. "Well, not just to make you dinner. I figured after I made your favorite—chicken parm, right? I made the sauce from scratch, you're going to love it—anyway, I figured after you ate, we could talk."

It was those three little words tacked on the end that cause panic to slither up my throat. Talking meant airing things out. Airing things out meant letting go of the past. And that was too slippery of a slope for me to risk going down. Even if my stomach was currently screaming at my brain to shut the hell up and go with the flow. I mean, chicken parm? Yes, that absolutely was still my favorite.

No, Alma, I silently chided. I needed to get my shit together, or I'd be putting everything I'd built here at risk: the life I'd managed to make for myself after my old one imploded. I didn't have it in me to start over again, so that meant Roan had to go.

I pulled my phone out of the little pocket on the outer thigh of my shorts

and smiled smugly. “Or I could call the police and report an intruder.”

I wasn’t seriously planning on doing it, but the shithead called my bluff by leaning back casually against the counter and crossing his arms, grinning at me like he knew I was full of shit. He didn’t give me any choice. I *had* to call. It was his own fault.

We remained in a silent staredown as I pressed my thumb across the screen and engaged the call, bringing the phone to my ear.

“911. What’s the nature of your emergency?”

“Yes, this is Alma Rossi, and I have an intruder.”

* * *

“I can’t believe you called the police on him!”

I brought the glass of wine to my lips and drank deeply as I held the phone to my ear. After the cops had escorted Roan out of my house in handcuffs, I’d poured myself a glass of wine and called Charlotte.

“I had to make a point!” I declared childishly as I looked around my kitchen at the partially constructed meal. Even only half done, it looked more appetizing than anything I had ever been able to make. For a woman who loved food as much as I did, I wasn’t a very good cook. Homemade meals were a luxury I only had every now and then when I went over to a friend’s house for dinner or something.

Roan used to be as bad a cook as I was, but apparently he’d learned something in the last ten years, because the dinner he’d been making looked delicious. So was the bread he’d baked the last time he was here.

“You had to make a point? Or you freaked out and did the very first thing that came to mind?”

I pulled the phone away and flipped it the bird even though Charlotte couldn’t see. “Okay, so maybe it was more of the last one, but he broke into my house, Char. What did you expect me to do?”

“He used the key he’d had made while he was taking care of you when you were sick,” she corrected. “And he didn’t do it maliciously. He did it in order to surprise you with your favorite meal. He did it for the same reason he’s done all of those sweet things all week long. So that you’ll finally talk to him and stop running away.”

I knew she was right, but I wasn’t quite ready to give up the fight yet.

“You’re supposed to be *my* friend. Whose side are you on, anyway?”

“Yours, babe.” Her laughter carried through the line. “Always yours. Which is why I’m saying what I’m saying now in the hopes of pulling your head out of your ass. What happened between you two sucked. He was a dick for doing what he did, but that was ten *years* ago, Alma. Are you the same person you were back then?”

Not even close, I thought. I could barely remember the girl I was back then.

She took my silence as the *no* it was meant to be and continued on. “So if you’re not same person, it stands to reason maybe he isn’t either. Maybe everything he’s done and said since he got to town has been genuine. The best way for you to find out is to talk to him,” she stressed.

I thought back to the first time he’d been in my house, when I asked him what had changed, and he said his father had died. I hadn’t let myself think too hard on that until now. But when we were dating, he’d always been so protective of me when it came to his father. I’d only met the man twice during the course of our relationship, and after the second time, Roan had declared never again. He freaked at the idea of his dad coming around and downright forbid me from ever being alone with the man.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

“Of course I am,” she said lightly. “Because I’m a genius.”

A knot of guilt had formed in my stomach the moment the police cruiser pulled away from my house with Roan in the backseat, and it had only gotten worse in the past ten minutes. When I originally called Charlotte, I told myself it was because I needed someone to tell me I’d done the right thing, but now that we’d spoken, I knew that wasn’t the case. She was the one I called because I knew I could count on her to give me the truth, no matter how much I might not want it.

“God, I’m going to have to go bail him out, aren’t I?”

She cackled hysterically through the line. “Go drop the charges, they’ll let him out without any issue. Leo and Micah are good guys.”

Leo and Micah were two detectives on the Hope Valley police force. When they’d been trying to shut down a drug ring some years back, Charlotte had been their informant on the inside. Since that whole drama went down, the three of them had grown incredibly close. Charlotte was also tight with their wives, Danika and Hayden.

I let out a heavy breath and steeled my nerves. “All right. I’m gonna go

get him. I'll talk to you later.”

“Call me tomorrow,” she demanded before I could hang up. “I’m desperate to know how this is going to play out!”

That made two of us.

ALMA

The sun had set by the time I pulled up in front of the police department. I didn't know the rules for getting someone out of lockup, but I could only hope there wasn't some kind of time limit and Roan wasn't going to have to spend the night behind bars.

I pulled the glass door open and stepped into the brightly lit building, walking up to the officer manning the front desk.

He looked up from the file he'd been flipping through, and I gave him a shaky smile. I wasn't sure why cops made me so jittery. I'd never been in trouble in my life, not so much as a speeding ticket, but every time I had to talk to one of them, I got all nervous and flustered. "Hi, uh, are Leo Drake or Micah Langford on duty tonight?"

He grinned back. "Sure thing. They're up in the bullpen." He jerked his chin in the direction of a set of stairs half the length of a regular one. "Just head on up. Can't miss 'em."

I thanked him and started in the direction he'd indicated, discovering quickly that he was right. Not because the area was easy to navigate—it was, but that was beside the point—but because all I had to do was follow the raucous laughter to the huddle of people in the center of the bullpen.

All of the desks had been abandoned as the cops in uniform and plain-clothed detectives centralized around one clump of desks. I heard someone speaking, then a moment later, the crowd fell into laughter all over again.

As I got closer, I could see everyone was gathered around the desks of Leo, Micah, and two other detectives, Hayes Walker and Patrick "Trick" Wanderly, Nona's husband. And everyone was gathered around because Roan *freaking* Blackwell stood in the very center of the crowd, regaling them

with some story that had them all in stitches.

“So I looked at the guy and said, ‘Hey, don’t blame me. I just work here.’”

Another burst of laughter went up from everyone. I didn’t know what the hell Roan was telling them, but it didn’t sound like much of a punchline to me. Still, the men and women who protected our town were in hysterics.

I cleared my throat and shot a flat look at Fred Duncan, the first officer who turned around and spotted me standing there.

“Oh shit.”

It was like a domino effect after that, heads turning in my direction, looks of guilt at being caught slacking off on their job and people scurrying away back to their desks.

Then there was Roan. Absolutely no worse for the wear.

“Freckles,” he greeted boisterously, throwing his arms out wide. “This is a nice surprise.”

I kept my expression blank as I folded my arms over my chest. “Well, I was at home and I got to thinking that maybe I overreacted. So I came here thinking I’d try to get you out so you didn’t have to spend the night in lockup.” I shot a glare at Leo and Micah, then turned it on Hayes and Trick. “Guess things are a little less strict around here than I thought.”

“What did you expect us to do?” Hayes asked, his brows rising high on his forehead. “Beat him with a phone book?”

“Maybe delouse and spray him down with a fire hose?” Leo threw in.

“No, I didn’t expect that,” I said sarcastically. “But I also didn’t expect to walk in here and see you guys having a freaking tea party.”

“Don’t be like that, Alma,” Micah, the most charming one of the group, started. “What can we say? He’s a really cool guy.”

Oh, I knew that all too well. The man was too charismatic for his own damn good, and he was way too talented at turning it off and on. “Fine. Whatever,” I grumbled. “So is he free to go if I drop the charges or whatever?”

Roan smiled like he’d just won the lottery.

“Yep. He’s all yours,” Trick answered. “But might I suggest not using the department for revenge next time?”

“Yeah, okay,” I grumbled, feeling like a kicked puppy after being rightfully put in my place.

“Great.” Roan clapped his hands together. “In that case, let’s get a move

on, Freckles. I have to finish dinner.”

The drive back to my house was made in silence, but Roan’s self-satisfaction filled the car enough to make the air almost stifling. I, on the other hand, spent those minutes silently freaking out. I should have known I couldn’t bail him out of jail, or whatever, then expect to get rid of him. The man was like static cling. When he was determined to stick with something, there was no getting rid of him.

I turned the wheel and pulled into my driveway, clutching the wheel in a white-knuckle grip even after I’d turned the car off.

“Hey.” Roan reached across the console from the passenger seat, his fingers skating across my temple to tuck my hair back. “Talk to me, baby. What’s going on in that head of yours?”

So much I couldn’t possibly put it all into words. Instead of trying, I turned to look at him, biting on the corner of my bottom lip. “I don’t suppose you’d be okay with putting this talk off for another time?”

I knew the answer to that by the hard, determined line of his jaw as soon as the question left my mouth. “Been putting this talk off for ten years. I’m done waiting.”

With that, he climbed out of the car and started toward my house. Instead of letting himself inside like I’d expected, he waited on the porch for me join him and unlock the door.

Tortellini let out a meow of excitement that sounded like death at the sight of his new best buddy, and waddled over to wrap himself back and forth between Roan’s legs.

“Jesus. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the sounds that cat makes. It’s like he’s being murdered.”

I dragged my fingers from the top of the cat’s head to his tail. “It’s been like that since I got him as a kitten. There’s no explanation for it. The vet says he’s in perfect health.”

Roan cut his eyes at me, a look of disbelief on his face. “Perfect health? Really?”

I narrowed my eyes and gave him a little shove. Of course, it didn’t so much as budge him. The man was built like a brick house. “Leave him alone. He’s extra fluffy, that’s all.”

He snorted and started toward the kitchen, leaving me to follow. “Extra fluffy my ass. That cat’s fat as hell. Plain and simple.”

I hopped up on the stool across the counter and watched as Roan went

back to finishing the dinner he'd started before I called the cops on him. "You're going to hurt his feelings if you don't knock it off, and he's not going to like you anymore."

Roan cast a look over his shoulder, a smirk that held no small amount of confidence. "Please. That cat loves me."

I blew out a raspberry and rolled my eyes before propping my chin in the palm of my hand. "Apparently everyone in town does. You've got more charm than any one person should be allowed."

I meant it to be teasing, but Roan suddenly grew very serious. The atmosphere went from light and breezy to tense and thick in the blink of an eye.

He turned fully to face me, his expression earnest. "Not everyone," he said in a low, solemn voice. "Not the one person who matters the most."

It was a direct hit, and I felt it hit my chest before spreading through the rest of my body like a crack in a windshield.

"Roan, that's not fair," I said quietly, emotion clogging my throat. "You're the one who pushed me away. You said it was too much work trying to keep me happy while you were recording and touring." The more I spoke, the bigger that fire deep inside me grew until my anger sparked back to life and pushed the sadness away.

"We were supposed to build a life together, talked about it for *years*, but the second you were signed, you started treating me like shit. I was an inconvenience, a nuisance. I cramped your style." I threw all the things back he'd told me all those years ago, and every word left a sick, burning taste on my tongue. I let out a caustic laugh. "You didn't even have the balls to end it yourself. You took the coward's way out and made *me* do it," I jammed my finger toward my chest. "You treated me like shit until I finally had enough." My voice rose higher and higher with each word until I was shouting. "You pushed me until I had no choice!"

