



WHEN FATE BREAKS

a novel

NIKKI WITT

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Playlist

Two Ghosts – Harry Styles
anything 4 u – LANY
Dandelions – Ruth B.
Change My Mind – One Direction
Don't Stop Believin' – Journey
hiccup – Valley
Favorite T-Shirt (Acoustic) – Jake Scott
Feelings – Lauv
Remember That Night? – Sara Kays
Good Things Fall Apart (Stripped) – ILLENIUM, Jon Bellion
8 Letters – Why Don't We
Neon Moon – Brooks & Dunn
A Little Bit Yours – JP Saxe
Secret Love Song, Pt. II – Little Mix
Wake Me Up When September Ends – Green Day
Strange – Celeste
Need You Now – Lady A
if you're meant to come back – Justin Jesso
see you later (ten years) – Jenna Raine, JVKE
Marry Me – Thomas Rhett
When We Were Young – Adele
Amnesia – 5 Seconds of Summer
justified – Kacey Musgraves
Infinity – One Direction
Us – James Bay
Dress – Taylor Swift
You Found Me – The Fray
Almost Is Never Enough – Ariana Grande, Nathan Sykes
Fate – H.E.R.
Rose – Briston Maroney
Back to December – Taylor Swift
Shut Up I Love U – Neptune
18 – One Direction
Till Forever Falls Apart – Ashe, FINNEAS
Evangeline – Tyson Motsenbocker

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About the Author

*To the overthinkers of the world.
Don't worry, it'll all work out in the end.*

...I think.

PROLOGUE

TWENTY-TWO YEARS AGO

Annie

S hrieking pierces the air.

“Where are we?”

“Honey, it’s okay! Just calm down, baby.”

“Mommy, why are we here? I thought we were going to Grammy’s.”

“Annie, I told you,” my mom says, dangling halfway into the backseat and tending to my fussy baby sister. “We’re stopping at Daddy’s friend’s house first. Remember?” She tries to give Steph a pacifier, but she only spits it out, crying even harder.

“No,” I say. “I want to go to Grammy’s and paint like you said.”

“We are, hon,” my dad chimes in from the driver’s seat. “We’ll just be here for an hour or so. You remember Uncle Kyle, don’t you, Annie-bell? Daddy’s best friend?”

“I thought Mommy was your best friend.”

My mom and dad both laugh. Steph continues to scream.

“You got that right,” Mom says with a wink.

“Well, *second* best friend,” Dad clarifies. “Uncle Kyle and I have known each other since we were your age. You met him and his family once a few years ago, but you may have been too young to remember.”

“Annie, hon, can you grab the applesauce from the baby bag? Steph may be hungry,” Mom says, flustered.

I reach into the bag, fishing around until I find the bright green squeeze pouch of applesauce. “Here you go, Stephy,” I say, uncapping the pouch and squeezing some into her wailing mouth. She immediately spits all of the applesauce back up, all over herself and onto my hands.

“Blech!” I yell. “Gross!”

Steph’s cries gradually turn into giggles at my outburst right as we pull into the driveway of a large house made of wood and stone, huge windows and a wrap-around porch and balcony decorating its front. There’s at least twenty cars parked in the driveway and all along the street in front of the house.

“Why are there so many people here?” I ask.

“It’s Uncle Kyle’s birthday,” Dad says.

“So this is an adult party?” I ask, groaning.

Dad chuckles as both he and Mom step out of the car, Mom opening the

back door to grab Steph out of her car seat. "It's just an hour, Annie," he says.

"And then Grammy's?"

"And then Grammy's," he confirms. "Hop out, let's go."

We make our way up the porch to the front door, Steph bouncing on Mom's hip. I can hear music coming from inside the house as Dad knocks on the door. After a few seconds, a pretty dark-haired lady about Mom's age answers.

"Hi, Emily," my dad says, smiling.

"Brett! Welcome home. Lake Placid has missed you," the dark-haired lady says, hugging my dad and then my mom. "Hi, Heidi, you look beautiful! And so does this little cutie," she says, tickling Steph's tummy.

Her eyes shift down to me and she squats down to my level. "Hello there, Miss Annie," she says. "God, you've gotten so big! Do you remember me? I'm Auntie Emily."

She holds out her manicured hand to me. "Um, my hands are sticky," I say, showing her my palms still caked with applesauce.

"Oh, baby, I'm sorry! I forgot," my mom says. "Here, let me grab you a wipe." She starts to swing the diaper bag off of her shoulder and dig into it with one hand.

"Oh, no, that's okay!" Auntie Emily says. "You can just go on in and wash your hands, Annie." She takes a step back from the doorway and points to the left. "You can use my and Uncle Kyle's bathroom. Just down the hall and through the bedroom."

"Thanks, Emily," my mom says.

"No problem at all. You guys come in! Kyle's out back, Brett. I think they're about to announce the lottery numbers."

"Oh, Lord. He's still doing that?" Dad asks, shaking his head.

"Every week," Auntie Emily smiles.

"Go ahead, Annie," Dad says. "Come meet us in the backyard when you're done."

"Okay," I mumble, heading in the direction Auntie Emily pointed.

I walk to the end of the hallway, easily finding the open door to the bedroom and slipping right inside. My eyes are immediately drawn to the large windows showing the view of the front yard. I walk over to them and peer out, spotting our rental minivan parked in the street before turning back to walk into the bathroom.

When I reach the door, I push it open with my elbow, not wanting to get the handle sticky. I start to step inside and then freeze.

There's already someone in here.

“Oh, sorry!” I squeak. I start to back out but then stop, turning back to the little boy sitting on the floor. He's holding a small black plastic container that appears to be filled with dirt, tiny green sprigs poking out of the top of it. He has his tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth in concentration, slowly pouring water from a paper mouthwash cup in the container. He hasn't even glanced my way or acknowledged that I'm here.

“Um...hi?” I say.

“Hi,” he says flatly, without looking up.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

He sets the empty cup down and rotates the container in his hand, inspecting it. “Watering my grass plant,” he says.

“Your grass plant?” I repeat, my eyebrows pinching.

“Yep.”

“You know there's, like, grass outside, right?” I question, confused. “Like, already grown?”

The boy finally raises his head to look at me, his huge blue-green eyes catching mine. “What are *you* doing?” he asks.

“I came in here to wash my hands,” I say, holding up my applesauce covered fingers as evidence.

“You know there's, like, water outside, right? In the lake?” he replies.

My mouth falls open. “I—”

“How old are you?” he cuts me off.

“Uh,” I stammer, caught off guard by his question. “Six?”

“Hmm...” he hums, eyes back on his plant.

“Well, how old are *you*?” I ask.

“Five. But I turn six next month.”

“Well, I turn seven the month after that,” I shoot back.

“When is your birthday?”

“August 1st.”

“Oh,” he says, his brows pulling together.

“What?” I question.

“My birthday is July 31st,” he says, pursing his lips. “So we'll both be six that day. That means, every year, we'd only be the same age for one day?”

“I guess,” I say, shifting on my feet. *Who is this kid?* “Can I wash my

hands now?”

“What’s your favorite number?” he asks, ignoring my question and sprinkling a packet of some sort of powder onto his grass plant.

“Thirteen,” I reply instantly. It really is my favorite number, but I also *really* just want to use the sink.

His eyes shoot back to my face. “But thirteen is the unluckiest number.”

“I don’t care. I like it.”

He looks at me for a few moments then turns back to his plant, his light brown curls falling in his eyes. “You’re weird.”

I scoff. “I am not—”

“Hey,” he says, cutting me off again.

“What?” I question, getting frustrated.

“What did one flower say to the other?”

“I have no idea.”

“*What’s up, bud?*”

I stare at him in disbelief.

After a few seconds he looks up from his plant, smirking, and we both burst out laughing.

“*You’re weird,*” I say.

“Yeah,” he says, gathering up his plant. “Tell me something I don’t know.” And then he walks past me and out of the bathroom without another word.

PRESENT DAY

“So when do I get to see it?”

“Steph, you're going to have to give me a little time. We literally just got the keys today,” I say, fitting the cell phone between my shoulder and ear as I wrap a towel around myself. “We don't even have furniture yet.” I wipe the steam from the bathroom mirror, my brown eyes coming into view. “Well, any from this century, that is. Maybe not even from the one before.”

“Ugh, come on, Annie! I already have my pearls and petticoat packed and ready to go!” Steph teases.

I roll my eyes, a smile pulling at my lips. “Patience is a virtue, dear sister.”

“Well you're gonna have to cut me some slack. It's not everyday your sister is gifted a mansion—”

“It is not a *mansion*,” I correct her. “And Remy's grandmother left it to *him*.”

“Okay, *one*, it's totally a mansion,” Steph shoots back, “and, *two*, your *fiancé* was gifted the mansion. So, therefore, it's your mansion. By law. You totally have a mansion. What twenty-eight year old has a mansion? You're living in a movie, Annie, I swear—”

“Okay, *one*,” I cut her off, “nothing is *by law* for another two months. And, *two*, stop saying mansion.”

“I just wanna see the mansion,” Steph says instantly, making me laugh. “C'mon let me live out my Southern housewife fantasy! Just for a weekend.”

Pulling my brush out of the drawer, I run it through my long knotted light brown hair. “Steph, you literally just got out of Alabama. Why don't you give yourself some time to revel in that? Get settled in at campus. Join a club or

something.”

I hear Steph huff out a pouty breath on the other end of the line as a heavy door closes. She must have just gotten back to her dorm. Though it’s small and dated and not nearly as cozy as her room back in our home town of Ramer, Alabama, it’s entirely paid for.

Steph has just started her first semester of grad school at Texas University. Although she didn’t start playing volleyball until high school, Steph was a complete natural at it, making the Varsity team her freshman year and becoming its instant star. We may be from a small town, but she quickly gained attention from the entire state, earning her a full-ride scholarship to play at Auburn University. Before she had even finished her senior year, Texas U had offered her an assistant coaching position for their volleyball team; they wanted her so badly that they even offered her free admission into their Masters in Kinesiology program and to pay for her on-campus housing.

Though I definitely understand her curiosity about the new house, she really shouldn’t rush back here so soon. I know I wouldn’t.

“The *mansion* will be here,” I tell her. “It’s been here for over 150 years. I promise it’s not going anywhere anytime soon. Besides, you’ll be here in a month anyways, won’t you?”

“Ugh, yes. *Fine*,” she grumbles. “I’ll give you one month. The tea better be on the table when I arrive.”

“Deal,” I say, pushing through the door leading into the master bedroom.

“Well, ancient furniture aside, how do you like it so far?” Steph asks.

“It’s beautiful,” I respond, bending down to open the cardboard box I had packed my pajamas in, but pausing when I find it empty. I forgot I put them in the wash earlier today. “It’s definitely old, but there’s a charm to it. It has a wrap around porch and shutters and pillars—”

“Not the *pillars*! My, *oh my*, Lady O’Hara!” Steph jokes in an exaggerated Southern accent. “I hope they don’t block the view from any of your fifteen bedrooms!”

“Oh, would you stop?” I chuckle, leaving the room and turning down the hall to search for the laundry room. I swear it’s going to take me a year to have this place mapped out in my brain.

“Well, what else?” Steph asks. “Have you come across any scandalous family secrets? Hidden treasures?”

“Unfortunately, no, nothing scandalous,” I say, spotting the laundry room

as I turn the corner. “But there is this...I don’t even know what to call it. It’s a sort of greenhouse structure coming off the back of the house. It’s massive and so detailed. It’s nearly falling apart at this point and it doesn’t look like it’s housed a plant in decades, but I’m sure it was incredible back in the day.”

I flip the laundry room light switch on and head for the dryer. Opening it, I find it empty and let out a huff. Pulling the cell phone away from my ear, I yell, “*Babe?*”

“Huh?” I hear from a distance.

“You never transferred the laundry earlier?” I call back.

“Oh, no. Sorry, babe! Forgot! Been a crazy day.”

That’s for sure.

I quickly move the load of clothes from the washer to the dryer and bring the phone back to my ear. “Sorry about that, Steph.”

“You’re good,” she says, yawning. “Well, what are you gonna do about the greenhouse? Gonna pull out that green thumb of yours?”

“*What green thumb?*” I question, starting the dryer and heading back to the bedroom. “Even if I wanted to attempt to use it, the place needs a lot of work. Nearly every pane of glass is either broken or filthy and all the wood is rotting out. I wouldn’t even know where to start with all the planters. Remy thinks we should just tear it down. He thinks it’d be more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Sheesh, yeah,” Steph says. “That’s probably for the best. I’m sure it’s an eyesore by the way you’re describing it. Can’t have that harshing all your backyard barbecues.”

When I reenter the bedroom, I start opening cardboard boxes at random, looking for something to wear to bed, my packing procrastination clearly having failed me as nothing is remotely organized.

“Ugh, yeah I know. It’s just such a shame. I’m sure it would be beautiful if it could be restored.” After digging into a fourth box, my hand finally touches a piece of fabric at the bottom. When I feel that it’s a t-shirt of some sort, I begin to fish it out. “I just wish I had the time and knowledge to fix it up.”