Something in Roan snapped. His hands came down on the countertop with a loud crack that made me jump. "*I had to!*" he boomed. He began to pace and rake his hands through his hair in agitation. "I had to. I didn't have a choice. That's what I've been trying to tell you since I got to this town."

I wasn't ready to let go of the anger. I hadn't realized until I started that I wanted to yell. I wanted to scream and curse and say everything that had been on my mind for the past ten years. I wanted to *fight*. And, god, it felt good. "That's such a fucking cop-out," I shouted, throwing my hands up. "You're

the one who made the decision to hurt me, to ruin what we had. That was all *you*, Roan. Just fucking own it!”

“He said he’d go after you next if I didn’t give him what he wanted.”

A sound like rubber squealing on concrete echoed through my head as the fight drained out of me. “What? Who?” I shook my head, trying to understand what he’d said. “What are you talking about, Roan?”

“Randall,” he growled. “My piece of shit father.” He stopped pacing, his shoulders drooping as he braced his hands on the counter across from me to hold himself up. “When I was signed, he showed up on our doorstep with his fucking hand out. He always sent my mom to do it. You know that. You were there, you saw it more than I wish you had. With her gone, he didn’t have a choice but to come himself. I was so glad you were at work when it happened. Mom used guilt, but he used something else.”

I forced air into my lungs as my mind whirled and my heart threatened to beat out of my chest. “Roan, what did he do?”

Those deep hunter green eyes came to me, and what I saw in them ripped the pieces of my heart I’d managed to put back together over the years to tatters. “He threatened you. He said if I didn’t give him what he wanted, he’d go after you. He laughed when I told him to fuck off, that I wasn’t giving him a dime. He told me if I wasn’t able to protect my own mother, how could I expect to protect you? He kept pushing and pushing, telling me I couldn’t look out for you every hour of every day. I’d be touring, shit like that, and he’d use that as an opportunity to get to you. I knew as long as you were with me, you weren’t safe. He was right. I couldn’t protect my mother, and that son of a bitch eventually killed her. If something happened to you, I’d never be able to live with it.”

I pulled in a sharp gasp. “Roan,” I breathed, lifting a shaking hand to my mouth. “He didn’t.”

“The official cause of death was listed as an aneurysm. An aneurysm caused by repeated head trauma, Alma.” He shook his head, pain etched into every line of his face. “I knew. Even the cops and the doctors suspected, but without her to confirm it, there was no way for me to prove he was the cause of that repeated trauma.” A bitter laugh slid past his lips, the sound skating down my spine and leaving goosebumps in its wake. “Even if he hadn’t killed her, she never would have turned him in. She supported that monster with her dying breath. Literally.”

I jumped off the stool and rounded the counter, coming up in front of him

and taking his face in my hands. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this?” I hissed, tears swimming in my eyes. “We were still together when Elenore died. Why did you keep all of this from me?”

He circled my wrists with his long fingers and used his hold on me to slide my hands down until my palms were pressed against his chest. “I was ashamed,” he admitted, so much sadness filling those three words that I lost the hold I had on my emotions and two fat tears spilled onto my cheeks. “You were everything to me. You were my goddamn world. I couldn’t tell you that my father killed my own mother. I couldn’t stand the thought of how you might look at me if you knew exactly how evil the blood I came from was.”

That actually hurt. My face pulled into a wince as I jerked back like he’d slapped me. “I can’t believe you thought that of me,” I said, unable to hide the pain in my voice.

ROAN

I was losing her.

Goddamn it. I'd done it again. I said the wrong fucking thing, and she was pulling away again.

When the hell was I going to stop fucking up where this woman was concerned?

She pulled at her hands, trying to break free from my grasp, but it only made me hold on tighter. I couldn't let her go. Not this time.

"I was a fucking idiot," I admitted. "I was young and stupid. I found the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, and all I could think of were the million and one ways I could lose her. You think I didn't know that you were so much better than me, Alma? I knew the moment our eyes met across that shithole bar the very first night that I was out of my league with you.

"You were too good for me, baby, still fucking are. But for some reason, you wanted to be with me. I was so goddamn gone for you, and you deserved so much more than a guy like me. But I figured I must have done something right in my life because you chose me. But I was scared. I woke up every day scared to death you'd realize you could do better than me. That thought was always in the back of my mind. I knew it was my own bullshit insecurities, but when you're young and dumb and you never had a single fucking good thing in your life, it's hard to believe the one thing you want most in all the world will stick."

She shook her head, her eyes wide with disbelief. "I—I didn't know. I didn't know *any* of this, because you didn't talk to me. I was so stupid. I was just walking through life, thinking I had everything I could ever want, that

things were wonderful. Then you pulled the rug out from under me. I didn't know how the hell to pick up the pieces after we ended. Do you have any idea what that feels like?"

"Of course, I do," I barked, pressing her palms harder against my chest. Now that she was touching me, I couldn't get enough. "I know exactly how it feels because I did it to myself too, and those pieces are still scattered to the fucking wind because I don't have you."

Her breath froze on that declaration, those whiskey eyes of hers flaring with something I couldn't quite put my finger on. We stood in silence, our chests heaving from yelling at each other. I don't know what went through her head at that very moment, but something in my confession broke something loose in her, because one second she was staring up at me with tears running down her cheeks, each one a knife to my fucking heart, and the next, she was shooting up on her tiptoes and slamming her mouth against mine.

It was a hard press of the lips that lasted all of five seconds before she dropped back down with a look of horror on her face, like she couldn't believe she'd just kissed me.

"Oh my god. I'm so sorry. Roan—"

But I was done. Done waiting. Done playing it safe. Done taking things slow when all I wanted to do was claim this woman in every imaginable way possible. I released her hands and, on a growl, grabbed her by the back of her neck and yanked her back up, sealing my mouth against hers.

I didn't hesitate, and unlike the short, chaste kiss she'd just given me, I insisted on more. My tongue came out, sweeping against the seam of her lips and demanding entrance. When they parted on a breathy sigh, I drove my tongue inside, dragging it against hers.

Every muscle in my body drew tight as a bow string as she wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me closer. Fire coursed through my blood as I tangled my fingers in the hair at the nape of her neck and forced her head back so I could take the kiss deeper. I could feel her heartbeat, the frantic rhythm matching my own. Feel the way her nipples had tightened beneath her flimsy sports bra and were sharp against my chest.

The greedy little whimpers and moans spilling past her lush, kiss-swollen lips as I dragged my mouth along her jaw and down the column of her neck made my cock hard as steel. It pressed painfully against my fly, begging to be let free as I nipped at her earlobe and drove my hips against her, desperate for

relief.

“God, Roan.” The way she moaned my name drove me out of my goddamn mind, and there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do to hear it over and over again. To hear her scream it at the top of her lungs.

I kissed her like our lives depended on it, like we’d cease to exist if our lips weren’t feeding from each other. She was the only person who’d ever made me feel so desperate and out of control.

Her hands moved, coming up so she could grip my hair and hold me to her like she was afraid I was going to stop. I always imagined I’d go slow the first time I kissed her once I finally got her back, that I’d savor every single second of it, memorize every aspect, but I couldn’t go slow. My need for Alma back then had bordered on desperation, on obsession, and it was no different now.

I rocked my erection against her again, the friction a blessing and a curse at the same time.

“Fuck, I’ve missed you,” I murmured against her lips before tugging on the bottom one with my teeth. She let out a hiss at the sting I caused, but I quickly soothed it with a stroke of my tongue, still remembering exactly what she liked. “I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of kissing you, baby.”

She whimpered and dropped her head back, demanding I lavish her sensitive neck with attention. She’d always had a gift for that, guiding me where she wanted me most without having to say a single word.

I wasn’t sure my cock could possibly get any harder. It pressed against my fly with so much pressure, I worried I’d have a permanent indent of the zipper teeth on the underside of my shaft for the rest of my life.

I dragged a hand down her body, letting the pad of my thumb catch on the stiff peak of her nipple through her shirt. I remembered how sensitive they were, and I intended to use that to my advantage.

She sucked in a sharp breath at the touch and arched her back deeper, pressing her tits against my chest harder. I let my hands continue to roam along the dip of her waist, the swell of her hips. One hand traveled around to cup her firm round ass as the other grabbed behind her knee and hiked her leg up, hooking it around my hip so the stiffness of my dick behind my jeans would press right against her center. I thrust forward as I bit down gently on the cord of her neck, gripping her ass tight and pushing her harder against me.

I still knew every button to push, every nob to turn to set her off. To make

her wild and drive her out of her mind, and I was pushing and twisting every single one, working her up to the point she wouldn't be able to think past her need for me.

"Christ, baby," I groaned against her ear. "I need to taste you so bad I can't see straight."

"Mmm Roan," she sighed, her hips working against mine, her body on tenterhooks and chasing after what it needed most. What only I could give her.

"Let me taste you, Alma," I pleaded, pulling back in order to look into her glazed, hooded eyes. "Tell me I can get on my knees right now and eat your pussy until you come all over my face."

"Please," she begged. "Please, Roan. Do it now. I need you." And just like that, all my self-control flew out the window.

I dropped to my knees right there in her kitchen, my mouth watering at the thought of having her taste on my tongue. My fingers wrapped around the waistband of those tiny goddamn shorts that had been driving me out of my fucking head all evening, and I slowly pulled them down her thighs. The pale pink thong she wore underneath was so goddamn tiny it barely covered her pussy. I could smell her arousal, feel the heat from her core.

I leaned forward and inhaled deeply. Nothing in the world smelled better than my woman when she was turned on. A gust of air burst past my lips, blowing against her and making her whimper. She was so wet it left a dark spot at the center of her panties. I dragged my tongue across that spot and groaned as her taste burst in my mouth.

"Fuck, so good," I moaned as she reached back and gripped the edge of the counter so tight her knuckles turned white.

Fisting the sides of her thong, I twisted the flimsy material until it ripped and threw the useless scrap over my shoulder, baring her pussy to me.

"Roan, please," she panted desperately. "I need to come."

That was all she had to say. I dove in, dragging my tongue through her drenched slit, lapping up her arousal. She cried out at that first swipe and continued to let out the most intoxicating sounds as I feasted on her cunt, alternating between fucking her with my tongue and sucking on her clit.

I could feel the pre-cum dripping from the tip of my cock. I wanted her so goddamn bad I could have gotten off with nothing more than the taste of her in my mouth, but I wanted to save that for when I was buried deep inside her.

Needing to get her off, to hear her come, I stuffed two fingers inside her,

curving them until they brushed against a spot inside her that had her fisting my hair so tight it felt like she might rip it out. I kept at it, rubbing her from the inside as I circled her clit with my tongue.

Alma rocked against my face, her movements frantic as she chased her orgasm, fucking herself on my tongue and fingers. I could feel her walls squeezing tighter, fluttering with her impending release.

I looked up at her, wanting to watch her face the whole time as I drove her wild. Her eyes met mine as she draped a leg over my shoulder and yanked me closer to her core.

“Yes,” she moaned. “God, yes, Roan. Just like that. I’m about to come, baby.”

Fuck me, but I was too if she didn’t stop talking. She was too perfect, in every way.

The look of awe I could never forget, not for a single moment, filled her eyes. The tiny little grin, full of pleasure, tugged at her lips. Then it happened. She clamped down on my fingers and threw her head back as she came, crying my name so loud it rang through the kitchen, bouncing off the tile floors and marble countertops. I kept at her until there was absolutely nothing left, until she would have sunk to the floor if I wasn’t there to hold her up.

I pulled my fingers from her pussy and sucked them into my mouth, wanting every last drop of that release, then I stood from the floor.

She looked drunk as she wobbled and tipped her face up at me, that goddamn grin still in place.

“Don’t you even think of passing out,” I said on a growl. “You save that for after I fuck you.”

ALMA

“*D*on’t you even think of passing out,” he growled at me, and even though I’d just come hard enough to fry my freaking brain, I felt my core pulse, already waking up with the promise of more. “You save that for after I fuck you.”

A shiver wracked my body at his deliciously dirty words. There was something about standing before him in my kitchen, completely naked from the waist down while he remained fully dressed that just felt so . . . wicked.

With the most intimate part of me bared to him, swollen from his ministrations and still dripping with arousal, I should have felt exposed. But I didn’t. I felt powerful. It coursed through me, surging through my blood and making my whole body feel like a live wire.

It was then that I remembered only Roan had that gift of making me feel like the most powerful, most wanton woman on the planet when he looked at me like he was. Like he wanted to burrow down so deep inside me, he’d be a part of my marrow.

There was no missing the massive bulge in the front of Roan’s pants, and as I dragged my tongue over my bottom lip, putting it between my teeth and biting down, I palmed his hard cock through his jeans, squeezing as hard as the material would allow. “Then you better hurry,” I said. Teased. Pushed him to the point of insanity just as he’d pushed me. “Because I need you inside me right now.”

A feral sound rumbled deep in his chest just before he took one step back and bent at the waist. His shoulder hit me in the stomach, and a moment later, I was being lifted up and tossed over his shoulder like a sack of flour. God, how had I forgotten how easily he used to toss me around and move me to

wherever he wanted like I weighed next to nothing. It had always been the *biggest* turn on.

He turned and started out of the kitchen, heading down the hall toward my bedroom, and from my vantage point, I could see his firm, round ass perfectly. It was impossible not to reach down and slide my hands beneath the waistband of his jeans so I could get a good grip on it.

I let out a yelp when he turned his head and sank his teeth into the naked flesh of my hip, right next to his face.

A second later, I was flying through the air, landing on my back in my bed. The sheets were different than the last time he was here, and instead of his masculine scent, they smelled like my fabric softener. I couldn't wait to muss them all up and cover them in the smell of Roan's cologne.

Take your shirt off," he rasped, the pupils of his eyes so big with desire that the black had swallowed up every bit of green. "Bra too."

I bit the inside of my lip to keep from smiling as I challenged, "You first."

Roan smiled then, that dimple-pressing, teeth-showcasing smile that always made me tremble from the inside. The man really did have the most *beautiful* smile . . . when he wasn't trying to charm someone or putting on a show for someone else's benefit.

He didn't make me wait; reaching down to fist the hem of his T-shirt, he ripped it over his head and tossed it aside, revealing his firm, broad chest to me. The rounded muscles of his pecs led down to a narrow waist and chiseled abs. He was bigger than I remembered, but still so perfect.

On his chest, right over his heart was a tattoo that hadn't been there when we were together. A line of Roman numerals. I didn't know what they stood for, but the place of prominence where he'd had them etched made me think they were important. Maybe they represented the date he finally got signed to a record label, the one wish he'd had since he was old enough to dream. It would make sense.

Before I could ask what the numbers represented, Roan's long, deft fingers worked the fly of his jeans open, and I fell mute when he pushed them down his long, strong thighs, taking his boxer briefs with them.

God, he was big. I had already known that, but time passed and my memory faded, making things seem less extreme. All these years later, he still held the title of the biggest I'd ever been with, and as I stared at him, I had the same thought I had every time we slept together in the past. The very

same thought Roan would always put at ease.

“It’ll fit, Freckles,” he insisted. The words taking me back in time. “I always do. You were made for me, remember? Made to take every inch of me.” Oh, I remembered all right, and at the memory, a new wave of wetness coated my opening, preparing my body for his.

“Now you,” he said, his tongue coming out to lick across his bottom lip. His eyes were glassy and bright with need as he watched me grab the flimsy tank top I’d worn to rehearsal and pull it over my head. The bra came next, and in the blink of an eye, I lay before him, completely naked. The intimacy of us staring at the other wasn’t lost on me. Neither of us moved for several seconds, simply content to get lost in taking the other in.

A whimper stalled in my chest as I watched him fist the root of his thick, straining cock. He squeezed hard and dragged his hand up to the tip, causing a bead of pre-cum to drip from the tiny slit.

“You want this, Alma?” he asked as he slowly jacked himself. His chest rose and fell with short, choppy breaths as he stared at me like he wanted to get lost in me.

“I do,” I panted.

“No going back from this. The moment I slide inside you, that’s it. So you have to be sure.”

What I was was delirious all over again, but this time, it wasn’t from sickness. This time it was all for Roan. A stuttered moan pushed its way up my throat. In that very moment, there was no other choice. What was about to happen was a foregone conclusion, and I could no longer wait to feel him on top of me, sliding into me, taking me over so completely.

“Roan, now. *Please.*”

At my begging, he twisted and bent to lift his jeans from the floor, giving me the perfect view of his taut ass as he fished a condom from his pocket. He ripped it open with his teeth and rolled it on his steely cock jutting from his hips, pointing right at me like a beacon.

The mattress depressed beneath his weight as he put his knees to the bed and proceeded to crawl over me. Goosebumps speckled across my skin in anticipation as he hovered above me. My lips parted in anticipation as he lowered his hips, giving me no choice but to spread my legs wide to accommodate him. I felt the blunt head of him against my slick opening and breathed deeply through my nose.

“Dreamed about this,” he said softly as he held himself up on one elbow

beside my head and reached between us with the other hand. He fisted his length and guided it, notching it into place. His Adam's apple bobbed on a thick swallow just before he pushed inside.

He let out a groan and dropped his forehead into the crook of my neck as a whimper lodged in my throat. The stretch and burn of him filling me so full stole my breath.

"Oh my god," I cried, my fingers curling, my nails digging into the rounded muscles of his shoulders as he continued to slide deeper and deeper.

He lifted his head to look down at him, his eyes locking with mine. His voice came out rough and craggy as he ordered. "Let me in, baby."

"I-I'm trying." I clung to him like a lifeline as the pain inside me quickly morphed to pleasure, but it was still overwhelming. "It's too much."

One corner of his mouth hooked upward. "You know it's not. You're built for me. Just a few more inches, baby. You can take it."

I closed my eyes and breathed through my nose, willing my body to loosen to accommodate his massive cock. I felt a new gush of wetness just as my walls gave way. My eyes popped open just before they went soft and dropped to half-mast, a tiny grin playing on my lips as Roan pushed the rest of the way inside me, bottoming out so deep I wasn't sure where I ended and he began.

His smirk turned into a full-blow smile as he whispered, "There she is." Before I could ask what he meant, he pulled out almost all the way and slammed back in, ripping a moan from deep in my chest.

His self-control snapped and he began to fuck me like his very life depended on it. The bedframe rattled, the headboard slammed against the wall, but I couldn't get enough. I wanted more, harder, faster, and I pleaded for exactly that. I raised one arm over my head and braced my palm flat on the headboard while I clung to him with the other and lifted one leg, hooking it over the top of his ass to hold on tight as he drove into me at a near punishing pace.

His gaze stayed rooted to mine the whole time. It was almost as though he was scared that if he looked away, I might disappear.

"So, good," I panted as the pressure deep inside me began to grow. A coil twisting and tightening to the point of breaking. "God, Roan. I can feel you everywhere."

His nostrils flared with each breath, perspiration glistening on his skin. His jaw popped and tensed, the muscles in his back stringing tighter together.

“Fucking dream come true,” he growled as he lifted one hand to wrap around my throat, holding me in place. “You’re a goddamn dream come true, Alma. Can’t let you go. I won’t.”

I threw my head back, arching my neck to press harder against his palm. Then, at his harsh declaration, I detonated. That coil snapped and I came on a scream. My body quaked with my release, spots dancing in front of my eyes.

“That’s it,” he gritted out, his cock driving into me over and over, bottoming out with every thrust. “Fucking squeeze me, baby. Milk the cum from my balls.”

My body did just that, my orgasm stretching out, longer and more intense than anything I’d experienced in the past ten years.

Only Roan could do this to me. Only he could play and manipulate my body so fucking perfectly that I was nothing more than a useless lump of flesh and bone once we finished.

I watched in fascination through hooded eyes as Roan threw his head back, that lump of his Adam’s apple standing out prominently as he roared with his own release. I felt his cock twitch as he filled the condom, and had felt a twinge of disappointment that I couldn’t feel the hot ropes of cum coat my walls instead.

I shook that twinge away and concentrated on his face until he finished, drained empty.

“Alma.” He said my name like a benediction, that intoxicating forest green burrowing down deep inside me and holding me captive. “God, it’s even better than I remembered. And I remembered everything.”

“Me too,” I croaked past the lump of emotion suddenly clogging my throat.

“Baby.” His smile was so sweet and tender as he used the hand that had collared my neck only seconds ago to tenderly brush the hair back from my face. “Christ, I’ve missed you so much.” I saw the words forming in his mind before he opened his mouth to speak them. “I lo—”

Panic set in and my hand came up, clamping over his mouth to keep him from saying it.

His brow furrowed as he stared down at me. My chest rose and fell like I’d just run a marathon as my heart threatened to escape.

“Don’t say it,” I whispered, my voice coming out reedy and thin. “I’m sorry. I just . . .” I trailed off with a shake of my head, not sure how to explain what I was feeling. I wasn’t ready. I didn’t want to hurt him, but I

couldn't hear those words. Not right now. I was too scared.

I expected him to be upset, but he surprised me by gently pulling my hand away and smiling down at me. "That's all right, Freckles. I get it." A sigh of relief escaped me. "I can wait."

He pulled out of me, the sudden loss of him making me frown. "In the meantime, how about a bath?"

Now *that*, I could handle.

ALMA

*M*y face was scrunched up in concentration, my tongue peeking out of the corner of my mouth. “Um, unicorn?”

“*Unicorn?*” Roan asked in bewilderment, his voice shaking with laughter. “God, you’re terrible at this game.”

I hugged my knees tighter to my chest and turned to look back at him over my shoulder, steam filling the air all around us, making the room muggy. “I am not!” I defended, poking my bottom lip out in a pout. “So what was it?”

He leaned forward, sloshing the water in the tub around us so he could drag his tongue along the side of my neck before taking my mouth in a steamy kiss. When he suggested a bath earlier after fucking me senseless, I hadn’t expected him to climb into the bathtub with me, moving to the back and sitting with his legs spread wide on either side of me, my back to his chest. But now that we were sharing my bathtub during the most decadent bubble bath I’d ever had, I couldn’t imagine ever wanting to bathe any other way.

When he pulled back, he was grinning from ear to ear. “It was banana.”

“Oh come on!” I cried with mock offense, splashing water at him. “That word would be impossible for anyone to get. Do another,” I demanded.

He held his hands up in surrender. “All right, all right.” He twisted me back around so I was facing away from him and wiped my back like he was erasing a whiteboard, spreading the bubbles around. Using his index finger, began to trace another word along my shoulder blades.

I tried my hardest to concentrate on the word he was spelling and now how incredible it felt to have his hands on me, his scent all around me, and his

erection pressing against my ass.