My breath catches in my throat. Faded red numbers come into view. I pull the worn blue t-shirt all the way out from the box, spreading it out flat. The number 13 stares back at me. I lift my eyes slowly, seeing the last name *Di Fazio* spelled out above the number in capital letters.

“Yeah, I get that,” Steph says, pulling me from my trance. “If only you

knew someone.” Realization suddenly hits me, my mouth falling open. “A green thumb you could borrow—”

“Steph, I’m sorry, but can I call you back?” I blurt out.

“No.”

“No?” I repeat.

Steph chuckles. “I’m wiped. Call me tomorrow. Or whenever you can. I know things are busy for you right now.”

I blow out a breath. “Will do.”

“Love you, sis,” Steph says.

“Love you, too. Bye.”

I hear the line go dead against my ear as I slowly stand up, clutching the shirt to my chest.

I wonder...

I throw on a wrinkled crewneck and a pair of athletic shorts I find at the top of another box and slip down the hallway and out the side door leading outside. The warm summer breeze rustles my wet hair, causing goosebumps to prickle on my skin. I cross my arms over my chest as I round the house, slowly approaching the greenhouse. If it was possible, it somehow looks even more hopeless and dilapidated in the nighttime.

I push open the rickety wooden door missing both panels of glass and step inside. Long dead strands of ivy hang pathetically from the ceiling and down the walls. Cracked and crumbling planters sit in lines on the floor and on the tops of rusting metal wire tables. Dirt and mud lay caked into every corner and crevice of the cobblestone flooring.

I imagine Remy’s grandmother spending her mornings out here, tending to her plants and watching the sun rise. A lump forms in my throat. We can’t tear it down. The bones are here, if barely. It just needs a lot of love and attention from someone that knows what they’re doing.

If only you knew someone.

I blow out a breath and lift up my cell phone, scrolling through my contacts. This is so stupid. It’s been years. And I shouldn’t. Not after everything. It doesn’t matter anyways. I’m sure all of my numbers wouldn’t have made it between the transfers of the three different cell phones I’ve had since then—

Blake Di Fazio

I stop scrolling, my thumb hovering over his name.

Shaking my head, I start to lock the phone screen and then look up,

finding myself at the far end of the greenhouse, not realizing I had been pacing. The moonlight streams through the few remaining panels of glass, glinting off the stone floor and illuminating the sad scene. Water from this afternoon's rain slowly dribbles down from the pieces of caved in roof and into the parched plant pots.

It really could be beautiful.

I take a deep breath, ignoring the pinch in my chest, and click the call button.

The phone rings several times, my heart rate rising with each ring. Just as I'm about to change my mind and end the call, I hear a rustling sound from the line.

"Hello?" a husky voice comes through.

I stop pacing in my tracks. "Um, hi," I stutter. "Is...is this Blake?"

There's more rustling and the sound of creaking floorboards. "Yes?" the voice confirms hesitantly.

"Oh," I say, realizing a part of me was hoping it was the wrong number. "Hi. It's... uh..." I clear my throat. "It's Annie."

"Annie?" he repeats, confusion in his tone.

"Yeah, um... Annie Jacks?" I say, my throat tight.

There's a pause. Several seconds of silence pass. I should just hang up. "Sorry, nevermind—"

"Wait," he commands.

I freeze, the phone several inches from my ear.

"...Evangeline?"

I swallow against the lump in my throat, the backs of my eyes suddenly burning. "Hi, Blake."

"No freaking way," he mutters in disbelief.

"Way," I whisper, a smile pulling at my lips.

"Wow..." he breathes. A few seconds go by before speaks again. "It's just been so long..." he continues. "God, how long has it been?"

"I'm not totally sure," I say, chewing at my bottom lip. "Six years, I think?"

"Wow. Yeah, that...sounds about right..." Blake says, trailing off.

The awkward tension grows with the silence. I clear my throat, attempting to ease it. "So, the reason I called," I say. "...Is there any chance... you still work for that landscape construction company?"

"Oh," Blake says, clearly caught off guard by my random question. "Um,

yes. Yeah, I still work with them. Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s kind of a long story, but I just moved into a new house– Well, not *new*. It’s actually, like, really really old, but anyways–” I babble, running my hand through my hair. “It has this old abandoned greenhouse attached to the back of it. It’s in pretty rough shape, but I think it has a lot of potential. I’d hate to just tear it down...but I literally have no idea where to begin. Do you think...” I pick at the light blue nail polish on my thumbnail, my stomach feeling like it’s in knots. “Do you think that’s something you–your company...could maybe take on?”

I hold my breath, waiting for his response.

“Oh, wow, Evangeline...” he says after a moment.

My cheeks begin to heat the longer his silence stretches. He surely thinks I’m insane. That I’m a total weirdo for calling him up out of nowhere all these years later about a freaking greenhouse. *In the middle of the night no less–*

“I’d love to.”

What?

“What?” I say, audibly this time. “Oh– I mean–” I slap my palm to my forehead.

Words, Annie.

“Really?”

Blake lets out a light chuckle. “Yeah. Yeah, I would,” he says.

“Wow, great. That’s great.” I can hear Blake shifting around on the other end of the line and take the opportunity to let out the breath I’d been holding.

“So,” his voice sounds again, making my spine steel. “Does this mean you finally made it to New York then?”

My mouth dries slightly. I turn, wrapping a hand around one of the glassless wooden panes, looking out of the greenhouse into the backyard. “Um, not quite.”

“Oh,” he says, confusion in his tone. “Well, where’d you end up? Somewhere close by? Boston? Philly?”

“Just a little further South...” I sigh. “I’m actually still in Alabama.”

“Oh,” Blake says again, his voice nearly inaudible this time. Several silent seconds pass, my cheeks warming as each of them tick by. “...Ramer?” he asks.

“Yep.” I’ve completely cleared one thumbnail of nail polish and have now switched to the other hand.

“Well,” he pauses, “I just assumed– I mean, that’s a little further than I anticipated. I typically just work in upstate New York–”

“I’ll fly you out.” I blurt it out before I even realize.

“*What?* Evangeline, seriously?” he questions.

“Yeah. It’s not a problem.”

What are you doing?

“I can’t let you do that,” Blake replies. “I’m sure there’s tons of contractors in Alabama that could get the job done.”

“Yeah, probably, but...” I trail off, my mind feeling like it’s racing a million miles an hour.

Just hang up, Annie. This is crazy.

“This greenhouse,” I say, ignoring my inner thoughts. “It’s really special to me... I want it in the hands of someone I can trust. If there’s anyone that can somewhat return it to its former glory, I know it’s you.” When he doesn’t respond right away, I add, “I really don’t mind flying you out.” I glance up at the huge house attached to this withering structure I’m currently standing in. “I even have a room you can stay in while you’re working on it.”

Or fifteen.

Another long stretch of silence passes. “I mean... Are you sure?” Blake finally asks.

“Positive,” I say, too quickly. Clearing my throat, I lighten my tone. “Are you in or are you out, Di Fazio?”

I can hear Blake let out a sharp breath through the phone. “Alright, Jacks,” he shoots back. “I’m in.”

My smile widens. “Cool,” I say, not very cool at all.

“Cool,” he mimics. I can picture him shaking his head, his lips pulled sideways into that crooked smile of his. “I just can’t believe it. I never thought I’d see the day.”

“What do you mean?” I question.

“You. Your own house. *With a greenhouse.* So domestic of you.” He whistles, chuckling. “When did you buy it? You said you just moved in?”

“Uh...um, yeah...” The lump has made a sudden reappearance in my throat. I reach out and snag a strand of ivy, twirling it anxiously between my fingers. “The house is actually in the family–”

“What?” Blake cuts me off.

“And, yes,” I go on, “we just moved in. Today actually.”

“...We?” he asks hesitantly.

“Yeah,” I say, letting the ivy fall from my fingers. “Me and my fiancé. Remy.” I swallow. “His grandmother left it to him.”

Great Grandma Mary Lou passed away nearly ten years ago now, but she’d left a clause in her will leaving this house to her oldest grandchild once they got married. Though we weren’t technically getting married for another two months, the lease on our apartment ended this month and Remy’s father insisted we go ahead and move in early. Stepping foot into the house for the first time today, I finally understood the marriage requirement. This is definitely a house for an adult. And a family.

Is that what we are now?

“Oh,” Blake’s voice breaks through my thoughts. “Well, wow, Evangeline. Congratulations.”

I’m unable to read his tone, but also refuse to let myself try. “Thanks,” I whisper.

The line goes quiet.

“So,” I say, “do you know how long it’ll take?”

“What?” he asks.

“...The greenhouse?”

“Oh,” he blurts, making me laugh. “Uh, depends. I won’t know for sure until I get there and see how big the structure is and how extensive the damage is. I assume you’ll want new plants added?”

“Definitely.”

“Then probably a week. Maybe two,” Blake says.

“Will your company let you come out here for that long?”

“Yeah, it won’t be an issue.”

“Well, okay...” I say, my cheeks warm.

“I’m actually just about to finish up a project here near Lake Placid in the next few days. Would it be alright if I came next week?”

My lips part.

Next week?

“That would be perfect,” I stammer. “If you just text me the details, I can book your flight—”

“That’s okay,” Blake says, cutting me off.

My eyebrows pinch together. “What? Why? Will your company cover it?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry about it. I’ll send you my itinerary once I get it booked.”

“Alright,” I say, not sure what else there is to say. “...Talk to you soon?”

“Yeah, see you soon.”

See you soon.

“Thank you, Blake. This really...means a lot to me.”

“Of course. I’m happy to help out an old friend.”

An old friend.

“Goodnight, Evangeline.”

“Goodnight, Blake.”

NINETEEN YEARS AGO

Bright light hits my eyes at the same time the brisk winter New York City air bites my nose and cheeks.

“Steph, you hold on to Annie’s hand, you understand?” my mom says as we step out of the Subway tunnel and make our way to the crosswalk’s edge.

“I *aaam!*” Steph calls back, squeezing my half-frozen fingers even tighter in her tiny hand. “You told me ten times already, Mommy!”

Steph may only be four, but she already has the sass of a teenager. I hide my chuckle as we make our way across 81st Street, still heavily decorated with Christmas decorations and bustling with thousands of tourists.

“How on Earth are we going to find them?” Mom asks Dad.

“Kyle said they’d be on the Great Lawn as close to our stop as they could get,” Dad replies. “And that we wouldn’t be able to miss them, whatever that means.”

We reach Central Park, making our way down the path towards the Great Lawn. It’s just before noon on New Year’s Eve.

My family had planned to have a quiet winter break at home in Ramer this year, but— between my mom’s long desire to get out of town and Kyle Di Fazio’s spontaneity— all it took was one phone call the week before Christmas between my dad and his best friend for us to find ourselves booking a last minute quick trip to New York City for the New Year’s holiday.

The Di Fazios were making the five hour drive from Lake Placid to spend the evening in Times Square and to grab a quick breakfast with us the next morning before catching our flight back to Alabama. My parents own the only hardware store in our town back home, meaning we can’t ever leave it

closed for too long. For this reason, all of our family trips are always rushed and frantic; but they are definitely memorable.

We barely step foot on the grass before three blurs of neon pink catch our eyes.

“Oh, Lord,” my dad says, shaking his head, breaking out in laughter.

Kyle Di Fazio turns, making eye contact with us, holding his arms out and pointing towards his beanie, a *look, it worked!* grin lighting up his face.

He and Emily make their way towards us and I lean to the side, peering around them to see the third pink beanie staying behind. Blake is totally oblivious, lying on his stomach, his nose buried in a book, an open bottle of Dr. Pepper on the ground next to him. He’s gripping a pencil in his left hand, writing something inside of the book, his tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth in concentration the same way it did three years ago in the bathroom.

“Hey, brother!” Kyle says, his blue-green eyes that are nearly identical to Blake’s shining. He gives Dad one of those handshakes that turns into a hug that men do before greeting Mom, giving her a peck on the cheek. “I knew you’d see us!”

“Yeah, so will every apartment owner above the fifth story in the Upper West and East Sides,” Dad jokes. “Maybe avoid the sidewalks. Wouldn’t want to cause an accident.”

“Oh, shut it,” Kyle shoots back. Him and Dad quickly spur off into their own conversation as Emily takes a step towards us, rolling her eyes dramatically. “All his idea, Heidi, I swear,” she says smiling, leaning in to give us all hugs. “How was the flight?”

“As good as a 6 a.m. flight with two little kids can be,” Mom laughs.

“Heeeey!” Steph squeaks. “We’re not little!”

“Sorry,” Mom corrects, “two *very big* four and nine year old adults,” she says, winking at me and Emily. “But, we made it! Thank you so much for making the drive to meet us.”

“Oh, of course!” Emily says. “Kyle and I haven’t made it out to the city in years. And I knew Blake would be excited to have a friend his age to hang out with.”

I glance back at Blake. He’s taking a drink of his soda, but otherwise, his position hasn’t changed nor has he looked in this direction.

Yeah, he seems so excited.

“Oh, honey, why don’t you go say hi to him,” my mom says, nudging me

forwards. I look up at her and she makes a flicking motion with her head, telling me it's not an option.

"Okay," I say, dropping Steph's hand and walking over to where Blake lays.

When my shadow casts across him, he glances up at me. His eyes are exactly the same, but the rest of his face has finally caught up, making them appear just over average size now. Though most of it is covered by his beanie, I can tell his hair has gotten a few shades darker over the years, the curls sticking out in all directions. His olive-tone skin is still tanner than mine will ever be, despite it being the middle of winter.

"Hi," I say, plopping down next to him, sitting cross-legged.

"Hey," he responds, continuing to write. I see now that the book in his hand is a worn out copy of *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* and that he's not actually writing in the book, but on a piece of folded notebook paper shoved inside of it.

I lean back on my hands, looking around the park and breathing in the crisp air. After a few moments, I glance back towards Blake. "You must feel really at home here," I say.

His pencil pauses and he looks up at me, confusion twisting his features. "Why?"

"You know," I say, my fingers running across the ground and a smirk pulling at my lips. "All the grass."

The confusion melts into stifled laughter and he rolls his eyes. "Shut up," he says, slamming the book shut as he pushes up to his knees and shifts to sitting on his bottom.

"I'm sorry, I had to," I tease. My eyes drift down to where a few inches of the notebook paper are sticking out of the top of the book, its entire edge covered in doodles of plants and leaves. "You really do love plants, don't you?" I ask, nodding towards the paper.

He shrugs, looking away.

"Why?" I push.

Blake's head snaps back in my direction, his eyes serious. "Well, they don't make fun of me, for one."

My lips part, my throat feeling tight. "I'm sorry," I blurt out. "I wasn't trying to—"

His intense expression falls suddenly and he breaks into laughter. "I'm just messing with you," he says. I feel the breath reenter my lungs, shoving at

his shoulder.

“Sorry,” he chuckles. “*I had to.*”

“Uh huh.”

Blake’s laughter fades out and there’s a few moments of quiet before he speaks again. “I don’t know why I like plants,” he says. “I just think they’re cool. I like watching them grow. It gives me something to look forward to, I guess. Seeing how they change.”

Huh. “That...that actually makes a lot of sense,” I say.

My mouth feeling dry, I shrug my backpack off my back and set it down on the ground in front of me, unzipping the largest pocket and digging around until I find my bag of Jolly Ranchers I got at the airport, pulling them out. “Want one?” I ask Blake, holding the bag out to him.

He shakes his head in response, but his eyes are still focused on where I just pulled the candy from. “Annie?” he says, catching me off guard.

“Yeah?”

“Why does your backpack say this?” he says, reaching out and grabbing the airport baggage tag hanging from the right strap. He squints his eyes at the white paper tag. “Eh– Ehvan-gel-”

“*Ee-van-juh-leen,*” I correct his pronunciation.

“Evangeline,” he repeats, eyes flicking down to the tag and then back to me. “Evangeline Jacks.”

I nod.

“Is that your real name?”

“Yeah,” I respond, looking towards the ground for a distraction. The first thing that grabs my attention is the notebook paper in his book. I reach for it, swiping it out from between the pages.

“Hey, stop!” Blake yells, trying to snatch it back out of my hands.

“Why?” I question, leaning away and unfolding the paper. “They’re just doodles, aren’t they?” My eyes fall down to the paper and I realize that the drawings are only bordering the paper, seeing a small jumble of words scrawled across the center of the page. It seems to be some sort of list.

“*Try something new, Do something selfless, Prove someone wrong.*” I read the list out loud. “Blake, what are these?”

Blake, having given up on trying to get the paper back, sits back down with a huff, circling his arms around his bent knees. “New Year’s resolutions,” he grumbles.

“Huh,” I say, my brow furrowing.

He turns towards me. “What?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “They’re just kinda...”

“Kinda what?” Blake pushes.

“I don’t know,” I shake my head. “...Easy?”

Catching me off guard, Blake plucks the paper right out of my hands.

“Well, what’s the point in setting goals you could never achieve, Evangeline?”

My face falls. “You don’t need to call me that,” I say. “Nobody does.”

“Why?” Blake asks, his head tilting.

“Because... I don’t know. It’s so long. And... *old*.”

Blake snorts.

“I’m serious. Old enough to be my great-grandmother’s name. *Literally*. I don’t know. I’m just,” I shrug my shoulders, “Annie. I forget that’s even my real name.”

Blake’s lips press into a line. “Well then I think at least one person should call you that,” he says, his eyes meeting mine. “So you don’t forget.”

I open my mouth to fight back and then stop myself, closing it again. “Okay.”



TWELVE HOURS LATER, we find ourselves crammed into Times Square, bright lights, loud noises, and questionable smells hitting us from every angle.

It’s fifteen minutes to midnight and our legs are about ready to give out. Steph is holding Dad’s hand, dozing off while still standing, leaning against his knee. Emily has her pink beanie pulled halfway down her face, rubbing her crossed arms to warm herself as she chats to Mom. Blake is currently standing on Kyle’s shoulder, trying to get a better look at Aerosmith’s pre-recorded performance playing on the big screens.

As the last song comes to an end, our entire group turns to look at each other, bodies shivering and teeth chattering. “You thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’?” Dad asks Kyle.

“Oh, yeah. Let’s blow this popsicle stand,” Kyle responds. “How about some pizza, kids?”

Steph, suddenly resurrected, shouts, “*Yeah, pizza!*”

We make our way out of the sea of people and stop at the closest pizza shop we can find: some old, small, and slightly sketchy looking place called Angelo’s.

When we step inside, the space is bigger than it appeared from the street and, though the interior is definitely old and dated, several TV screens line the walls, playing the Times Square event we just left. “*Score!*” Kyle whisper-shouts, high-fiving Dad.

“Annie, hon, you and Blake grab us those two tables, will you?” Mom says, motioning to the open tables closest to the register. “You want the usual?”

I nod at her, smiling, and make my way over to where Blake is already sitting down.

Everyone else joins us in no time, the parents crowded at the first table and me, Blake, and a once again sleeping Steph, with half a piece of pizza still hanging from her mouth, sat at the other table.

Mom passes my plate of pizza down to me and, as I go to take a bite, I see Blake staring at me out of the corner of my eye.

“What?” I ask him.

His face looks like he’s in pain. “Are you serious?”

I raise my eyebrows, looking around. “What are you talking about?”

“Your pizza,” he says, flicking his eyes towards it. “Pineapple? *Really?*”

“What’s wrong with it?” I question. “It’s my favorite.”

Blake covers his mouth. “That’s so wrong.”

“Oh, come on,” I say, rolling my eyes. “Have you ever even tried it?”

“Nope. And I don’t need to. It’s not right.”

An idea clicks into my head. “Well,” I say, tearing my slice down the middle, “here you go.” I drop the half-slice onto his paper plate.

Blake glances from the pizza back to me. “I don’t want it—”

“C’mon, Blake,” I say, a smile forming. “*Try something new.*”

His eyes widen. “No. Not that. It’s too gross.”

“So, are you saying you don’t want it? That eating that slice of pineapple pizza wouldn’t bring you any happiness?”

“Exactly,” Blake says, pushing it away.

I stick my hand out, stopping the plate in its path.

“Well, then,” I say, sliding it back to him, “eating it would be doing something *selfless*, wouldn’t it?”

Blake's jaw drops. "I—"

"Nevermind," I interrupt him, looking away.

"What? Why?" Blake asks, confused.

"You wouldn't do it anyway."

"I don't want it."

"Actually, you *couldn't* do it."

"Why?" Blake asks, brows pinched.

"Because you're a scaredy cat."

"I am not!" Blake retorts.

"Well, Blake," I say, pushing the plate even closer to him and then resting my chin in both of my hands. "*Prove me wrong.*"

Blake freezes, eyes searching my face that is currently displaying the smuggest of smiles.

"You're evil," he says.

"All three of your resolutions, knocked out at once," I say. "Just gotta eat the pizza."

Things outside on the streets suddenly become more chaotic. Loud voices boom in the distance "9!...8!...7!..."

I glance up at the TV on the wall showing the ball getting ready to drop. When I look back at Blake, he is holding the slice of pineapple pizza in his hand. He nods towards my plate, prompting me to pick up my half.

"Well, here goes nothing," he says, holding his slice out in the way you would a drinking glass you are about to toast.

"2!...1!"

The sky outside lights up, cheers boom through the streets, and all of the TVs in Angelo's flash with colors.

I tap the crust of my pizza to Blake's. "Cheers," I say.

"Happy New Year, Evangeline."

PRESENT DAY

“**Y**es, please. Two large pepperonis and one medium with extra pineapple. Yep, that’ll do— *Hey!*” I break off, nearly dropping my phone, shivers running down my spine as lips brush against my neck. Long arms wrap around my waist, pulling me backwards into a hard chest. I catch a blur of dirty blonde hair in my peripheral vision as teeth graze my earlobe, making me giggle.

“*Would you stop?*” I hiss. Remy only chuckles in response, continuing on with his distraction. “Oh, no! Sorry, not you!” I say, shoving him off when the very confused pizza delivery man’s voice breaks through the line. “Yes, that’s all. An hour? Perfect. Thanks so much.”

I hang up the phone, pushing lightly at Remy’s shoulder. “You’re the worst.”

“I’m the *best*,” he declares, pulling me back in by my wrist, my hands landing on his shoulders as I crash into him and he plants a kiss on my forehead. “But I do have some bad news.”

My gaze falls to my hands, just having realized he’s wearing a suit jacket. That always means the same thing. Nerves immediately work their way into my stomach. “You have to work?”

Remy’s hands come up to cup my face, a frown pulling at his lips as he nods. “Chuck needs me to come with him. Gotta have a good cop for the whole *good cop, bad cop* sales pitch to work.”

“And you can’t go tomorrow? Or at least just later this evening?”

Remy shakes his head, brushing his lips once to mine before turning to grab a water bottle from the fridge. “I’m sorry, babe. I know it’s last minute, but we have to jump on this. Gotta take the opportunities when they arise.

You know how it is.”

“I know, but...we have to get Blake from the airport.” I run my hands over my crossed arms, suddenly feeling fidgety. “I was just about to come get you so we could head that way. It’ll take forty-five minutes, tops—”

“I’m really sorry, babe. Our meeting is in a half hour,” Remy says, grazing my arm as he brushes by me to grab his briefcase from the bench by the front door, stopping to adjust his tie in the hallway mirror.

“But...Blake...I— Don’t you want to meet him?” I stammer.

“I’ll meet him tonight. And from what you said he’ll be here for at least a week or two. That gives us plenty of time.” He looks away from the mirror to meet my gaze. “Are you okay, Apple Jacks?”

I lean awkwardly against the kitchen island, trying my best to look casual despite the fact that my heart is currently doing backflips in my chest. “Yeah, babe. I— I’m good. I just— I ordered you a pizza and it’s going to be cold by the time you get back.”

Remy chuckles, walking back to brush a kiss against my temple before heading out the door. “It’ll be fine, babe. I can reheat it.” He pauses in the doorway, looking back to me. “You said this guy was your friend, right?”

“Well...yes.”

“Then this should be even better. Take some time to catch up before you bring him back here to fix up that old rickety greenhouse you formed such attachment to overnight—”

“I always liked the greenhouse,” I interrupt him, my face heating.

“Whatever you say, babe. See you tonight. Love you,” Remy calls over his shoulder, shaking his head with a grin before closing the door behind him.

I force my own smile and wave, mumbling something incoherent. I spin around the second the door closes, fisting my hair in my hands.

“*Shit,*” I mutter, grabbing my car keys from the counter and following after Remy.



I TAP MY FOOT ANXIOUSLY, continuing to chew on my bottom lip even though I tasted traces of blood over five minutes ago.

I lean back against the warm metal of my truck, the rough rattle of the

diesel engine working its way through my entire body and calming me. I chose to leave the engine running while I waited because, well, it wasn't really a choice at all. It is nearly the middle of August in Montgomery, Alabama. With enough elements of stress already involved in my reunion with Blake after so many years taking place in a confined space, I elected to remove the possibility of heat stroke from the equation by leaving the air conditioning running.

I let my head fall back, my eyes scanning the bright blue sky, a pang of disappointment hitting me when I don't see a single cloud; I had planned to count them as a distraction. I let out a sigh, choosing to follow the paths of planes leaving and returning to the airport instead. I spend approximately thirty seconds watching a plane turn from a speck in the distance to a giant mass right above me before I suddenly feel the pull of a presence ahead of me.

I force my gaze downward and instantly feel my breath catch in my throat. My body suddenly feels off balance, my knees weak and head heavy as I spot Blake coming out of the sliding glass door of the airport, glancing around in search. I fumble for the door handle, partly to steady myself but also *possibly* to jump inside the truck and make a run for it. I don't get more than two seconds to think my escape plan through, however, before Blake's eyes land on me.