“S,” I said, beginning to read off the letters I thought he was spelling. “Um, U? P. E . . .” That was where I lost it, unable to keep up when he was writing. A tiny growl worked its way from my throat. “Errr! When did this game get so hard?” I whined. “What was it?”

His chest shook against me as he chuckled. “Supercalafragilisticxi—”

I whipped around and smacked his chest. “You dirty, dirty cheat!” I laughed, the smile on my face so wide it felt like it was splitting in half.

He grabbed my waist and lifted me, twisting me in the water so I was straddling his thighs. “You’re right. I’m sorry,” he said, continuing the chuckle at his joke, thinking he was so hilarious. He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me so our chests were pressed flush together. The rasp of his chest hair scraped across my nipples, making them pebble. “Sorry, baby. I couldn’t help myself.

“Mm-hmm,” I hummed, lowering my head to press a kiss to his pec. Now that we’d started touching, I found I was having trouble stopping. “I forgot you were such a sneaky bastard. It’s why I hated playing board games with you.”

“Very true.” He wasn’t the least bit repentant. “But, hey. It’s not my fault. When I want something, I pull out all the stops to get it. In every aspect of life.” His gaze drilled into me as he spoke that last sentence. When he looked at me like that, it was hard not to get swept away in him. It had only been a few hours, but already, I felt those walls eroding, and if I wasn’t careful, they were going to crumble to dust.

I couldn’t let that happen. At least not right now when I still had no idea what Roan and I were or where this was going. We couldn’t keep our hands off each other, sure, but there was a difference between physical attraction and something more. There was something deep inside of me that wouldn’t allow me to completely let go of my fears or the hurts from the past.

I could handle this . . . now. But when I tried to get my mind to consider the future, it was as if a brick wall shot up in my path and I ended up slamming into it. Over and over, so many times that if I wasn’t careful, I was going to end up with some serious long-term damage.

After that story about his father, so many questions that had been plaguing me for the past decade finally had answers, but those answers didn’t change the fact that he hadn’t trusted me enough to tell me what was happening in his life. We were supposed to have been partners, but he kept

some pretty crucial secrets that ended up destroying us. He didn't trust me then, and I wasn't sure I could trust him now.

It was why I couldn't let him tell me he loved me.

I shook myself out of my melancholy and forced myself to stay in the here and now. Lifting up, I traced my index finger over the black ink etched into his skin, tracing the Roman numerals. "What do these stand for? They must be important if you put them somewhere you see them every day."

"They are important," he informed me. "It's a date. Most important date of my entire life."

My eyes lifted to his, my curiosity piqued. "Is it the date you signed with your label?"

He shook his head.

"Your mom's birthday?"

There was no missing the flash of pain that skated across his expression, but it was there and gone so fast I almost convinced myself it hadn't been real. "No. it's not that," he murmured.

I hummed, tapping my bottom lip. "Is it . . . the date you won a bigtime award or something?"

"Nope."

The skin between my brows puckered as I frowned. "Then what is it? What could be that important?"

He took my hand in his, straightening my index finger back out, and guided it over the marks again. "This is the year, 2010. The month." He moved to the middle set of numerals. "March." Finally, we traced the last numerals together. "The day. The twelfth." His gaze returned to mine as he repeated the date. "March 12, 2010."

My chest shook on a choppy exhale. "The date we met," I said so quietly I wasn't sure he'd heard until he nodded in confirmation.

"Yep. The date we met. Like I said, most important date of my entire life."

And it was right there, front and center for him to see every time he stood in front of a mirror without his shirt on.

"When did—how—" I stumbled over my words and had to stop to pull in a calming breath before trying again. "When did you get that?"

"The week you left Nashville." The pain radiating off him was so palpable, I felt it sinking into my own body, turning the lukewarm water in the tub frigid. "That was when I accepted that it was really over and I'd lost

you for good.”

I sniffled, trying my hardest not to burst into tears.

“No baby,” he said soothingly, tucking a few strands of hair behind my ear that had fallen loose from the knot on the crown of my head. “Don’t do that. Don’t cry. It’s in the past. We’re here now. We’re together. Don’t be sad.”

I sniffled, trying hard to get hold of my emotions. I blinked the tears away and focused on calm breaths until I felt like I was in better control. “Sorry. I’m good.”

“Hey.” Roan’s big hand came up to cradle one of my cheeks, his thumb skating along my cheekbone. “Don’t apologize. You have nothing to be sorry for. If you need to cry, cry. I’ll be here to dry your tears, baby. But what I really want most in the world is just to make you happy.”

His hand came around to the back of my neck. He used his grip to tilt my head down for a slowly, languid kiss before he rested my forehead against his.

“I think it’s time we go to bed,” he decreed softly.

Before I could argue or agree, he wrapped an arm around my waist, pinning me to him, and hoisted me up with him as he rose to his feet. He stepped out of the tub and lowered me to my feet on the fluffy bathmat. Then he proceeded to dry every inch of my body with such tenderness, he made me feel delicate, special . . . important.

God, he really was making it hard to keep my guard up around him. If I wasn’t more careful, I was liable to get my heart crushed all over again.

Once we were both dry, he carried me back into the bedroom, pulled the covers back, and laid me down. He moved around the room flipping off the light before returning to the side of the bed and crawled beneath the comforter with me. He flipped me around so my back was to his chest and wrapped his arm around my waist so that we were spooning in the dark.

“You’re staying?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Alma, wherever you are, that’s where I am.”

But for how long? The question creeped in, making my chest constrict.

The fact of the matter was that whatever was happening between Roan and me, it was temporary. Because his life was in Nashville, not here, and I was never going back. Too many bad memories had ruined that town for me, and I had no desire to deal with the ghosts that lingered.

ALMA

I was dreaming of Roan, of his long, strong body wrapped around mine as we shared my bed. But that couldn't have been right. Roan was back in Nashville where he belonged, and I was here in Hope Valley, living the life I'd built for myself after he'd smashed my heart smithereens.

But the dream felt so damn good I never wanted to wake up. Dreaming Alma was peaceful, content. She could have stayed in that bed forever with the only man she'd ever loved.

Unfortunately, a sharp, sudden jerk yanked me out of the dream and back into reality. At least in reality, Roan was actually in my bed. And as I stretched my legs, I felt a twinge that reminded me of everything we'd gotten up to the night before. How incredibly he'd used my body, over and over. After the bath, we fell asleep cuddled together, but I'd lost count of the number of times he'd woken me up in the night with his mouth or his fingers. I had so many orgasms the night before I was going to need to drink an entire case of Gatorade today to replenish my fluids.

The violent jerk that had ripped me out of sleep happened again, and I cried out when I felt Roan's legs thrash and kick me beneath the covers.

I rolled over to see what the hell was going on and yelped, "Oh shit!" Tortellini had decided it was time for his breakfast and was currently lying spread-eagle across Roan's face.

I shot up and grabbed the cat, chiding, "Tortellini, *no*," as I lifted him off of Roan's face and plopped him onto my lap.

Roan thrashed, pushing himself up to sitting as he sucked in huge gulps of air. His wide green eyes were full of fear as he turned to gape at me, his chest still heaving like he'd just run a marathon at a full sprint.

“What the fuck was that?” he barked. I curled my lips between my teeth to keep from laughing at the sheer terror carved into his features. “Holy fuck, Alma! That goddamn cat almost killed me!”

“He didn’t want to kill you,” I assured him. “That’s just his way of telling you he’s hungry.” I rubbed a purring Tortellini behind his ears. “Actually, he only does it to people he likes, so you really should take it as a compliment. He was just being affectionate.”

Roan’s mouth fell open in astonishment. He blinked, then jabbed a finger toward the culprit. “That cat is a menace!” he shouted so loud Tortellini and I both jumped. “That’s not affection, Alma, that’s premeditated attempted homicide! That fat bastard is going to murder you in your sleep one night!”

I rolled my eyes on a snort as I leaned over and dropped my little guy back onto the floor. “Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” I said as I climbed out of the bed and moved to my dresser. I was in the process of pulling on a pair of underwear as I said, “It was totally harmless. He would have moved off of you eventually.”

Roan threw the covers back and shot out of the bed. He stood naked as the day he was born with his hands on his hips and his feet planted shoulder-width apart. “That’s it. From here on out, we sleep with the door closed. He can eat when we get around to putting his food into his goddamn bowl.”

A sensual shiver worked through my body, not only at the sight of all of Roan’s naked perfection, but also at the ease in which he made a declaration that basically said he had every intension of sleeping at my house for however long this thing between us lasted.

The tiny voice in the back of my head was yelling at me to set some boundaries, maybe him staying at my house wasn’t the best idea, but everything else inside me shivered delightfully at the thought, so I told that voice to go to hell.

For ten freaking years, I’d been holding myself at arm’s length from anyone and anything that could possibly get too close because I was terrified of getting hurt again. All that really lead to was a lonely life and very tired arms.

For the first time in a freaking decade, I wanted to do something for myself. And I was going to, damn it.

I tried to play it off as casual, turning to face my dresser as I replied, “If that’s what you want, sure.”

I didn’t want him to think my agreement to his terms meant something

huge, but the truth was, Tortellini had always had free rein, so the fact I was willing to block him from my room, the very place he slept night after night, was, in fact, a very big deal.

I grabbed a T-shirt from one of the drawers, but before I could put it on, Roan was behind me, the heat of his strong body wrapping around me like a safety blanket as he reached around and took the shirt I'd been holding and tossed it aside. My eyes followed after it, going wide. "Hey!" I cried out in astonishment, but my objection died on my tongue when Roan bent, pulling my earlobe between his teeth and giving it a little nip that caused me to shiver.

"Wear mine."

I looked back over my shoulder into those smoldering green eyes. He'd slipped his boxer briefs back on at some point, a spark of disappointment that he'd covered his world-class dick shot through me. Roan Blackwell was built to walk around naked all day, every day. It should have been a sin for him to wear clothes.

"What?"

"The shirt you stole from me all those years ago. Wear that one. Please?"

It was the *please* that got me. Well, that and every other stinking thing about this guy.

"Ah, you caught that, did you?" I teased as I bent to get the Music City shirt from the bottom drawer.

He took it from my hands and gently turned me to face him so he could dress me himself. "Nope, didn't miss that you still wear my shirt, Freckles. In fact, seeing you in it was what gave me hope that maybe I still had a tiny chance. That I hadn't screwed things up so badly I'd never be able to win you back."

The look in his gaze as he stared at me was intense and meaningful, but like all the other times things started to get too heavy, that panic returned, clawing its way up my throat and threatening to strangle me.

Desperate to ease the sudden tension I felt building, I popped up on my tiptoes and planted a quick kiss against Roan's lips before squeezing my way from between him and the dresser. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving." I adopted a light and breezy tone as I skip-walked toward the open bedroom door. "I haven't gotten any better in the kitchen in the past several years, but I can manage to pop a few pieces of bread into a toaster if that works for you."

He followed after me, his big hands cupping my hips as I led the way down the hall toward the kitchen.

“How about this? You make the toast and coffee, I’ll handle everything else.”

I tried to remember the last time a man had cooked for me and came up short. Hell, even Roan hadn’t done it in the past. Mainly because both of us were barely a step from dangerous in the kitchen back then. But if he wanted to cook for me—again—while I got to sit back and enjoy the view, who was I to complain?

“Sounds good to me.” We entered the living room, and I spun around on my heel, sidestepping Roan and reaching to give that firm, yummy ass of his a smack. “Get in that kitchen and feed me.”

He kept walking, looking back at me over his shoulder with a wink that made my lady parts hum. “Don’t think I’ll let that smack slide. I’ll punish you later. When we’re in the shower,” he promised.

And I couldn’t freaking wait.

ALMA

I sat on one of the barstools as Roan moved around my kitchen with the kind of efficiency that made me incredibly horny. God, what was it about a man who knew how to cook that was so freaking hot?

After the near-death experience, Tortellini was happily chowing down from his food bowl without a care in the world, but I worried Roan wouldn't be so quick to forget. As he cooked two perfectly sunny-side-up eggs in one skillet and fried bacon in the other, he kept casting ugly looks at the cat, who either didn't seem to notice, or didn't care.

"You know that cat needs to go on a serious diet, right?" He pointed a spatula at Tortellini.

"He is how he is," I decreed before sinking my teeth into a buttery piece of toast. "Besides, who am I to judge a fellow food lover?" I asked around a full mouth, spraying crumbs all over the counter.

Roan rolled his eyes on a chuckle before turning back to the stove. Just as he slid the eggs onto two separate plates, his phone started to ring from the back pocket of his jeans.

I'd pouted when he pulled them on earlier, but I understood he was leery to be around popping grease without proper coverage. Fortunately, he still hadn't put on a shirt.

He pulled the phone out and looked at the screen. There was no missing the way the muscle in his jaw jumped as he stuffed it back into his pocket without answering.

I watched the whole scene with a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach as I slowly chewed my toast. We'd been in a bubble for the past twelve hours, and I couldn't shake the feeling that a pin had been stuck in it.

“You need to take that?” I asked, unable to keep my curiosity in check.

A low growl rumbled from his throat. “No. It’s just some asshole who’s handling Randall’s estate or whatever.” He flipped the bacon over in the skillet. “Already told him I didn’t want whatever that piece of shit left me. Told him to burn it for all I cared, but he didn’t listen.”

I blinked, trying to absorb that information. “Wait.” I gave my head a shake. “Randall left you something when he died?”

“Guess so,” Roan grumbled, keeping his back to me.

“And you don’t know what it could possibly be?”

That finally got him to turn around and face me, bracing his hands wide on the countertop across from me. “Not a clue. Not that it matters. I don’t want it. I don’t want anything from that man. He should’ve taken it all to hell with him.”

“Don’t you have, I don’t know, people or something to handle this kind of thing for you? How did this guy even get your number? I mean, you’re famous, right? Isn’t your cell number supposed to be private?”

“Supposed to be,” he mumbled, dropping his head. “But my manager’s kind of pissed at me at the moment, so this is his way of punishing me.”

My eyes bugged out as my back shot straight, indignation dripping down my spine. “What?” I barked, my voice so aggressive Tortellini looked away from his food for two seconds before diving back in.

“Relax, Freckles. It’s really not a big deal.”

How he could say something like this wasn’t a big deal was beyond me. “What could your manager possibly be pissed about that he’d give out your private number to a complete stranger?”

Roan heaved out a sigh and flipped the burner off beneath the bacon. He spoke as he began transferring each strip onto a paper-towel-covered plate.

“It’s not just him. It’s the label too. They’re upset I’m not caving to what they want; I’m holding my ground on what comes next with my career.”

The blood in my veins began to chill. Talk of his career, his fame, was something I’d intentionally been avoiding. In the back of my head, I knew that mentality wasn’t sustainable, but I couldn’t help it. I wanted to keep Roan to myself for as long as possible. I’d lost him to his career once before. It was inevitable that it would happen again.

He plated the bacon and slid one plate in front of me, placing the other in front of him and digging in. I, on the other hand, had suddenly lost my appetite.

I dragged the tines of my fork through the sunny yellow yolk, breaking it and spreading it across the plate. “What is it you’re fighting back on?”

“Mainly, what I’ll be releasing next.”

As hard as I’d tried to avoid Roan’s music over the years, it had been impossible not to catch bits and pieces here and there. One of my issues with his songs was they were so far in the opposite direction of what he sang when we’d been together. The songs he used to play for me in the living room of our shitty apartment were full of heart and passion and emotion. Those songs meant something. But everything he’d released since signing with a big label had been watered-down country anthems about good times, cold beer, and women.

The music that made him famous wasn’t him. At least not the man I used to know. But the masses gobbled that meaningless shit up.

A voice in the back of my head kept screaming at me to let the subject drop, if I let the real world creep in now, I’d lose him sooner than I was ready. But my curiosity got the best of me. I still couldn’t bring myself to look up at him, but I also couldn’t keep from asking, “Oh? And what’s that?”

“I want to record *my* music,” he answered. “Songs I actually give a shit about. Songs that mean something.”

My head shot up at that, and I found him watching me closely, a grin on his face. “Yeah, I was starting to wonder what it was going to take to get you to look at me.”

My eyelids narrowed in a glare. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh. Sure you don’t.” He crunched into a piece of toast and followed it with a sip of coffee, black, how he’d always taken it, while mine was full of milk and sugar, masking the coffee taste completely, how I liked it. “Anyway, I decided I was tired of putting out the same bullshit, one album after another. Each one has been a version of the same goddamn thing. I laid down a few tracks on my own dime recently, stuff similar to what I used to play when we were together. Meaningful songs. But the label didn’t like that. They wanted more of the same, and I basically told them they could fuck off.”

I choked on my sip of orange juice and proceeded to cough and sputter as I tried to work it out. “You *what*? Can you really do that? What if they drop you?”

He shrugged like he didn’t have a care in the world. “I can do whatever

the hell I want. My name's big enough; I don't really need them anymore. I can produce my next album on my own or call some of the connections I've made over the years and hire a producer myself, one that sees my vision. My contract is about up with the label. I've been doing a lot of thinking lately, and maybe they aren't the best fit for me anymore."

A tiny little coal of excitement deep inside of me sparked to life and the thought that maybe things were different this time around filtered into my mind.

But I quickly snuffed it out. All Roan had ever wanted from the moment I met him was to be famous, to have his music played to millions of people across the country. He'd succeeded in that, and I couldn't imagine him wanting to give that up. Besides, he wasn't talking about leaving his career behind. He was simply re-evaluating the direction it was going in and thinking of shifting gears. That didn't mean there would all of a sudden be room for me. That was a world I hadn't fit in ten years ago, so what made me think I could all of the sudden fit now? And did I even want to?

It was those thoughts that had the few bites of breakfast I'd taken sitting like a lead ball in the pit of my stomach.

Nothing had changed, not really. Eventually, Roan would go back to Nashville. The ending of . . . whatever the hell we were doing would be here before I knew it.

I swallowed down a gulp of coffee and pushed down the unpleasantness swirling around in my brain.

Whether this ended sooner or later didn't matter. The fact was, I had him now. And I was going to make the most of the time we had left together.

I shoved my plate away and hopped off the barstool, slowly rounding the counter as he looked on with curiosity.

"What's the matter? Are you not hungry?"

I smiled, slipping the persona I'd been wearing for the past decade right back into place. "Oh, I'm hungry," I told him, stopping mere inches away and dragging my fingernail down the center of his chest my gaze catching on the date tattooed there. "Starved actually. But I'm in the mood for something else."

A groan worked its way from his chest as he wrapped an arm around my waist and yanked me to him, slamming his lips against mine in a bruising kiss. He pulled back just enough to look in my eyes, his own having gone dark with need.

“Then get on your knees and have your fill, baby. It’s all for you, anyway.”

I didn’t have to be told twice.

ALMA

The past week and a half had been pure bliss. There was no other way to describe it.

After my breakfast-time blowjob in the middle of my kitchen several days ago, Roan had yanked me to my feet, spun me around, and fucked me from behind right there against the counter where we'd been enjoying our breakfast.

He'd left me napping shortly after and headed back to the inn to pack his stuff, and when I woke up, his bags were in my closet and my drawers had been reorganized to make room for the few items he had with him.

His guitar case sat in the living room, and every day after I got home from rehearsal, I'd find him sitting on the front porch or couch or somewhere, strumming away, creating one new melody after the other.

I used to be able to sit and watch him for hours, and as badly as I wanted to do that exact same thing now, I didn't let myself. I only allowed so much before reeling myself back in so I didn't let my expectations get away from me.

I'd make an excuse to escape whenever he played, taking a shower or running errands, anything to stay away from him and that damn guitar. His voice and music were my kryptonite. If I got too close, I'd be doomed.

Every night I was off from the club, he'd cook dinner while I kept him company. We'd eat his delicious meals, talking and laughing more than I had in a very long time, then eventually we'd fall into bed together and Roan would worship my body in that way only he could.

If I was working the club, it was guaranteed he'd be in the audience, taking in the show. He always stuck around until it was time for me to leave.

Then he'd drive us home and fuck me raw, so turned on from watching me dance that he couldn't keep his hands off me.

I'd had more sex in the past week and a half with Roan than I'd had in years, but I couldn't get enough. Feeling him, touching him, tasting him, it was *never* enough.

"Look at you, baby. So pretty when you're sucking my dick like a good girl. You're so goddamn good at that."

I looked up from beneath my lashes, over the planes of Roan's tight, toned body, to his face. He lay stretched across my bed with his head propped on a pile of pillows as I crouched between his long spread legs. The muscle in his jaw worked, his chest rose and fell violently as his breath sawed in and out of his lungs.

He looked almost feral, like he was only seconds away from devouring me whole. And god, but I *loved* that I had the power to do that to him.

I hummed wantonly, smiling the best I could around his hard, fat cock as I bobbed down on it, swallowing when I felt the tip bump the back of my throat. He was so big, I couldn't possibly take him all, but what I could take was enough to drive me wild.

Drool dripped from the corner of my mouth as I continued to work him, to drive him to the brink of insanity. I played with his balls with one hand, feeling them draw up tighter to his body the closer he got to coming, and with the other, I toyed with my slit, using the wetness that was dripping down my inner thighs to fuck myself with my fingers.

I'd never been a huge fan of blowjobs, but sucking Roan off turned me on like nothing else. The closer he got, the more the pressure in my core built.

"Goddamn it," he hissed, his jaw clenched tight, his lips curled back to expose his teeth. He looked like a wild animal that had spotted his prey. "You're getting off on this, aren't you? You love having your mouth stuffed full of my dick, Alma?"

I hummed against him, my eyes rolling backward in my head as my lips fluttered shut. I could feel myself barreling toward my own release, and I was so greedy for it, I couldn't see straight.

"Ah, ah, ah," he chided. "You don't come until I'm inside you."

With that, he knifed up to sitting and grabbed me beneath my armpits. He hauled me up his body until I straddled his waist, his erection prodding at my drenched entrance. We'd had the talk a few days ago, and since I was on the pill and we were both clean, we'd decided to ditch the condoms and go bare.

I loved nothing more than the feel of Roan inside of me with nothing between us.

“I want to watch your beautiful body while you ride me,” he ordered, reaching between us to line his dick into place. Grabbing hold of my hips, he used them like handles, yanking me down on him as he thrust upward, spearing me with his massive length.

I cried out, dropping my head back on that delicious stretch. That burn felt so fucking good as my body adjusted to make room for him.

“That’s my good girl. Now move. I want to feel you flood my cock.”

I did just that, my hips undulating like waves as I braced my palms on his chest, placing one of my hands right over his tattoo. That date.

“Roan,” I breathed, my voice hitching as my walls began to flutter. “You feel so good. I’m so full.”