We both freeze momentarily, almost as if we're characters glitching in a video game, before I straighten my stance and Blake continues walking forward. My heart rate increases with every step he takes. I straighten the sleeves of my white blouse and run my hands through my hair three more times than necessary. Though my gaze is darting all over the place, I can feel Blake's eyes glued to me, the intensity of it burning straight into my face and to my already churning stomach.

I blow a quick breath out of my nose, blinking hard once before forcing myself to look at him. When my eyes shift and focus on his approaching figure, my lips involuntarily part.

How can someone look exactly the same but also so completely different at the same time?

Blake Di Fazio strides toward me, his stature even taller than I last remember and his skin as tan as ever. His brown curls flow long on top of his head but are cropped shorter on the sides, displaying the perfect combination of boyish and mature adult. He wears a backpack and rolls a large trunk of

sorts behind him, his muscles flexing from his forearm up to his chest, visible through his dark t-shirt—

His forearm.

My gaze flicks back down to Blake's left arm. The arm he's rolling the trunk with. A large tattoo he must have gotten in the last six years wraps all the way around his forearm, running from his wrist to nearly his elbow. I can't make it out right away but, as he comes closer, the image looks like a sort of nature scene containing trees. I glance to Blake's other arm, noticing some more ink I can't quite make out on his bicep, just poking out at the bottom of his shirt sleeve.

Blake seems to have noticed me surveying him because, when I finally look up to his face, a wide smirk is spread across it. The combination of *that* particular smile mixed with the twinkle currently present in his sea green eyes is nearly too much for me to take. My stomach dips, making me feel like I'm a freaking kid again.

I quickly shake the feeling off, praying my cheeks aren't as pink as they feel as Blake comes to a stop just a few feet in front of me, his boots scuffing the ground.

Blake rolls his trunk into an upright position at his side, leaning onto its handle with one hand while inserting his other hand into the pocket of his dark jeans. His head tilts to the side as if he's about to say something, but he doesn't. He simply looks at me, his eyes dragging from my face, down my body, and up again.

I cross my arms, uneasiness settling in at his silence and gesture. My lips roll into my mouth as I rack my brain for the best words to use. The best thing to say. I've been doing this since the moment we hung up the phone last week, but I'm still coming up blank.

How does someone possibly begin this conversation? Should there even *be* a conversation? Or could we just forget it all and start fresh? For a moment that thought sounds incredible, but then a wave of memories crashes into me like a semi-truck. *Good* memories. Memories I don't want to forget. Even if I've pushed them out of my mind as much as humanly possible for the last several years, I could never let them go. Not completely.

My pulse pounds in my ears as Blake's gaze intensifies. His head tilts in the opposite direction, his brow furrowing slightly and his expression unreadable. I know that if I don't speak now, there's a good chance we'll stay standing out here all night. Or worse: Blake could speak first. The absolute

unknown of that possibility scares me more than anything, forcing me to say the only thing I can think of.

“Hey.”

Blake’s brows raise a fraction, then his entire face melts into a trace of a smile. He nods, his tongue darting out to wet his lower lip. “Evangeline.”

My eyes burn at the name only Blake calls me. The name I haven’t heard in-person since the last time I saw him. *Since...*

I dig my nails into my palm, diverting my attention and keeping my eyes from doing anything as absurd as forming tears right now.

“Hey,” I say again, dumbly.

I step forward on reflex, starting to spread my arms, and then stopping, pulling back. I drop my hands to my sides and then raise them again awkwardly, not knowing what to do or how to act. I end up chickening out and slide one hand into my hair. When I look back up to Blake, his head dips and his eyes narrow.

“Um, I—”

Blake cuts me off, suddenly dropping his backpack from his shoulders and letting it hit the ground with a hard thud in the same moment his arms wrap around my waist, lifting me a few inches off the ground and engulfing me in a massive bear hug. My face presses against his chest and my arms, needing a moment to catch up from the shock, slowly wrap around his back. The toes of my shoes brush the ground as I remain suspended, Blake’s scent washing over me like a tidal wave. Citrus and cedar. Sunshine and rain. Nostalgia and reminiscence. I inhale deeply, catching something else.

Broken promises.

Regret.

Pain.

I push away, slightly more aggressively than intended, my feet planting flat on the ground and my face painting on a smile to stifle the tension. Blake takes my cue, taking a step back, a small smirk on his lips but something much deeper and more complicated in his eyes.

I reach up to brush my mussed hair away from my face. Blake’s gaze flicks instantly over to my left hand, his demeanor hardening when it lands on the large diamond dressing my ring finger.

He clears his throat, reaching down to pick up his backpack from the cement path. When it’s resecured on his back, he looks at me expectantly. When I raise a brow in confusion, he clarifies. “Should we...?” he asks,

nodding to the truck behind me.

“Oh!” I blurt. “Yeah, definitely. Here—”

I reach for Blake’s trunk but he cuts me off, grabbing it first. “I got it,” he says, dropping it easily into the bed of my very tall lifted truck.

“Okay then,” I say, following Blake’s lead and rounding the front of the vehicle to hop in the driver’s side.

Though the truck cab isn’t small by any means, Blake’s presence makes it feel entirely overcrowded. I glance over my shoulder to the backseat as I buckle my seat belt, wishing I could just crawl back there and hide and cursing Chuck for calling Remy into work and preventing me from doing so.

Okay, enough Annie, the voice inside my head mentally slaps me. *Just chill. You’ve got this.*

I shake my head, readjusting my mirrors even though it’s not necessary to buy myself an extra few seconds.

Just be casual.

“So, how was the—”

I jump as if I’ve been shocked when my arm comes into contact with Blake’s large, tan, tree covered one on the center console.

Wow. Real casual, Annie.

I clear my throat, trying to play the whole thing off as I deliberately set my elbow down as close to my edge of the console as I can without it falling off. Blake makes a snort-like sound and, when I turn to look at him, I just catch a flicker of amusement in his eyes before he looks away.

“How was the flight?” I press on, pulling away from the airport and pressing the gas harder than I probably should in hopes of making this short drive home even shorter.

“Very small,” Blake replies.

“Like, the plane?”

“Yeah. I didn’t even know they made them that small. I’m pretty sure my knees left permanent indentations in the seat in front of me.”

“Yeah, well, can’t say I’m surprised. I’m sure there’s not too many people coming to Alabama on a daily basis by choice.” Blake’s head shifts in my direction and my face instantly warms. I look out the window, forcing a laugh and quickly continuing before Blake decides to ask the question in his eyes out loud. “Did they have Dr. Pepper at least?”

My gaze turns on him when he doesn’t answer right away. Though his eyes are still searching me, his lips pull down at one corner. “They did not,”

he says.

“Blasphemous,” I deadpan.

“Truly. I think I might file a formal complaint.”

“A strongly worded letter might be helpful. I can help you draft one if needed.”

Blake’s laughter fills the truck and the tension in my shoulders automatically eases. “I’ll definitely get back to you on that,” he says.

My own chuckles fade into a sigh. *This isn’t so bad.* “So,” I smile, “how’s your mom?”

“Perfect, as always. You know how she is.”

Yeah, I do.

Nostalgia tugs at my chest as Emily Di Fazio’s dark curls and bright smile come into view in my mind. Kyle and her dancing in the kitchen to some 80’s rock ballad. Her ridiculously good chocolate chip cookies that Steph, Blake, and I would fight to the death over.

“What about yours?” Blake’s voice pulls me from my trance.

“What?”

“Your mom.”

“Oh,” I blurt. “She’s, uh, good. I think.”

I don’t even have to look at Blake to see his one raised brow.

“I haven’t talked to her in awhile,” I confess.

“You need to call your parents, Evangeline,” Blake shakes his head at me in a faux-patronizing kind of way.

“I know, I know,” I swallow. “I’ve been a little crazy lately.”

“Pretty sure you were always crazy.”

I punch Blake in the shoulder like it’s the most natural response in the world. “*Shit,*” I wince, shaking out my hand, my fingers having been crushed into themselves, sending a shooting pain up my arm. That had to have been a bone I hit on accident. There’s no way his shoulder muscle is that hard.

What even is a shoulder muscle?

Blake’s shuddering figure catches my attention out of the corner of my eye. When I look at him, I see he has his tongue pushed into the side of his cheek, his hand partially covering his face as he stifles a laugh. I punch his shoulder a second time despite the pain still pulsing through my fingers.

“Shut up,” I say, rolling my eyes but breaking into my own laughter as Blake’s composure crumbles all together.

We laugh so long that I’m pretty sure we’ve forgotten what we’re even

laughing about. A part of me feels like we may have both just been pent up ticking time bombs of emotion waiting for a release. My cheeks and gut both begin to ache as I somewhat aggressively lay on the brakes to make a left turn, having nearly missed it in the distraction of laughter and my own thoughts.

Happy with how the ice has broken thus far, I carry on. “How’s work?”

“Oh,” Blake replies, shifting in his seat. “It’s been good. Gotten lots of big projects recently. I was contracted to redo Lake Placid High School’s entire landscaping over the summer. Did some work on the mayor’s garden. But, most recently, some crazy lady flew me all the way across the country to renovate some old greenhouse.”

My lips pull up at the corners. “Did she now?”

“Yeah,” Blake mutters. “What do you make of that?”

I turn my head to see Blake staring at me thoughtfully. My body instantly responds, sitting up straighter in my seat and eyes shooting back to the road.

“It sounds like she really cares about seeing her greenhouse restored. And like she knew the best man for the job.”

“Yeah,” he says, his face and tone neutral. “Clearly.”

I roll my lips into my mouth, diverting back to the original subject. “Well, I’m glad everything’s going well. You must really love your company having been there for...what? Nearly a decade now?” I shake my head at the realization.

God, where has the time gone?

“Yeah, well, I love what I do. But, actually— *Holy shit, Evangeline.*” My breath catches at Blake’s sudden movement as he braces one arm on the back of my seat, dipping his head to get a better view out of the windshield. “This is *your house?*”

I can feel the redness blossoming across my cheeks as I put the truck in park. Blake is nearly leaned across my lap at this point, ogling at the house through my driver’s side window, the heat from his body radiating into my own.

“Yeah,” I swallow. “It’s our house.”

Blake’s brows, that had just been raised in wonder, fall suddenly. He tears his gaze from the house, turning to meet my eyes, our faces mere inches apart. I try to push my head further back into the headrest, but it doesn’t have any room to give. His gaze flicks down to my tightly pressed together lips, his throat bobbing once before his eyes meet mine again.

“Right,” he says. His eyes burn into my face for several more seconds, both of us completely still apart from my rapidly rising and falling chest. My heart pounds in my ears as I stare back at him. Just as I begin to think Blake has truly frozen in place, something flickers in his eyes and he breaks the trance, pulling away. He unbuckles his seat belt and pushes out of the truck in one fluid motion. I instantly slump into my seat, releasing a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. I let my eyes fall shut for one full second before I hear Blake’s voice.

“You coming, Jacks?”

“Coming,” I respond, definitely not at a volume audible to Blake, who is outside of the truck with his suitcase already in hand and heading for the front door.

I pull out my cell phone, checking for any messages from Remy letting me know he’s on his way back; there are none. I blow out a breath, shoving the phone back into my pocket and hopping out of the truck, ignoring the weakness in my knees when my feet hit the ground.

I stop a few feet away from the front porch when I notice Blake’s suitcase is really more of a tool trunk. “You got tools in there?” I ask, nodding towards the hard plastic case.

“Mostly.”

“Well, here,” I motion towards the side gate leading to the backyard. “Let’s go drop those off in back first. No sense in you dragging that into the house for you to bring it right back out tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Blake says, following after me through the tall wooden gate.

I hold my breath as we round the corner of the house, knowing the greenhouse is about to come into view. The moment it does, I hear the wheels of Blake’s trunk skid to a harsh stop.

“Holy shit,” he breaths.

I cover one eye with my hand as I slowly turn back to him. I don’t even make it all the way around, however, before Blake is storming past me and into the withered structure. My stomach drops as I see him frantically spinning around, obviously not knowing which source of wreckage or disarray to take in first, his hand fisting into his hair. I cross my arms and keep my eyes on the ground, deliberately ignoring the exposed skin of Blake’s torso as his arm remains raised in the air.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I say.

“And what’s that?” Blake asks breathlessly, his back to me.

“It’s too far gone. And a waste of time...*Your* time.”

Blake freezes, turning back to me, his lips parting.

“I know it’s awful, but—”

“Evangeline.”

“What?” I question, glancing up and stumbling a step backwards when I realize Blake is now standing directly in front of me, his arm braced against the open door frame of the greenhouse. My eyes trail to his forearm, finally able to examine his tattoo up close. I notice now that there are mountains in the background, poking up from the tops of the trees. I also realize that the trees are actually surrounding a body of water.

A lake.

“If I’ve learned anything in this life,” Blake says, bringing my attention back to his face, “it’s that you so rarely have any idea what I’m thinking.”

My mouth falls open, heat rushing to my face. Blake tilts his head, his brows pulling together. I take a step back at the same moment he pushes off of the greenhouse, taking a step forward. He opens his mouth like he’s going to say something else, but both of our heads snap in the direction of the house at the sound of the very loud antique door bell.

I turn back to find Blake’s eyes still glued to me, his mouth now shut. I swallow against the sudden dryness in my throat. “That’ll be dinner,” I mutter. “I ordered pizza. I hope that’s okay.”

Blake’s lips roll into his mouth. “Yeah, pizza’s great.”

“Great,” I say, walking clumsily backwards towards the back door of the house. “I– I’ll be right back.” Blake’s eyes follow me the entire way until I trip across the threshold, letting the door fall shut behind me.

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

“**Y**ou locked the store up, right?” Mom calls from ten paces behind Dad and me as we power walk through the dirt make-shift parking lot.

“Yes, babe! Always do! Now, come on, you’re lagging!” Dad shouts back over his shoulder.

Mom jogs a few steps to catch up with us just as we cross under the red and white hanging banner reading *Monty Classic* at the entrance of the baseball park.

“Oh, sorry! I just keep feeling like we’re forgetting something,” Mom says, digging through her tote bag for the fourth time since we left the truck.

“It’s Steph, Mom,” I say, laughing. Steph is away at her first ever summer sleep-away camp in Dadeville for the week and our entire family has been out of whack since we dropped her off two days ago.

“Oh my God, you’re right, Annie,” Mom says, slapping a palm to her forehead. “My brain just isn’t used to this much quiet. It doesn’t know how to function like this.”

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing the Di Fazios are in town,” Dad chuckles. “Your brain will be back to normal in no time.”

We just reach Field #2 when we see Kyle Di Fazio standing on the top row of the bleachers, Emily sat next to him, waving his arms above his head and motioning us over with a huge smile on his face.

Blake started playing baseball at a local league shortly after our vacation in New York City and, apparently, he was pretty good. He’s now playing on a traveling team whose most recent tournament just so happened to be in Montgomery, Alabama, a short half hour drive (*twenty minutes if you’re my dad*) from Ramer. Dad promised Kyle we’d make an appearance, so we

closed the hardware store for lunch this Sunday and ran over just in time to catch the end of Blake's last game.

We've met the Di Fazios one other time since the New Year's trip, but it was just for a quick bite at a diner on our way out of town after visiting Grammy for Easter two years ago. Both of our families were crammed together at a table really meant for four and we had less than one hour before we had to leave for the airport, so the kids let the adults do most of the talking. Blake and I had just managed a couple of jabs at one another and three and a half heated games of tic-tac-toe passed across the table on napkins before it was time to head out. So, without counting that *poor excuse for a visit*, as Kyle liked to call it, this will be the first time in four years that our families have gotten to see each other.

A whistle sounds and I turn my head towards the field. A blur of nine blue jerseys come running out of the dugout to my left. I immediately spot Blake, his brown curls bouncing under his cap as he jogs towards the outfield. My parents start making their way up the bleachers but I pause at the fence at the same moment Blake's eyes shoot up and to the side, locking on me.

The rest of his team blows past him to their positions on the field, but Blake skids to a stop, veering in my direction. He grabs at his cornflower blue *Jays* jersey, pulling it up and over his face, wiping away the sweat from his brow as he jogs my way; when he pulls it back down, there's a smirk on his lips.

"Hey," he says, when he reaches the fence.

"Hey," I say back. We've both definitely had a growth spurt in the last few years, Blake now standing about three inches taller than me. His turquoise eyes are still striking, even squinting against the offensively bright summer sun. He opens his mouth to say something but is cut off by a gruff voice to his left.

"*Di Fazio! Get out there!*" his coach shouts to him.

"Gotta go," he says, jerking his head towards the field.

"Don't pick all the grass out there," I mouth, turning back towards the bleachers.

"Shut up," he says, rolling his eyes but hiding a smile as he jogs away, taking his place in left outfield.

When I reach the top of the bleachers, Kyle stands up to greet me. "Who the heck is this, Brett, and what has she done with your baby girl?" he asks

sarcastically, looking from me to my dad.

I shake my head and giggle in response. “Hi, Uncle Kyle. Hi, Aunt Emily,” I say, leaning into Emily’s outstretched arms.

“I don’t think you can even call us Aunt and Uncle anymore,” Emily says. “You’re a full blown adult!”

“Calm down, I’m only thirteen!” I laugh.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Emily responds with a wink. “*She’s just beautiful, Heidi,*” I hear her turn and whisper to my mom as I take a seat next to Dad.

My foot brushes up against a crumpled up piece of paper; when I pick it up and unravel it, I see it’s a lottery ticket. I can feel Dad peering over my shoulder. “Aw, no luck today, Kyle?”

“Nope, not today. No worries though,” Kyle says, plucking the ticket from my hand. “Next week’s the week. I can feel it.”

“Didn’t you say that last week?” Dad asks him, an eyebrow raised.

Kyle shoots Dad a look that could kill.

Dad throws his head back laughing. “I’m just messing with you, man. Follow those dreams.” He tries to pat Kyle on the shoulder, but his hand is quickly slapped away.

“Nope,” Kyle says, “Go back to your store and screw something, Jacks.”

Dad and I shake our heads, laughing, as we turn our attention back to the game. In the time it took us to get settled in the bleachers, the Jays pitcher had been on fire, quickly striking out two batters.

I have only bare minimum knowledge of baseball, but, from a look at the scoreboard, I can tell the Jays are up by one with only one out left.

“Is this the final inning?” I ask Kyle.

“Yep,” he responds, suddenly jumping to his feet. “*Let’s finish this!*” Kyle shouts, causing both Dad and I to flinch in surprise.

“Yeah, let’s go, Blake!” My mom and Emily shout practically in unison, waving a set of blue and red pom-poms that appeared out of thin air.

I look back to the field, seeing a boy in an orange jersey at home plate to bat and another on second base.

The Jays pitcher throws two strikes and then the batter fouls one off. On the fourth pitch, the bat makes a loud cracking sound as the ball shoots into the outfield, still in but sharply to the left.

“*Oh, no,*” I hear Dad and Kyle say under their breath at the same time. I look from them back to the field just as Blake launches into the air after the ball.

He just barely catches it, falling to the ground, as the player that was on second approaches third. Kyle jumps up out of his seat again, yelling. “Go!”

As if in response, Blake darts to his feet, pulling back and launching the ball across the field with all his force. The opposing player falls to slide into home. I don’t remember standing, but I’m suddenly on my feet. A cloud of dust shoots into the air as the ball reaches the Jays catcher. Three seconds feels like three hours before we hear the umpire.

“Out!”

Half of the audience jumps out of their seats, bursting into cheers and applause. I see Blake smiling in the distance, his hands on his knees as he catches his breath. His teammates are running towards him, jumping up and down and slapping him on the back.

“Not bad,” I mutter, joining everyone else in clapping.

“Not bad at all,” Dad agrees.



“AISLE 9!” I say, poking my head up from behind the counter as I smooth down my green *Jacks Hardware* apron.

The man jumps at my sudden response. He had walked in mumbling into his cell phone that he needed polyethylene tubing but doubted that we’d have it in our little store.

“Well, thank you, Miss,” he says, still clutching his chest from the surprise. He gives me a nod and carries on just as the front door bell chimes.

I turn in that direction, seeing all three of the Di Fazios making their way inside, their foreheads glistening with sweat and Emily fanning herself, their Northerner blood clearly not used to this August Alabama heat.

“We made it!” Kyle says, wiping his brow.

“Welcome to Jacks,” I say dramatically, putting my hands on my hips.

My parents and I had to get back to the hardware store right after the game was over. Even though we assured them repeatedly that it’s not much to see, Kyle and Emily insisted on checking the place out before heading home and said they’d come as soon as Blake’s coach let him go.

Blake steps in the store last, baseball uniform and cap still on, his nose and cheeks pink from the sun. When he comes closer, I see he has a blue

ribbon around his neck holding a gold medal.

“Isn’t this just so cute!” Emily cheers, twirling around.

“Now, aren’t you a little young to be working?” Kyle questions, tilting his head at me.

I shrug. “It’s a small town.”

“And a family affair!” I hear my dad call as he approaches from the back of the store. “We all gotta pitch in. Right, Annie-bell?”

“Yep,” I nod.

“That’s my girl,” Dad says, ruffling my hair before turning to the Di Fazios. “Hey, Blake! Great game, dude. You were awesome!” He reaches out for a fist bump that Blake returns with a sideways smile. “Y’all want the tour?” Dad asks, waving his hand around the store.

“Definitely!” Kyle says. “Come on, Blake.” After Blake hesitates, exchanging glances with me, Kyle adds, “Or do you want to stay and keep Annie company?”

“Um…” Blake hums, gripping the front straps of the huge backpack he’s wearing. “I’ll stay.”

“Alright then, see ya in a few,” Kyle says, giving Blake a pat on the shoulder and following after Dad with Emily.

There’s a few seconds of awkward silence as our parents’ voices trail away. When we can’t hear them anymore, I clear my throat. “You were, you know?” I say. Blake raises an eyebrow. “Kinda awesome.” I clarify, glancing away.

Blake steels his spine. “Well, you don’t have to sound so surprised.”

“I just didn’t expect it, I guess,” I say. “Figured you didn’t have much time to practice with all your gardening activities.”

“Are you ever gonna give it up with the plant jokes?”

“Probably not.”

We stare each other down for a few seconds then both break, smiling.

“Do you mind if I set this down somewhere?” Blake asks, referring to his backpack.

“Sure, you can leave it back here for now,” I say, unhooking the chain to the area behind the register and stepping out to give him room.

Blake scoots in past me, slipping the straps off his shoulder. As he removes the backpack, my eyes fall to the red writing on the back of his baseball jersey.

“Huh,” I say out loud.

Blake's eyes snap to mine. "What?" he asks.

"Oh, nothing," I say. "Just...nice number," I nod towards his back.

His gaze follows mine to the number on his back, but he doesn't say anything, setting the backpack down and switching places with me.

"I thought number 13 was unlucky?" I question, sarcasm in my tone.

Blake turns to me when he's back on the other side of the register, putting his elbows up on the counter. "Well, obviously not," he says, holding up the gold medal between his thumb and forefinger.

I feel my mouth fall open and quickly snap it shut, reaching for the corded phone sitting on the counter. "Excuse me," I say, raising the receiver to my ear.

Blake raises an eyebrow. "What are you doing?"

"Calling the University of Alabama to let them know they better snatch you up before the MLB does," I reply, deadpan.

Blake's face breaks into his signature sideways grin as he lets the medal fall from his fingers. "Shut up," he laughs, shaking his head.

A bell chimes and we both look towards the door. "*Annnnie!*"

A short blonde girl comes barreling through the door, followed by her mother. "Oh! Hey!" I respond as the girl approaches the counter to the right of Blake, a grin on her face.

"Hey, rat. Did you miss me?" she asks.

I ignore the rat comment, as it's completely normal from her. I don't miss the look of confusion that crosses Blake's face, however, and have to hold in a laugh. "Since 9 a.m. this morning when you left my house? *So much,*" I respond, rolling my eyes sarcastically.

"I knew it," she says. I see her glance Blake's way for the third time, her grin spreading. I take it as a cue.

"Leah, this is Blake," I say, motioning towards him.

"Ohhh! The dad's best friend's kid?" she blurts out, her filter gone as usual.

"Yep," I say, wincing a little. "Blake, this is my friend, Leah."

"Her *best* friend," Leah corrects me, holding a hand out to Blake.

Blake hesitates before returning the handshake. "Hi," he says, averting his gaze.

Leah's mom has made her way to the counter now. "Hi, honey! How are you?" she asks, her bright pink lips curled into a smile.

"I'm good, Mrs. Tucker. How about you?"

“Oh, just fine, hon,” she replies, “But I’d be better if our shower wasn’t clogged to high heaven. Every time Leah’s father goes out of town on business, I swear, it’s something.”

“Oh no,” I say, my nose scrunched. “Drain snakes and cleaners are on Aisle 4.” I point my thumb in that direction. “If the clog is really bad you might have to remove the drain cover. You’ll need a Phillips screwdriver for that. Those are on the back wall. And here,” I add, leaning around the front of the register to grab a pair of pink rubber gloves hanging on display. “You’ll probably want to use these.”

Mrs. Tucker lets out an appreciative sigh. “You are just an angel, Annie Jacks.” She nudges Leah into the store. “You tell Brett to give you a raise now!” She calls over her shoulder as they disappear down Aisle 4.

When I turn back to Blake, he’s leaning away from the counter. He stares at me for several seconds, his eyes surveying me.

I look down at myself, convinced I must have spilled something on my clothes. When I find them clean, I glance back up to Blake, raising my brows. “What?” I question.

“Nothing... You’re just...like... You just seem like...” He tilts his head.

“Like?”

“I don’t know,” Blake says. “Like an adult?”

I snort. “I’m just wearing an apron, Blake,” I say.

“I know, Evangeline.”

I rear back, caught off guard. *So, I guess he’s still insisting on calling me that.*

“Something about you just makes you seem older than you are. More mature, I guess. Confident. You really seem to know what you’re doing,” Blake says.