“Ah, shit,” he gritted out, snapping upward to meet me thrust for thrust, fucking into me hard and fast from the bottom. Even with me on top, he was still in complete control during sex. I preferred it that way. I loved handing it over to him, trusting he knew exactly what to do to make me feel amazing. “You’re so fucking tight, Alma.” His fingers dug into my hips so hard I knew he was probably going to leave bruises behind; I didn’t mind it one damn bit.

I moved faster as that coil inside me tightened. A thin sheen of sweat had built on both our bodies. The room was filled with the sounds of our pants and moans, of skin slapping skin.

All of a sudden Roan sat up, bracing himself with one arm stretched behind him, his hand in the mattress, as he pinned me to him with the other wrapped around my waist. He pistoned his hips upward. Over and over, driving himself so deep he bottomed out. “Need you to get there for me. I’m so goddamn close.”

On those words, I snapped. I clamped down on him like a vise and threw my head back on a scream as I came hard enough to see stars. He followed me right over that edge. That first spray of his hot cum shot deep inside me. I continued to ride him through both of our releases, until we were so spent we collapsed on the bed, struggling to catch our breaths.

“God, it’s so good,” I pointed out breathlessly. “Every single time.” He held me to him, so I propped my hands on his chest and rested on them so I could look up into his satisfied eyes. “Why is it always so damn good?”

I expected his eyes to glint with humor, but they didn’t. They grew darker as his expression turned serious. The way he was looking at me was enough

to make me squirm, but it wouldn't have done any good since he wouldn't loosen his grip.

"Well, Freckles, I'd tell you why. But you freak out every time I try to and either run away or cover my mouth to stop me."

My chin jerked backward like he'd slapped me. He might as well have with how painful that blow was.

I pressed up on his chest hard enough he didn't have a choice but to loosen his grip. I shot off the bed and moved to the dresser, yanking the drawers open violently and digging through them for clothes, pulling pieces out without paying much attention to whether or not they matched.

I heard Roan sigh from the bed as I yanked a pair of panties up my legs. "Freckles, come on. Where are you going?"

"I have rehearsal," I gritted out as I pulled a sports bra over my head.

"Don't be mad. Come on, just come back to bed. We can talk about this."

With my camisole in place, I pulled on my yoga shorts and spun around to face him, slamming my hands down on my hips. He sat in the middle of my bed, the covers pooling at his waist. Both his knees were cocked up, his forearms resting across the top of them.

"What's there to talk about, huh?" I asked snippily. "The way you explain it, I sound like a cold bitch who's terrified of expression actual feelings."

I knew I was being irrational, but I couldn't seem to make myself stop. It wasn't like he didn't have a point, like he wasn't right. Maybe that was why the switch inside of me had flipped so easy. It was because he'd given voice to the fears I'd been pushing down, down, down for days. I was fine when he was letting me get away with it, but now that he'd called me out, my fight or flight instinct kicked in, and even though a tiny voice in the back of my head told me I was picking the wrong one, the desire to run coursed through me like molten lava, a need I couldn't ignore.

"That's not what I said, and you fucking know it," Roan growled. His face went hard as he tossed the covers back and slid out of the bed. He snatched his underwear off the ground and pulled them back on. "You're putting words in my mouth because you're freaking out." He crossed his arms over his chest, his mannerisms sharp and stubborn. I could see it in his eyes. He was done letting things slide. "Tell me I'm wrong."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I mumbled. It was damn near impossible to look at him, so I distracted myself by moving to my full-length mirror so I could wrap my hair in a knot on top of my head.

“Bullshit,” he snapped. “You know *exactly* what the fuck I’m talking about. Stop playing those bullshit games, Alma.” He stomped over to me and grabbed my arm, forcing me to turn around. Taking my chin in his hand, he lifted my face to his. “Stop fucking running and talk to me, goddamn it,” he growled.

I threw my arms wide, the panic in my chest squeezing so tight it was nearly impossible to breathe. “What do you want me to say, huh?” I shouted, fully engrossed in my freak-out. “What the hell do you want from me, Roan?”

He rocked back on his heels, his hands dropping to his sides. “How can you even ask me that?” His voice came out so pained it felt like someone had shoved a knife into my heart. “How could you not know by now? I want *you*, Alma. Fuck,” he barked, ripping a hand through his hair. “I fucking love you.”

I took a step back, like those words were a real-life thing I needed to get away from. “Don’t say that,” I whispered past the tightness in my throat.

“Why the hell not?” he shouted in exasperation. “They’re the truth. I love you, Alma. I’ve always loved you.”

“Stop,” I hissed.

He shook his head, the sadness practically dripping from his pores. “Why does that scare you so much?”

My sinuses began to burn. My vision blurred with tears, but I blinked them back, refusing to let them fall. “You know why,” I answered, my voice coming out small, broken. “You crushed me once already, Roan. It’s only a matter of time before you do it again when you go back to Nashville. Excuse me for wanting to protect myself from the only man on the planet I’ve loved enough to break my heart.”

I’d revealed so much more than I wanted to, but the words wouldn’t stop spilling past my lips. It was as if a dam had broken, and there was no stopping it. I had to get out of there before those walls I tried so hard to live behind collapsed completely.

“I have to go,” I murmured, then, without looking back, I did exactly what he’d accused me of.

I ran.

ROAN

The front door slammed in the distance, and I let out a sigh, dropping my head forward.

“Goddamn it, Roan,” I cursed myself. “You fucking idiot.”

That hadn’t gone how I’d planned, not a single goddamn moment of it. I’d told myself over and over that I needed to be easy with her. That I needed to guide her into this relationship gently, with finesse. And what did I do? I approached it with all the grace of a fucking sledgehammer.

Of course she’d run. I didn’t blame her one damn bit. If I’d taken my own advice, maybe I’d have her in my arms at that very moment, both of us building our strength for round two.

Her words echoed in my head like shouting into a deep, dark cave.

“Excuse me for wanting to protect myself from the only man on the planet I’ve loved enough to break my heart.”

There was more to unpack with that statement, but all I could focus on was the fact that she still loved me. She was terrified, but she still loved me. And as long as she did, there was hope for us.

I just needed to prove it to her. And to do that, I needed to make a gesture grander than anything I’d ever done before.

My phone started to ring, Cal’s name popping up on the screen and sending a bolt of frustration shooting through me.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding,” I grunted before I swiped my thumb across the screen to answer. I brought it to my ear and growled through the line, “Is this a joke? Please tell me it’s a fucking joke, because I’m almost certain I told you not to call me again after the last time we talked.”

My manager’s voice came through the line not sounding contrite in the

slightest. “I know what you said, Roan, but this is important. I *need* to talk to you.”

I dragged a hand through my hair and over my face, the scruff I hadn’t shaved since I arrived in Hope Valley scratching against my palm. “Let me guess. This has something to do with that estate planner asshole you gave my number to. Think you and I are gonna have to have a serious fucking talk about you doing that, pal.”

“No, it’s not about that,” he blurted. “Look, will you just listen? This is important. I don’t know where you are, but you need to get back to Nashville as soon as possible. The label is done playing games. They said if you aren’t willing to record an album that they approve of, they’re not going to renew your contract.”

He said it like it was the worst news he could possibly share, but his words set a lightbulb off in my head, and suddenly I knew exactly what my gesture to Alma was going to be.

“Fine. I’ll head back today,” I told him. “I should get in sometime late tonight.”

He sighed like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. I hung up before he could say anything else, because I wanted the satisfaction of being face to face when he discovered that my return to Nashville was going to be anything but a relief for him.

It only took me about an hour to pack all my shit up into the few bags I brought with me, and as I stood in the middle of Alma’s living room, taking one final glance, Tortellini wound his way through my feet, making a figure eight with his fat body.

“Yeah, I know. I’m going to miss you too,” I relented. “Even if your fat ass tried to kill me in my sleep.”

He sat down, his body turning into a basketball before my very eyes. He opened his mouth and meowed that blood-curdling death meow of his.

“I know, I know. I should wait until she gets home so I can tell her in person, but I left it all in the letter.” I pointed to the envelope on the counter where I’d enclosed the letter I’d written to Alma, telling her everything. “And this won’t take long. I’ll be back in a few days, I promise. And then, we’re putting your chunky ass on a diet.”

If a cat could flip a person off, I was sure that was what Tortellini would have been doing right then. But he’d deal. I’d make it worth it for him. Just like I’d make giving me another chance worth it for Alma.

But first, my grand gesture.

Bending down, I gave the cat a scratch behind his ears and grabbed the handle of my guitar case. With my duffle bag looped around my opposite shoulder, I headed out, using the key I was damn well keeping to lock the door behind me.

As I climbed into my truck and started it up, I stared back at the house, at the front porch where I'd created some of the best songs I'd written in a decade. Being away from Alma these next few days was going to make them some of the worst in my life.

But it would be worth it. Because I'd have her.

* * *

Alma

That had to have been one of the worst rehearsals of my life. I couldn't concentrate. I screwed up basic moves. I stumbled over parts of dances I already knew. And worst, I'd gotten snappy with my friends when they pointed out the mistakes I was making.

I apologized more during the rehearsal than I had in a very long time, but eventually, the stares and concerned looks from my friends were too much, and I couldn't take it any longer. I had to get out of there.

The truth was, I was mad at myself, and I was taking it out on everyone around me. It wasn't like me to do that, to treat the people I cared about badly, so I made the excuse of not feeling well and left rehearsal early.

I drove around aimlessly, cursing myself for my temper, cursing myself for being a coward. Roan had put it all out there, and I couldn't bring myself to let go of the past, to lower those freaking walls of mine.

Finally, after cruising past Muffin Top and all the other restaurants and stores downtown, I summoned up the courage to turn my car toward home.

I owed Roan an apology. Actually, I owed him more than that, but I'd start with saying I was sorry.

I turned onto my street, rehearsing what I was going to say in my head, only, as I pulled into my driveway, the truck that had been sitting there was gone.

My stomach gave a little twist, but I told myself it was fine. He'd probably just run out for something, but for some strange reason, I didn't believe that.

My hand trembled as I unlocked the front door and pushed it open, and I knew something was wrong when Tortellini didn't greet me first thing, demanding affection and food. Not specifically in that order.

I headed deeper into the house, an eerie feeling creeping along the back of my neck that something wasn't right. When I got to the living room, my cat lay in the center of the floor, tattered bits of paper strewn all over the floor.

"Oh, you little shit," I scolded. "What did you get into now, huh?" He simply looked up at me without a care in the world, like I hadn't said a thing. As I moved to the hall closet to grab the broom and dustpan, I couldn't help but think that maybe Roan had been right. Tortellini *was* a menace.

I swept up the mess and threw it in the trash, deciding that the scrap of mail or whatever it was he'd destroyed, would be enough to tide him over until dinner time.

"Serves you right," I said as I stared at him over the counter and into the living room. "Hope it was worth it, because it's all you're eating this afternoon."

I was just about the head back to my bedroom to change out of my rehearsal clothes when I noticed something from the corner of my eyes and drew up short. More to the point, I noticed something *missing*.

The guitar case had been propped against the wall beneath the living room window for the past week and a half. Whether he was strumming on the guitar or not, the case was always *there*.

Only, it wasn't now.

My stomach dropped to the floor at my feet, and I burst into action, racing into my room. I ripped open the closet door, but Roan's bags were no longer tucked away in the corner. I darted to the dresser and yanked open the drawer he'd made room for himself in. Sure enough, it was empty.