I push a loose strand of hair from my ponytail behind my ear. “Well, this is our store. I spend more time here than I do at our house. I guess it should look like I know what I’m doing.”

He glances around the small store fully for the first time, taking it all in. “Hmm...”

“What?”

“That’s just kinda...”

“What?”

Blake’s eyes flick back to mine. “Kinda awesome.”

My back straightens. “Oh,” I say. “I mean...not really. It’s just the way

things are for now.”

“For now?” Blake asks, his brows pinching.

“Well, just until college... or whatever.”

“You’re not gonna take this place over?” Blake asks curiously.

“No way,” I respond, busying myself with straightening things around the register.

“Oh,” Blake says. “I just figured...” I continue shuffling things around on the counter. When I don’t elaborate on my answer, Blake pushes. “Well, why not?”

I look up at him and sigh. “Several reasons.”

“Well, give me four.”

“Four?”

Blake nods.

“That’s a very specific amount.”

“Gotta start somewhere,” he smirks.

I blow out a breath. “Well, first, mainly.... I want out of this town. Out of this state, really.”

“Why?”

“It’s just so... *small*. Everybody knows everybody.”

“What’s wrong with people knowing you?” Blake asks.

“Nothing, I guess. I just want to see something different. Be somewhere new.”

Blake’s head tilts. I think he’s going to question me further but he just nods, signaling me to continue.

“Second,” I say, opening a drawer behind the counter to organize its already organized contents. “...I don’t want to be a Van der Mooch.”

Blake’s head cocks to the side. “Uh...bless you?” That pushes a laugh out of me. “A what now?” he asks.

“A *Van der Mooch*,” I repeat, shaking my head. “It’s this family here. The Van der Michaels. They own practically this entire town and half of the next one over. They’re old money. *Ramer Royalty*,” I say, with air quotes. “None of their kids for the last five generations have had to truly work a day in their lives. They just...mooch. Off their parents. And so on.”

“And you don’t want to do that,” Blake says. It’s not a question.

“No,” I confirm. “I want to make something on my own. Be something on my own. Not just take credit for my parents’ hard work.”

Blake stays quiet. When I realize he’s not going to say anything, I

continue. “And...” I play with my apron string, twirling it between my fingers. “It’s too quiet in here. And boring. And it smells kinda bad sometimes. There you go, I gave you five reasons. An extra at no charge.”

“Okay,” Blake says, amused. “Well, what isn’t boring?”

I look to my side, scanning the hanging aisle signs. “The paint section,” I say. I look back at Blake before unhooking the register area chain and taking a few steps into the store. “C’mon,” I motion forward with my head when I see Blake still standing in the same spot.

He jogs a few steps to catch up with me as I lead us towards Aisle 12 at the back of the store; we only make it to Aisle 6, however, before I feel Blake hesitate next to me. A giggle escapes my lips when I see him craning his neck back to get a better look at our very small section of gardening supplies.

His head snaps back in my direction and I shake my head, laughing even harder. “Shut up,” he grumbles.

“I didn’t say a word,” I chuckle.

PRESENT DAY

I set the pizza boxes down, bracing both hands on the counter and staring at the floor. I inhale deeply and exhale slowly, shaking my head in an effort to reset my brain. I don't think it works that way, but I let myself pretend.

I grab one paper plate from the pantry, suddenly feeling too nauseous to eat, and slide two pieces of pepperoni pizza onto it from the box. I start to walk out of the kitchen but turn back, snagging one piece of pineapple pizza and cramming it into my mouth as I head out the back door.

Maybe the pizza will settle my stomach. Or maybe I'll just puke. We'll see.

When I reenter the backyard, I see Blake using a tape measure along one of the side window panes of the green house. I notice his tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth as he lines the tape up perfectly against the wood and a smile comes to my face. He pulls a pencil out from behind his ear and scribbles something down in a notebook he had sandwiched in his armpit.

How long was I inside?

I hold up the plate of pizza as Blake spots me. "Hungry?"

Blake nods, setting the notebook and pencil down on the wire tables to his side. "Starving," he says, happily taking the paper plate from me. When Blake's gaze finds the slice of pineapple pizza in my hand, a smile briefly flickers across his lips, but he doesn't comment on it.

After I take my last bite, I brush my hands together to remove the crumbs, letting my arms fall into the crossed position as I walk into the greenhouse. Blake's eyes follow me as he continues to eat his pizza, his body leaning against the doorframe. I run my finger along the dead strands of ivy plastered all along the walls until I reach the door that leads directly inside the main

house from within the greenhouse. Although I can tell it was once white, it's turned a dusty brown color from age and the film of grime covering it. Paint is peeling and cracking off in every dip and crevice of the door's design and the antique bronze door knob has oxidized a bluish-green color over time. I wrap my hand around it, attempting to turn it, but it only moves a quarter rotation before it won't budge any further. I'm sure this door hasn't been opened in over a decade. I guess there was no need for greenhouse access when the greenhouse had been abandoned. I let my hand fall from the knob, turning to lean against the useless door to face Blake.

"So, what's the verdict?" I ask.

Blake's brows raise in question.

"Since I apparently have no idea..." I trail off, smiling tightly. "What do you think of this place?"

Blake pushes off of the doorway, walking into the greenhouse and further surveying the space. He turns his back to me to grip one of the wooden window panes; it easily sways, making the entire structure creak as he pushes it back and forth. "I think it would definitely take every bit of two weeks to make it usable again. Maybe more."

My stomach twists. *More than two weeks.* Worse than I thought. There's no way Blake's company is going to let him stay out here that long. I feel a wave of guilt and stupidity for wasting his time. I should have just messaged him some pictures of the place ahead of time. But, then again, maybe a part of me wanted to see him. Even if it was just for an evening. I shake the thought from my head.

God, Annie, what were you thinking—

"But I know I can make this place incredible again. Even if it's a bit of a wreck right now, the bones are all here. I've got plenty to work with and lots of potential routes I could go—"

"Wait, *what?*"

Blake stops talking at my interruption, spinning to look at me. "What?"

"You...you're going to do it? You're going to fix the greenhouse?"

Blake's lips pull up at one side, his brow furrowed. "Well, that's what I came here for... Right?"

"Right," I blurt. *Yes, 100%. That was the only reason.* "I mean, yes. But it's a huge project. You said so yourself—"

"I can handle it."

My back straightens, pushing off of the old door. "Blake, you said it

would take more than two weeks.”

“I said *maybe* more than two weeks.”

My brows pull together. “Surely your company won’t let you spend that much time on this?”

“My company will be just fine with it.”

“But—”

“Evangeline. Do you want this place restored or not?”

“I— Of course I do. But I don’t want to impose on your life like this.”

“My life?” Blake chuckles. “Evangeline, we’re talking two weeks here. Two and a half, tops. Not a prison sentence. You won’t be taking any years off my life, don’t worry.”

“Are you sure?”

“As long as you’re okay with having me here for that long, I’m sure.”

I swallow hard. Two weeks—*maybe two and a half*— under the same roof as Blake. “That...that would be okay.”

“You know,” Blake says, taking a few steps in my direction, “ I know how much this means to you.”

My heart thuds against my chest, my brows raising. “Yeah?” my voice wavers.

“Yeah, I can tell. I can see it all over your face.”

I feel heat bloom in my cheeks, not entirely able to decipher what emotion it is a result of.

“You really love—” Blake cuts off, reaching out suddenly.

I take half a step backwards and find myself flush with the door once again. Blake doesn’t seem to notice, however, as his thumb grazes across my cheekbone. I feel the heat of his contact, as if it’s leaving a burn mark behind, as he trails across the side of my face. It feels like an eternity goes by before the pad of his thumb comes in contact with the loose strand of hair that has fallen in my face. Blake pushes it behind my ear easily, sending a shiver down my spine and tightening the current invisible hold on my throat. His thumb remains still for a moment, his gaze flicking to meet mine once, before his forefinger joins his thumb, pinching at something and plucking it from my hair. My eyes, which I didn’t realize had been shut, fly open to see Blake holding a single dried ivy leaf that had apparently been stuck in my hair.

“—this greenhouse.”

My eyes snap from the ivy leaf to Blake’s face. “What?”

“You really love this greenhouse,” he says, flicking the leaf from his

fingers.

Oh.

My lips fall open. “Yeah,” I say, smoothing my hair back. “Yeah, I do. And it does mean a lot to me that you’re willing to fix it. Just let me know whatever you need. I’ll pay you every penny you’d normally charge.”

Blake’s eyes search me for a moment, his arms crossing and head tilting to the side, before catching me off guard with the last question I was expecting in this moment. “How’d you and this guy meet?”

I clear my throat to cover the fact that I just nearly choked in surprise. “Remy?”

“Is there another guy?”

“Well, none you need to know about,” I say with a wink. Nope, no other guys for me.

None in this lifetime.

When Blake doesn’t respond to my joke, I continue. “At the hardware store.”

Blake’s brows raise. “Really?”

“Yeah, it’s kind of a long story.”

“Well, luckily, I’ll be here for awhile.”

Yeah, luckily.

“I’d love to hear all about it,” Blake says. “But, first, you got any more pizza in there?”

I let out a silent sigh of relief. That was definitely not a conversation I was ready to have tonight. Not with Blake. “No, actually, the pizza place was only having a three piece special tonight.”

Blake shakes his head, his tongue pushing into the side of his cheek to stifle a smile from forming. “Shut up.”

I walk past Blake, out of the greenhouse and towards the back door. “I’m sorry, but it’s true,” I joke. “There’s plenty of grass out here if you’re in the mood for a second course, though.”

“*Ha-ha,*” Blake says, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “Don’t test me, Jacks. I’m starving. And it’s been a long day.”

I won't argue with that.

Blake follows me in the backdoor of the house. I make sure to take the least scenic route by taking a straight shot down the main hallway to the kitchen; I don’t have the energy to give a tour of this place right now when I still barely know my own way around.

When we enter the kitchen, I motion for Blake to take a seat at one of the bar stools at the kitchen island. “I’ll have your order right out to you, Mr. Di Fazio,” I say with a dramatic bow in an accent I couldn’t even begin to identify before turning to the pizza boxes on the counter and pulling out two more pieces for each of us.

I drop Blake’s second helping onto his outstretched plate. “Thank you, m’lady,” he says, attempting my same ridiculous accent.

Blake’s already scarfed down his first slice before I reach for mine; the second I pick mine up, however, I immediately drop it back onto the plate, hearing the front door open. Blake’s gaze meets mine and I see him starting to stand from his chair.

“I got it– I– *Be right back,*” I sputter, pushing away from the counter. The front door is practically visible from the kitchen, only being separated by the short hallway and half-wall designating the foyer, but I just need a moment somewhat alone with Remy before introductions are made. A moment to decompress.

I step out into the entryway, finding Remy removing his jacket and loosening his tie. I have a feeling by the vacant look in his downcast gaze and the unusually ruffled state of his sandy blonde hair that his meeting didn’t go too well.

“Hey, babe,” I say, approaching him. He looks up, noticing me for the first time. “How’d it go–”

Remy pulls me into his arms, kissing me hard. He holds me there for a long moment, one hand twisted into my hair and the other around my waist. When he finally relents, it takes a moment for me to catch my breath.

“That bad?” I breathe.

“We’ll be back. You know I don’t take no for an answer,” Remy says, his brows raised and lips pulled into a smug smile.

“Oh, trust me. I know,” I confirm, rolling my eyes sarcastically.

“But, in the meantime,” Remy says, planting a quick kiss on my forehead before moving past me, “let’s meet this little friend of yours– *Oh.*”

Remy’s voice cuts off as he rounds the corner, coming nearly face to face with Blake standing just inside the kitchen. My face flushes at the thought of him having just spied on us.

Dammit, Blake. I told you I had it.

I grit my teeth together, pushing my hair out of my face as I walk into the kitchen to stand by Remy.

Why do I even care?

Him and Blake are standing only feet apart. And it feels so very surreal. And weird.

They both seem to size each other up for a moment, Blake's hands going into his pockets and Remy's arms crossing. I have to turn my face away briefly to keep from either snorting or rolling my eyes.

Men.

"Remy, this is Blake," I say, motioning toward Blake. "My old, uh, friend." I feel Blake's gaze flick in the direction of my face, but I ignore it. "Blake, this is Remy. My—"

"Fiancé. Right," Blake interjects. "Hey, man," he says, stretching out a hand towards Remy. "It's nice to meet you."

Remy looks at Blake's hand, but doesn't shake it right away, looking him over once more. I realize that, even though Blake is only a couple of inches taller than Remy, he easily has thirty pounds on him. Remy isn't little by any means, but Blake is just...*Blake*. That being said, Remy definitely isn't used to being the smallest guy in the room, and it clearly shows. I clear my throat, putting a hand on his shoulder and smiling at him. That seems to break Remy out of whatever weird macho trance he's in, his hand shooting out to accept Blake's handshake.

"Yeah. Hey, man. Nice to meet you as well."

I pull my lower lip into my mouth, stifling my smile. "Beautiful," I say. "Now, pizza?"

"Sure," Remy and Blake both reply at the same time, finally dropping their entirely too long handshake.

Blake and I make our way over to the kitchen island, reclaiming the same spots we were just sitting in across from each other, while Remy begins to make himself a plate of pizza. "I gotta thank you for coming out, Blake," he says over his shoulder. "I know Annie really appreciates it."

"*We* really appreciate it," I insist, covering my mouth with my hand as I talk through a mouthful of pizza.

"Yes, we do," Remy says, plopping his plate onto the island, but remaining standing behind me. "Really," he says, placing his hands on my shoulders. "Once my little Apple Jacks gets an idea in her head, there's no getting it out."

Though I had been avoiding making eye contact with Blake, I can't do it any longer, my gaze shifting to his. The expression on his face can only be

described as a mixture of surprise and nausea, his lips scrunched together and brows raised. He stares back at me for a moment before raising his eyes to Remy behind me.

“It’s not a problem,” Blake says flatly. “I’m happy to help.”

Remy squeezes my shoulders once before releasing them, walking over to the fridge. He reaches inside and pulls out a bottle of beer. He grabs two more in his other hand, raising them up in offer to us.

“Yes, please,” I say. Remy twists off the cap, handing the bottle to me. He moves to twist off the second cap, but Blake stops him.

“I’m alright, thanks.”

I feel my brows pull together as I take a long drink from my beer. *Huh.*

Remy returns the beer meant for Blake to the fridge, coming to stand behind me again. He takes a drink from his bottle before placing his hands on the sides of my shoulders again, kneading them as he talks. It’s not uncommon for Remy to touch me like this, but I can’t lie that it feels oddly intimate with him doing it in front of an audience. Especially when that audience is Blake, who is watching his every move with the most unreadable look in his eyes.

“So, Blake,” Remy says. “Landscaping?”

“Yep,” Blake confirms, his gaze only flicking to Remy for half a second before returning to where his hands are on my body.

Remy chuckles, removing his left hand from me temporarily to take another drink. “You like working with dirt? And worms?”

Both hands are back, sliding down the sides of my arms now. They stop just where the short sleeves of my blouse ends, the fingers of his empty right hand tracing lazy circles on my inner bicep. Blake’s eyes seem to darken as Remy grazes over a very particular patch of skin, his jaw ticking. Realization hits me and I straighten my spine, feeling a drop of sweat trickle down my back.

Blake notices my movement, his head tilting. He finally tears his gaze from me, lowering the temperature in the room by ten degrees, and looks back at Remy. “Yeah, well, I’ve found that worms are better than most people,” he deadpans, responding to Remy’s question.

“Ha,” Remy snorts, not humorously. “Well, Blake,” he says, raising his beer, “you seem to be a man’s man through and through. Your dad must be proud.”

I swallow hard, my mouth dry, slowly raising my eyes to look at Blake.

He remains still for several seconds before one corner of his mouth finally pulls up. “Yeah. Well, I’ll ask him and get back to you on that.”

The shrill sound of a phone ringing splits through the air, breaking the tension. Remy releases me and I take a heavy breath, wringing my hands together under the counter. Remy steps to the side, pulling his cell phone from his pocket.

“And what do you do?” Blake asks him.

“Business,” he replies, looking down at his phone screen. “And investments.”

“That’s vague.”

Remy looks up at Blake, his jaw shifting to the side. “Is it vague or is it just too big for you to wrap your brain around?” he asks, smiling. “Now, excuse me.” Remy answers the call as he turns his back on us and walks out the front door to continue his conversation.

“Charming dude,” Blake says a few seconds after the door closes.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter, pushing away from the island, standing up to gather our pizza plates. “He’s stressed. His business deal fell through.”

“How often does that happen?”

I pause, looking up at Blake. “Almost never.”

He stares at me for several seconds, his eyes shifting between mine. “Good,” he finally says.



I ROLL over to my other side for what has to be the hundredth time tonight, still not able to get comfortable. When that still doesn’t help, I move to lay on my back. I close my eyes tightly, telling myself to focus on the gentle rhythm of Remy’s breathing next to me as I count down from one hundred. After counting down from one hundred for the seventh time, I resign, my eyes springing open to stare at the ceiling.

I can’t sleep. My brain simply won’t let me. I let out a groan, rolling myself out of bed and grabbing a robe to slip over my old oversized One Direction sleep shirt and plaid pajama shorts as I push the bedroom door open. I pad to the kitchen, pouring myself a glass of water and laying my head down on the kitchen counter. I’m not sure how I thought cold water or

cold tile against my face would help to make me sleepier, but it was worth a shot. I let out a sigh, dumping the remainder of my glass down the sink before heading back to my room.

I start to make my way there, but pause just as I pass one of the hallways, taking a step back to look down it. I squint my eyes, examining the door at the very end of it. The door leading directly into the greenhouse. I tell myself I should just keep walking, but curiosity (*and insomnia*) gets the better of me.

I approach the door, trying to keep my movements as quiet as possible as I reach for the doorknob. Once again, it only gives about a quarter turn before it catches. I let out a huff and try again. *Nothing*.

I've heard before that the definition of insanity is trying the exact same thing twice and expecting different results.

So I try it a third time.

The knob once again turns the same amount, but, just as I'm about to stop pushing it, it turns just a fraction more. I let out a squeal of accomplishment.

Now we're getting somewhere.

I remove my hands from the door altogether, rubbing them together in preparation. Then, I lean the entire side of my body against the wood, taking a few quick breaths. "*Here we go,*" I mutter to myself. I pull back just slightly, mentally counting to three before throwing all of my weight into the door while turning the handle as hard as I physically can.

To my complete shock, it gives instantly, and I find myself yelping in surprise as I literally fall into the greenhouse. My shoulder hits the ground and I let out a grunt, rolling stiffly onto my back. "*Shit,*" I curse. I slowly peel my eyes open and gasp, clutching at my chest, when I find Blake standing directly over me.

"Hi there," he says, tilting his head. "Whatcha doin'?"

I roll my eyes at the sarcastic tone of his voice, covering my face and the smile of embarrassment plastered across it. "Oh, nothing. Just chillin'."

"Uh huh," Blake nods, reaching an arm out and pulling me to my feet.

"Thanks," I say, brushing myself off.

Blake hums in response, moving to sit on a bucket in the corner. There's a notebook and a pencil sitting on another bucket right next to it, the notebook page full of numbers and sketches like he's been planning.

"Couldn't sleep either?" I ask, nodding to it.

He shakes his head as I close the now-functioning door I just fell through, leaning against its frame. We sit in silence for a few minutes, Blake staring

down at his notebook and me staring out at the night. Oddly, it's not uncomfortable.

"So," Blake says suddenly, breaking the silence.

"So," I echo him.

Blake's lips pull to the side, his head turning away for a moment before looking back at me. "The hardware store? Really?"

I blow out a breath.

Okay, now it's maybe a little uncomfortable.

"Yep," I reply. "Pretty much. We'd know *of* each other before, but that's the place we actually got to *know* each other." Blake's lack of response makes me keep talking, needing to fill the silence. "He just came in one day. I didn't give in to him at first, but...he just kept coming back. He can be very persistent."

"I can see that," Blake says.

"Yeah, well..." I acknowledge, averting my gaze. "It's been good. He's been good for me. The timing of it all was really perfect. He kinda showed up right when I needed him."

I look back at Blake and see his throat bob, a deep line of thought etched between his brows. "Well it sounds like it was meant to be, then."

I stiffen, my teeth going into my bottom lip. "Yeah," I nod. "Maybe." When Blake doesn't respond, just continuing to stare at me, I push off the doorframe. "Well, goodnight."

"Hey, can I ask you one more thing?"

I pause with my hand on the doorknob, looking over my shoulder. "Yeah?"

Blake's serious expression melts into a look of amusement, his brows scrunching. "Apple Jacks?" he questions. "I mean, really?"

"Shut up," I chuckle, rolling my eyes as I let myself back into the house.

THIRTEEN YEARS AGO

“Hold on, just a sec!”

“Putting away your action figures?” Dad calls back, knocking harder.

“No, you son of a—” Kyle Di Fazio’s voice is drowned out by the sound of the heavy front door creaking open.

“Always the warmest of welcomes,” Dad says, shaking his head with a laugh.

“Shove it, Jacks,” Kyle says, pushing Dad’s shoulder. “Lovely to see you, ladies,” he directs at Mom, Steph, and me standing on the porch behind Dad. “Come on in.” He stands aside, allowing us into the house, hugging each of us on our way in.

It’s the first weekend of April and the last weekend of Spring Break. Even though we had seen Grammy on a few different occasions, it had been years since we made it back to Lake Placid to visit with her at home. With Steph and me being out of school this week and my parents finally finding a new manager for the hardware store that they could trust to hold the fort down for an extended period of time, we actually managed to plan for a few days with Grammy and, naturally, an afternoon with the Di Fazios.

“Hey, Annie,” Kyle smiles as he pulls me in last. “How’s high school treating you?”

“Basically like junior high,” I respond, returning his smile. With Ramer being so small, the shift to high school wasn’t all that extreme. My classes still consisted of the same one hundred students, just in a slightly larger building and a little further down the street. “But it’s getting better as it goes, I guess. Just two more months until I’m officially an upperclassman. We’re

in the home stretch.”

“Aw, come on now. I’m sure you’re excited, but try to just enjoy the ride,” Kyle says, patting the top of my head. “It’ll be over before you know it.”

Yeah, that’s kind of the idea.

“I know, I know,” I nod, giving him a smile before following the rest of my family inside. When I make it to the living room, I see that the TV is playing the lottery drawing. Dad and I glance at each other and then down at the coffee table at the same time, seeing a ticket torn in half just as Kyle enters the room.

“Next week?” Dad asks.

“Next week,” Kyle confirms.

“Where’s everyone at?” Mom questions.

“Somebody called in earlier today, so Emily is hung up at the shop,” Kyle responds.

Emily has worked at this old two-story used book shop in town called The Book Nook for the past decade. From what I’ve heard, it’s supposed to look like something out of a movie, with exposed brick in the walls and antique wooden bookshelves stretching for miles. Emily has also mentioned other things over the years like secret reading nooks and a complimentary coffee bar. It’s safe to say that I’ve always been dying to go see it.

“She’ll be there another hour or so,” Kyle continues. “Blake is in the back working on—”

“Hey,” a husky voice I don’t quite recognize snaps my attention to the side. Standing in the back doorway, flannel covered arms crossed and long torso leaning against the doorframe, is Blake. Khaki shorts hang low on his hips, a t-shirt version of his blue Jays baseball jersey covering his chest. My eyes trail up, seeing sweat lightly soaking the top of his t-shirt and shining across his face. His hair is a lot longer, the brown curls swooping out from underneath the baseball cap turned backward on his head.

“Blake!” My mom’s voice rings through my ears as she scrambles forward, throwing her arms up. Blake pushes off the doorframe and meets her halfway, returning her hug. Mom pulls back, keeping her hands on Blake’s shoulders. “Look at you! You’ve got me up on my tip-toes here. How did that happen?” Blake chuckles shyly. “How are you?” Mom asks him.

“I’m great, Miss Heidi.” His voice makes me do a double-take for the second time. *When did it get so deep?* “It’s nice to see you,” he says to my

mom. “Hey, Steph,” he calls, waving to her over Mom’s shoulder. He finally turns to me, taking a step in my direction. I have to crane my neck backwards to meet his blue-green eyes. Considering I’m not a short girl, he has to be well over six feet now.

“Hi, Evangeline,” Blake says, his lips pulling up at one side.

“Hi,” I reply. I feel a shiver work its way down my back and I hug myself, rubbing my arms over the sleeves of my sweater. I look around Blake to see the back door still hanging open, letting in the chilly breeze.

“I figure we’ll fire up the grill in a couple of hours,” I hear Kyle say, turning my attention to where he stands in the kitchen, “but, in the meantime, NASCAR, right?” he questions, looking at Dad.

“Of course. Fire it up,” Dad says, sliding his jacket off.

“As fun as that sounds,” Mom chimes in, “I think I may actually go pay Emily a visit. I’d love to see the shop.”

“Ooo, me too!” Steph sings.

“Oh, I’m sure she’d love that,” Kyle says.

“Great!” Mom says, grabbing the rental car keys from Dad’s outstretched hand.

“I’ll go, too,” I say.

Mom turns back towards my direction. “Oh, hon, why don’t you stay? You can keep Blake some company.”

My heart sinks a little, but then Blake’s gaze finds mine.

“Why don’t you bring her out on the lake, Blake?” Kyle says, grabbing two beers from the fridge. “It’s a beautiful day out.”

Another shiver wracks my body.

“Okay,” Blake says, motioning for me to follow him.

“*Beautiful day?*” I whisper after him, rubbing my hands together. “It’s like 50 degrees out.”

Blake turns back, amusement on his face. “Exactly. Nice and warm.” My mouth pops open and Blake shakes his head, grabbing a beanie and pair of winter gloves from the set of hooks by the back door. “C’mon, Alabama. You got this,” he says, tossing them to me and walking through the door.