My heart began to beat at a painfully fast rate and my whole body trembled as I fell to my knees and grabbed the handle for the bottom drawer. I slid it open, wood creaking as it scraped along the slides. Roan's shirt, the Music City one I'd kept with me all these years, should have been folded and placed in the very center of the drawer. Exactly where I put it after the last time I did laundry.

But it wasn't there. It was gone.

Roan was gone.

I don't know how long I sat there, staring into that drawer as the sad, heartbreaking reality set in.

Roan was really gone. He'd left me again, taking my heart with him.

Only this time, I had no one but myself to blame.

ALMA

It had been four days since Roan left me. Four days of tears and snot. Four days of self-pity. Four days of calling in sick and holing myself up at home so I didn't have to see anyone. So I didn't have to admit I was a failure, I wasn't worth sticking around for. For four long, agonizing days as I checked my phone constantly for a call or text that never came through.

I told myself over and over I would call him, but every time my thumb hovered over his name, I'd lose my nerve. So instead, I lay in an unwashed lump on my couch day after day, binging on junk food and watching shitty daytime television because the soaps made me cry, and I was in the mood to cry.

I was in such a pathetic state even my cat didn't want anything to do with me and had given me an extra wide berth the past few days.

It was the only way I'd found to relieve the ache that had been building in my chest like a pressure cooker.

For four days, I'd ignored everyone else so I could mope and feel sorry for myself and eat my weight in oatmeal cr me pies, Ding Dongs, takeout pizzas, and ice cream. Apparently that was all the time my friends would allow, because at the end of day four, my front door was thrown open and my friends came storming in.

The determination that was printed on all their features quickly gave way to concern and sheer horror when they took in the state of me and my house.

"Oh my god," Asher breathed, her face scrunching up as she lifted a hand to cover her nose. "What's that smell?"

Sloane shook her head in disbelief. "I don't know if it's the trash or her."

I pushed to sitting, letting out a pathetic groan when the new food baby I

was sporting didn't want to bend in that direction. "Well, it's been great to see you guys," I deadpanned. "But you can see yourselves out. As you can tell, I'm not taking visitors at the moment."

I waved a hand down the front of my sweats, noticing they were covered in food stains.

Oh well, I thought to myself. It wasn't like it mattered. I didn't have anyone to impress. Not anymore.

Charlotte, clearly the bravest one in the group, trudged past food wrappers and takeout containers and took a seat next to me on the couch. She moved like she was going to hug me but thought better of it when she got close enough to smell me. Because that terrible smell was, in fact, *me*.

"Oh, honey." The sympathy on her face nearly did me in and it took everything I had not to burst into tears all over again. "When was the last time you bathed?"

"Or cleaned?" Marin asked.

"Or peeled yourself off that sofa?" Layla tacked on.

The answer to all those questions would be the same.

"I don't know," I mumbled around the half-eaten Swiss Roll I found tucked between my cushions. "What's today?"

McKenna held her hands up "Nope. No. No way." She shook her head as she rounded the coffee table littered with junk and grabbed my hand. "This is unacceptable." She tugged, giving me no choice but to stand up. I'd been lying for so long my legs wobbled and I almost went down. Was it possible my muscles were already starting to atrophy?

"I'll tell you what's about to happen. You're going to go in your room and take a shower, making sure to *scrub everywhere*. You're going to wash your hair at least twice to get all that damn grease out, and while you do that, we're going to straighten up in here."

"I think this may be beyond our capabilities," Hardin said. "This looks and smells like a job for a professional." She looked around at our friends. "Anyone have the number for one of those cleaning services that comes in after a gruesome homicide?"

McKenna didn't pay her any mind. She kept shoving me toward my bedroom. "When you get out, we're going to sit down and talk. You're going to tell us what happened between you and Roan, and we're going to help you figure out a way to fix it." She reached up and cupped my cheeks in her hands. "Deal?"

I sniffled, my eyes growing misty. “Deal,” I croaked as I wiped at my nose with the back of my hand.

She shoved me into my bathroom and pulled the door closed, giving me some privacy while she went back out into the den of disaster and got to work. Any other time and I might have felt ashamed at my friends witnessing the state of my life, but I was too heartbroken to care.

I hadn’t thought it was possible, but I actually hurt more this time than I had when Roan and I broke up ten years ago. At least back then I’d had that stupid T-shirt to wrap myself in, that small piece of him I’d been able to keep with me. I didn’t have that this time around. No, this time, he was gone from my life completely.

I turned and caught my reflection in the mirror for the first time since I got home and discovered he was gone. I barely recognized the woman staring back at me. My normally thick, shiny hair hung in limp clumps. The dark purple bags under my eyes gave the appearance of being sunken in. My normally tanned, dewy complexion was dull and sallow.

“Ugh, Alma. You look like a hot freaking mess.” I turned the shower on as hot as I could take it and stripped naked, tossing the soiled clothes in the hamper when I probably should have thrown them right in the trash.

I stood under the spray until the water went from scalding to lukewarm, then I scoured myself with a shower poof and half a bottle of body wash and scrubbed my hair three times.

By the time I got out of the shower I actually felt halfway normal. As much as I wanted to throw on another pair sweats so I could go curl back up in front of the television, I forced myself to go through my rigorous skincare routine, then slapped a couple serum patches beneath my eyes as I brushed and flossed my teeth. With that done, I lotioned and moisturized before finally getting dressed and heading back out to join my friends.

I startled at the state of my living room. Before I’d gotten into the shower it looked like a tornado had hit it, now, you could never tell I’d destroyed it with neglect the past few days.

“Wow,” I breathed. “Thank you.” Emotion clogged my throat, the lengths my friends went to moved me so much my eyes began to water for the millionth time in recent days. “You guys are the best,” I squeaked right before a sob ripped from my chest.

“Oh lord.” Marin reached for me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “The dam has officially broken, ladies.” She led me over to the

couch and plopped me down, taking the cushion beside me. “Start talking,” she ordered.

“Yeah.” Hardin sat down on the coffee table in front of me and leaned forward to take my hands. “We can’t help you if you don’t talk to us.”

She was right, and I needed all the help I could get, so I told them everything. They’d already known when Roan and I had started back up again, because for that week and a half, I hadn’t been able to hide my incredible mood. But I shared with them what had happened on the last day, on the fight we got into before Roan left me. I told them all about how scared I’d been, how I’d let that fear dictate everything, refusing to let Roan voice his feelings.

They listened quietly, hanging on my every word. It wasn’t until I told them how Roan had accused me of running every time I got scared that McKenna spoke up.

“Was he right?” she asked. “About you running. Was he right?”

I nodded my head. “Yes,” I whispered as a single tear slid down my cheek. “He was right.” But it was more than that. After I lost him for the second time, I realized it wasn’t only since he’d come back into my life that I’d been running. Everything I had been doing for the past decade was my way of trying to outrun the past. I ran when I left Nashville. Every time I swore I’d never get married. Every one-night stand and random hookup. That was me running. Hiding. Keeping those walls up between me and the rest of the world.

“I’ve been so desperate to protect my heart, I’ve done everything wrong. I haven’t protected myself from anything. All I’ve done is guarantee I’ll never live more than a half life.”

“So what are you going to do about it?” Layla asked. My friends were here now, to have my back and lift me up, to do whatever it was I needed them to do.

“I’m . . .” The idea hit me like a wrecking ball, and as soon as it did, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt it was the right thing. “I’m going to Nashville,” I announced, determination steeling my spine. “And I’m going to get the love of my life back.”

“Hell yeah you are!” Sloane jumped up and thrust her fist in the air. “Now go pack. And make sure you grab some really slutty underwear.”

“I’ll book your ticket,” Charlotte offered.

Hardin spoke next. “And I’ll cat-sit for you.”

Everything after that felt like it happened at hyper speed. I ran around my bedroom like a chicken with my head cut off, throwing everything my hand touched into my suitcase. I probably forgot some very crucial items, but that was okay, because I had some ultra slutty underwear in my bag, and that was all that mattered.

After the ticket had been purchased and Tortellini had been forced into his cat carrier, my girls left so I could get on the road to the airport. I didn't have a lot of time, so the plan was to push the pedal all the way down and pray the route there was speed-trap free.

I was rushing to the front door when, all of a sudden, it swung open. I skidded to a stop, the soles of my sneakers catching on the wood flooring and nearly tripping as Roan stepped across the threshold and announced loudly, "Honey, I'm home."

* * *

Roan

I pushed the door closed and turned around, jerking to a halt at the sight of Alma standing just feet away, a look of astonishment on her face and her hand wrapped around the handle of a bulging suitcase.

My brow furrowed and my head cocked to the side. "Where are you going?"

Her mouth gaped. She sputtered and blinked like her brain had been kicked off line and could not compute.

"Where am I going?"

"Yeah, Freckles. That's what I just asked."

"*Where am I going?*" she repeated on a squeak.

I dropped the bags I'd been carrying and moved to her, taking her face in my hands. "Baby, you're scaring me. What's going on?"

"I—I'm going to Nashville," she sputtered, causing my chin to jerk back in bewilderment. She continued to speak, her voice high-pitched and frantic as the words spilled out at a rapid-fire pace. "I'm going to Nashville because you aren't supposed to be here right now. You're supposed to be *there*. And I'm going to go and try to win you back because I've been so stupid. I was

scared, and I let that fear rule me and I ended up losing you for a second time.”

I rocked back in shock. “Lose me? Freckles, you didn’t—”

But she was on a roll and couldn’t hear a word I was trying to say. “So I’m going to Nashville to tell you that I love you. I love you, and even though I’m still scared, I don’t care about that. Not anymore, not if it means I have you. I’ll deal, because all I need in life is you. As long as I have you, I have everything. But you aren’t *in* Nashville. You’re *here*.”

A switch inside of me flipped, warmth spreading through my chest and filling me so full I thought it might burst from the tips of my fingers and the ends of my hair. She wouldn’t stop talking, so I did the only thing I could think to shut her up. I grabbed her by the back of her neck and yanked her to me, slamming my mouth down on hers.

The kiss wasn’t slow and sensual. It was hard and possessive. I poured every ounce of the love I felt for her into it so she couldn’t possibly have any doubt. By the time I finally pulled back, dropping my forehead against hers, we were both panting and out of breath.

“What”—she cleared the frog from her throat—“what was that for?”

“Well, it was mainly to shut you up,” I said with a smile that split my face in half. “But it was also because you said you love me, and I can’t *not* kiss you after you say something like that.”

Her eyes were wide, full of wonder and confusion. “I’m so confused right now.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I can see that. But, baby, didn’t you get my letter?”

Her brows pinched together in a V. “Letter?”

“Yeah, the letter I left for you. I explained everything in that letter. How I was heading back to Nashville so I could officially fire my manager and label for good and pack up all my shit so I could put my house on the market.”

“You’re putting your house on the market?” she squeaked.

“Yeah. I fucking hate that house.” I stood tall and looked around at the home Alma had made herself. This house felt more like a home to me in a week and a half than the one I’d lived in for years. This whole town felt like home, and I couldn’t imagine ever leaving.

“I much prefer this one.” I returned my gaze to hers. “And besides, the woman I’m in love with and am going to marry one day soon lives here. So now I do too.”

Alma's eyes filled with tears as she fisted the material of my shirt, holding me tight. "But—but what about my shirt? The Music City shirt. You took it with you." Her throat worked on a thick swallow. "I thought—"

"I took it with me so I had a reference when I went to buy a new one. One that's not all faded and unreadable. I still have the old one. I just have a new one too."

She let out a watery laugh and looped her arms around my neck. "You can keep the new one. But the original is mine."

God, I loved this woman. I couldn't wait to start our lives together.

"So what do you say, Freckles. Is it cool with you and Tortellini if I move in for good?"

She lifted up on her tiptoes and spoke against my lips. "We wouldn't have it any other way."

EPILOGUE

ALMA

*S*ometime later

I stood at the edge of the dance floor, my body swaying to the soothing beat of the music through the speakers, the skirt of my long, ivory dress swishing around my feet. There were people all around, guests I needed to put in a bit of FaceTime with, but I couldn't rip my gaze off Roan as he danced with Sloane's teenage step-daughter, Darcy, who happened to be a huge fan.

He was smiling at the sweet, shy girl, her cheeks burning a furious red under his attention. It had to have been the sweetest thing I'd ever seen.

I caught movement from the corner of my eye, a grin pulling at my lips as my girls gathered all around me.

Charlotte was the first to speak. "So, how's it feel to be Mrs. Blackwell?" She was teasing, but if I were being honest, it felt really freaking great.

"I can't believe this day has finally come," Marin teased. "The woman who swore up and down for *years* she was never getting married made the trip down the aisle today and pledged herself to another person."

I chuckled as I shoved my elbow into her side.

Hardin came to my defense. "Okay, guys, leave her alone." Or at least I thought that was what she was doing until she continued. "We have the rest of our lives to make fun of her for being a big old dummy. Let's give her a day off today."

Layla pouted. "But where's the fun in that?"

"The fun is the open bar," Asher answered.

Sloane lifted her glass of champagne in the air. “Amen to that!”

I turned to look at my friends, the women who were more like sisters. My ride or die, my family. I wouldn't have been standing where I was if it hadn't been for them, and for that reason—along with so many others—they had my loyalty until I took my last breath.

“I love you guys,” I said seriously. “I want you all to know that. I love you, and I'm grateful each and every day that I met you.” I zeroed in on McKenna. “That you gave me a chance and brought me into your little ragtag family.”

They began to snifle, and I knew I'd succeeded. They could make fun of me for getting married when I'd vowed to never go down that road, but I'd return the favor and make fun of them for being giant crybabies.

But for today . . . well, I was taking today off, and I was going to go dance with my new husband.

I glided across the dance floor just as the song ended and Roan released Darcy's hand. She shot a timid grin up at him and took off with a giggle.

“Hey, music star,” I started as I stopped in front of him. That had been my nickname for him ever since his last album—the one he'd recorded and produced himself, the one full of beautiful, meaningful songs—blew up the charts. He'd won his very first Grammy with it, and cleaned up at the AMAs and CMAs. People loved his *new sound*, but only I knew it was his original voice. “How about taking your wife for a spin on the dance floor?”

He smiled so big his dimple pressed deep beneath his five o'clock shadow. “Can't imagine a better way to spend the next three and a half minutes,” Roan said as he pulled me into his arms and started to lead the way.

I let out a scoff and smiled up at him. “The next three and a half minutes? Hate to break it to you, but you're stuck with me for the rest of our lives.”

He leaned down and brushed his lips against mine. “Just the way it was always meant to be.”

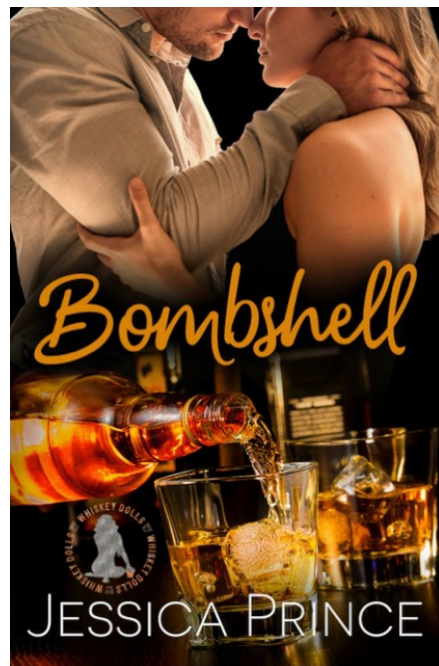
I closed my eyes and melted into him as I thought no truer words had ever been spoken.

The End.

*Thank you so much for joining me on this ride! The **WHISKEY DOLLS** hold a*

special place in my heart, and even though the series is over, I'm sure you'll see some of your favorites again very soon!

CHECK OUT MORE FROM WHISKEY DOLLS



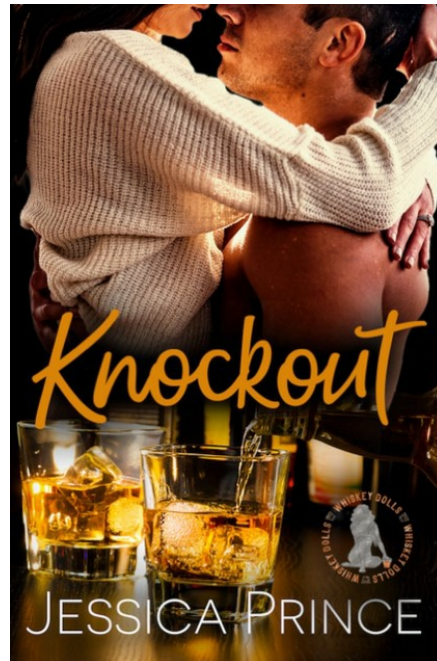
He'd hated me first, so I figured it was only fair I hate the stupid, sexy jerk back.

After ending the world's worst relationship, Marin Grey had sworn off men. So it was rather inconvenient that she couldn't seem to keep her eyes and thoughts off the Ice King himself, Pierce Walton—also known as her ex-boyfriend's older, much hotter brother.

He was cold, callous, and rude. He was also the most gorgeous man she'd ever laid eyes on, which made the fact that he'd hated her from first sight all the more unfair.

When circumstances dictate they put their swords away so Marin can help Pierce take care of his son, that ice-cold hate suddenly takes a turn into something much hotter. And if they aren't careful, they could both be burned alive.

* * *



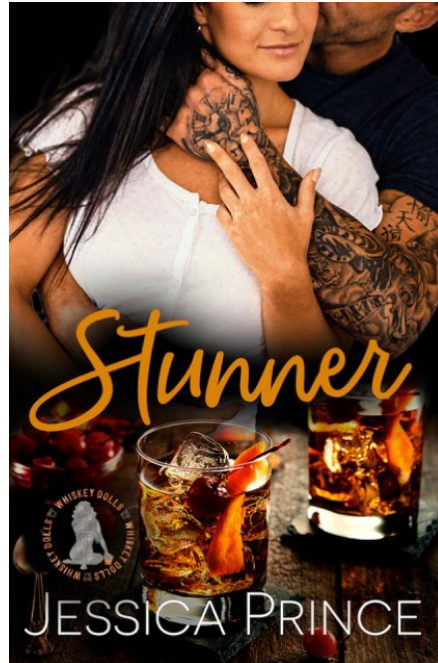
It wasn't fair that the man I hated with a passion was so freaking gorgeous.

Things in Layla Fox's life were going great. She had a fantastic job, amazing friends, and a killer apartment. There was just one tiny glitch in all that perfect. Her upstairs neighbor was the very definition of tall, dark, and handsome . . . and she hated the man with every cell in her body.

Jude Kingsley was the most arrogant jerk she'd ever met, making the fact that she was attracted to him more than a little inconvenient.

When the two of them are forced together by Jude's meddling grandmother, the bitter rivalry between the two feuding neighbors suddenly turns into something very different. And a raw, intense chemistry like theirs is bound to explode if they aren't careful.

* * *



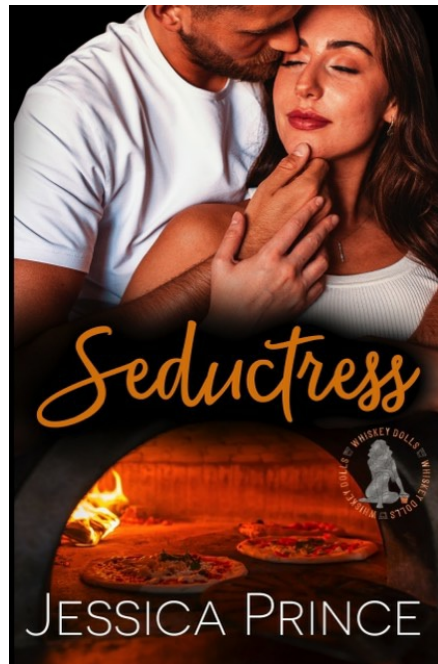
Never in a million years did I think I'd be jilted on my wedding day.

Around the time Asher Rose was supposed to say “I do”, she was bellied up to a bar full of bikers, three sheets to the wind and feeling sorry for herself. The last person she expected to come to her rescue was Owen Shields.

He was tattooed, broody, and her ex-fiancé’s best friend. The arrogant jerk who was supposed to be the best man at her wedding was never supposed to be her knight in shining armor.

Falling for Owen was never part of the plan, but when the gorgeous town vet throws everything he has her way, including his adorable dog and angelic niece, Asher is in for the fight of her life.

* * *



I knew my best friend's little sister was off limits, I just couldn't help myself.

When a tragic accident caused Ford Grimes to trade the fast pace of the city for the refuge that came with being a small-town firefighter, the last thing he wanted was romance. Then he met the seductive manager of the local pizzeria and found himself questioning all the rules he'd put into place for his new life.

Hardin Shields may as well have had a neon sign strapped to her that said *do not touch* in big, glowing letters. The single mother had enough on her plate. With a family restaurant to run and an ex who was making her life difficult, the last thing she needed was for her unrequited crush on her older brother's best friend to take a turn into . . . something.

When the chemistry becomes too hot to ignore, they decide to keep things light and fun, but when danger comes lurking, threatening Hardin, Ford has to decide if he's strong enough to let go of the pain of the past in order to protect the woman who's coming to mean too much, or let her go.

* * *



Who knew the grumpy single dad next door would turn out to be The One?

As Sloane Chambers stood at her window and creeped on the new guy moving in next door, she was immediately drawn to the tattoos, muscles, and the way his jeans hugged his perfect . . . frame. But when she caught him hacking up her rose bushes with a chain saw, the battle was on.

For Silas Bridger, moving to a new town and starting a new job was his chance for a fresh start. He'd already failed at being a husband, but he was determined to make things right with his teenage daughter and be the father she deserved. Which meant there was no room in his life for complications. Especially in the form of his gorgeous, sassy next-door neighbor.

When the attraction to Sloane becomes too intense to ignore, that line he kept firmly drawn is crossed. But there is no way he'll let a handful of passionate, earth-shaking encounters turn into something more. He's done with the dreaded L-O-V-E, or at least that's what he tells himself. Because Sloane is quickly becoming the kind of complication he may not survive.

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ABOUT JESSICA



Born and raised around Houston, Jessica is a self proclaimed caffeine addict, connoisseur of inexpensive wine, and the worst driver in the state of Texas. In addition to being all of these things, she's first and foremost a wife and mom.

Growing up, she shared her mom and grandmother's love of reading. But where they leaned toward murder mysteries, Jessica was obsessed with all things romance.

When she's not nose deep in her next manuscript, you can usually find her with her kindle in hand.

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