I shove the beanie and gloves on as far down as they’ll go before following Blake outside. We make our way across the backyard and down the hill towards the lake’s edge. When I get my bearings on the somewhat steep decline enough to look up, my breath is taken away. It has been years since I have been in my dad’s hometown and even longer since I have actually been

to the lake that gave the town its name.

The deep teal mass of water glistens in the sun, the thousands of surrounding trees rustling in the wind. The lake sits in a sort of valley with the surrounding houses and vegetation elevated on uneven rocky lands. The mountains on the horizon look practically fake, the last of the winter snow still resting on their peaks.

“Wow,” I breathe.

“You coming?” Blake’s voice snaps me from my trance.

“Oh, yeah!” I call back, stumbling down the remainder of the hill to where Blake is crouched down behind a wooden structure, removing a tarp from a canoe.

“There you are,” he says, smirking up at me when I reach him.

“Yeah, sorry. I got a little distracted.” My eyes trail over to the structure next to us. It appears to be a sort of shed, but half of the wooden walls are either missing, rotting, or look like they’ve had a sledgehammer taken to them. My feet have a mind of their own as I find myself at the entrance, the door missing, peering inside. “Blake?” I call.

“Yeah?”

“Um, what is this?”

“Oh,” Blake responds. “It’s a shed.”

“Uh, where’s the rest of it?”

“It’s a work in progress,” he says. “It’s always been here, but we just used it for junk. My dad’s letting me rebuild it. He said if I did it myself, I could turn it into whatever I want.”

I take a step into the structure, immediately noticing signs of Blake on the inside, despite the outside barely being started on. Several pots of plants are lined up on the ground against the partial left wall, mostly plain leafy ones and a few different types of flowers I don’t recognize. The pot on the end catches my eye, however, and I make my way over to it, bending down to get a closer look at the baby’s breath overflowing from the small black container. I pluck a tiny stem from the plant, twirling it in my fingers.

I glance behind me, seeing a blue lawn chair sitting in the corner, a baseball and mitt shoved underneath it along with a journal and a couple of old paperback books I’m sure came from The Book Nook. A half empty case of Dr. Pepper cans is on the ground next to the chair. I smile to myself.

Blake’s perfect little man cave.

“Hey.”

I'm startled by Blake's voice. I stand up and spin around, finding him behind me, hands propped on either side of the wooden door frame. "Are you done being nosy?" he asks, his eyes flicking down to the sprig of baby's breath in my hand. I immediately throw my hand behind my back, shoving the flowers down into my back pocket.

"For now," I reply, ducking under his arm with a grin and slipping back outside.

I see the dark green canoe pulled out onto the grass and walk over to it. Blake makes his way to the other end, reaching down to pick up his side. I see the muscles in his forearm and neck strain and wonder when those got there until Blake commands my attention, clicking his tongue and nodding his head towards the canoe, signaling me to pick up my end. I do as he says and we make our way towards the lake, me walking backwards and trying not to fall over every single rock and stick I encounter.

Eventually, we make it. I plop down onto the seat on my side at Blake's instruction as he pushes the small boat out onto the water and jumps in after it, settling in his own seat. We each pick up an oar and begin working together to row.

"Can I ask you a question?" I speak up after a minute.

Blake looks up from the oar to me. "You don't need to ask permission, Evangeline."

"What's with your dad and the lottery tickets? Isn't he a banker?"

"A financial advisor," Blake corrects. "But, yes, he does work at a bank."

"Well, that's even worse," I chuckle. "Shouldn't a financial advisor advise against gambling?"

Blake shrugs his shoulders. "You would think so. I'm not really sure to be honest. He's just always played the lottery. Every week for as long as I can remember. It's not like we're strapped for cash as far as I'm aware." We both glance back towards the Di Fazios's rather large and beautiful lakeside home.

"Hmm..." I say. "Maybe it's just fun for him. Something to look forward to?"

"Maybe," Blake agrees. We stay silent for the next few minutes, rowing against the current. Once we are out several hundred feet, reaching nearly the middle of the lake, we mutually decide without words to stop, placing our oars at our feet.

I sit up straight, leaning my head back and taking in a deep breath of the cold air, waking up my senses. I stay that way for a few moments, listening to

the gentle lapping of the water against the canoe and the distant sounds of birds chirping. When I let my head fall back forward and my eyes open, I see Blake staring at me. His large eyes are reflecting the lake, making them appear more blue than green. His dark brows are pulled together, his head tilting to the side. I feel goosebumps prickling the back of my neck, my light brown hair sweeping across my back in the breeze.

“What are you thinking about?” Blake asks, breaking the silence.

I breathe out. “I’m thinking...that this place is beautiful,” I answer. “And I’m thinking that I’d love to live in New York City. And that I could visit here. Or maybe somewhere else like here. I’m just thinking about...the future, I guess.”

“The future?” he repeats.

I nod.

“And what’s your future, Evangeline?”

“Marketing,” I say without hesitation.

“Marketing?” Blake echoes me.

“Yes.” When Blake just gives me a confused look in response, I continue. “Marketing is fast paced. It’s always changing. It involves people. New people. All the time. I can do it anywhere, so I can see lots of new places.” I pull my knees up, hugging them with my arms. “New York’s just the first place on the list. I’ll have to get a degree first, of course. But it’ll be worth it. Anything that gets me out of Alabama.”

“You really don’t want the store, huh?” Blake asks, no hint of judgment in his tone, only curiosity.

My lips pull to the side. “No, I don’t,” I say. “My parents created a great little empire. And I’m so proud of it. But I want my own empire.”

Blake watches me thoughtfully, his throat bobbing. “Well, it sounds like you’ve got it all figured out,” he says.

“Don’t you?” I ask.

“No,” he replies immediately.

“Well, obviously not *everything*,” I say, “but surely you’ve got your basic life plan figured out.”

“No,” Blake says again.

“How can you not? I mean, what do you want to do?”

Blake looks away, his head shaking and a light chuckle escaping him, but he doesn’t respond.

I raise an eyebrow. “Well, now it’s your turn.” He looks back at me. “Tell

me what you're thinking."

Blake blows a breath out of his nose. "Do you believe in fate?"

"Fate?"

"Yeah, fate," he confirms. "You know, destiny? Kismet?"

"I know what fate is," I say. "That's just the last thing I expected you to say." I feel my brows pinch. "But to answer your question, no, I don't think so."

"Why not?" he asks.

"Because..." I purse my lips, thinking. "I don't like the idea that I'm not in control of my life."

Blake snorts.

"What?" I ask.

He rubs a hand down his face. "Okay, *Neo*. Did you just quote *The Matrix*?"

I laugh, realizing that I totally, unintentionally, did. "I have no idea what you're talking about," I deadpan.

"Uh huh."

"But fate, really," I say, seeing Blake's attention return to me. "I just feel that...someone can only show you a door. You're the one that has to walk through it."

Blake's face drops at my second *Matrix* quote, his eyes rolling. "Evangeline."

"Follow the white rabbit, Blake."

"*Evangeline*."

"Okay, I'm done, really." I say, putting my hands up. "Sorry, I took a red pill before we got here."

Blake stares at me, expressionless. "Just forget it," he says, looking out at the lake.

"No, okay, seriously," I insist. "I don't think I believe in fate, but why do you ask? Do *you*?"

His eyes find mine again. "Yeah, I do."

My head tilts, a smile coming to my lips. "Why?"

"I just feel like there's a plan for everything. That there's a set path we're all on and no matter what small decisions we may make along the way to fight against it, whatever is meant to happen always will." Blake pauses. "You don't agree, clearly."

I hadn't realized that I had been shaking my head. "Oh," I blurt. "Um, I

don't know. I just don't think I'm...willing to accept that? I mean...don't you have dreams? Aspirations?"

"Sure I do," Blake says. "But I think that they'll either happen or they won't. Obviously I'll have to put effort in on my part, but...I don't know. I just don't see a point in trying to plan out every minute of my life. It just seems kind of exhausting. And like it'll inevitably lead to disappointment."

"Maybe," I say. "I guess I just don't like the idea of leaving my life up to some magical force I can't see."

Blake chuckles. "No one said anything about magic, Evangeline."

"I know," I shake my head. "I guess I would just like to know that if something doesn't happen for me or if I end up unhappy...it's only my fault. That there was nothing else I could have done."

Blake studies me for several seconds and then sighs, reaching under his bench to pull out two cans of Dr. Pepper I hadn't seen before, tossing one to me. My fingers curl around it, the cold of the aluminum passing right through the barrier of my glove and making me shiver.

"Well, here's to things happening," he says, holding out the can to toast me. I clink my can with his and start to pull it away but stop, noticing Blake hesitating. "And maybe to a little magic to help us along the way," he adds.

"To fate," I declare. Blake's eyes flick up to mine, a crooked smile breaking out on his face as we both pop open our cans.

A take a sip of the soda, my teeth instantly chattering from the cold temperature at the same time a strong cold breeze blows through. My body shudders reflexively as I wrap my arms around myself, my shaky breath coming out in a misty cloud.

"Here," Blake says, standing up to shrug off his flannel.

"No, it's okay—"

"Shut up," Blake cuts me off. "You're shivering."

He steps towards me, wrapping his flannel around my shoulders and adjusting the collar to cover my neck. The boat rocks suddenly and Blake lurches forward. I reflexively lean back as he stumbles, my hand that's not holding the soda can shooting up to fist his blue T-shirt. Blake catches himself on my bench seat, his hand landing just to the side of my right thigh at the same moment my hand pushes against his chest, the only thing keeping him from knocking me off backwards.

"Crap, sorry," Blake grunts. When he raises his head, our faces are only inches apart. His turquoise eyes search mine. Chills spread all over my body,

but I'm not entirely sure they're from the cold this time. A strange feeling flutters low in my belly.

"Thanks," I breathe, releasing his shirt from my hand and wrapping the flannel tighter around myself.

Though I've let him go, Blake doesn't move away. He blinks, something in his eyes changing, and he swallows. "You're going to get everything you want in life, Evangeline. I'm sure of it."

I open my mouth to respond, but the sudden tightness in my throat won't let any words come out. Blake pushes on to his feet and steps back, retaking his seat. His eyes finally tear from mine to look at the shore in the direction of his house. "We should probably get back."

"Yeah," I agree, picking up my oar.

We row back without another word.

PRESENT DAY

Blake

A grunt escapes me as I kick the rotting piece of wood for the third time. I don't have a spare second to celebrate when it finally gives, however, my hands shooting out to grab the panel of glass before it shatters against the stone floor. I shift the panel to one hand, using the back of my other one to wipe the sweat from my brow as I walk out into the yard, leaning the glass up against the wall of the house with the twelve or so other panels I've managed to salvage already this morning.

I glance up at the sun when I feel another drop of sweat trickling down my forehead, realizing it must be nearly 9 a.m. This is why I start early. And why my internal clock had me up and out here by six this morning. The heat gets frustrating enough in Lake Placid, but this southern humidity is a whole new element my body isn't used to.

I make my way back into the greenhouse, starting in on the next panel. All day yesterday was spent planning and prepping, which is my least favorite part of the job. It's not that I *dislike* the planning phase, it's just that I'm an antsy freaking human being. I love transforming landscapes and structures like these and deciding what plants will be added in to bring new life to the space, but, the problem is, I just want to *do* it. The second a singular idea comes to mind, I just want to see it in action. You can sit and plan a project for weeks, but, most of the time, you won't even know for sure that something will work until you see it in real life. Luckily, with the experience I've gained over the years, I tend to know what will work and what won't, but this greenhouse is a whole new ballgame. A very unique structure...

And a very unique client.

Thankfully, that very unique client had made herself very busy most of the day yesterday with errands and other things I didn't pry into. I didn't mind the space. In fact, frankly, I needed it. My head has felt like it's spinning since the moment I stepped off the plane at Montgomery Airport. Actually, I think it's been spinning for well over a week now. Since I got that phone call.

That damn phone call.

I'm pretty sure my brain and chest are still trying to work through all of the emotions that hit me at once the moment I realized who I was speaking

to. As if I could forget that voice.

No matter how hard I might have tried.

And then there was the second round of visceral reactions once I learned why she was calling. Why she needed the greenhouse fixed. How it was attached to a home not just owned by her.

It was such an odd sensation. In a matter of one minute, feeling as if you've been transported to a new world— *No*, not a new world. An old world.

Home.

One you forgot you had. Just barely stepping foot in the doorway. Being hit with a wave of feelings and thoughts and sights and sounds and smells that you forgot existed because you locked them in a safe within the deepest levels of your mind. Being reminded that things you have grown to think of as dreams were actually once a reality.

Thinking for just *one* millisecond that *maybe* you just got lucky enough that those dreams could be a reality once again. This entire world and life flashing before your eyes so vividly for one minute until the entire picture suddenly shatters. All because of one word.

Fiancé.

And yet, I agreed.

I agreed to come here and fix this beautiful godforsaken greenhouse. Because I had to. Because I was in too deep.

Though it had only been a minute, that was the first minute I had allowed myself to think of Evangeline Jacks in over five years. *Truly* think of her. Her face. Her laugh. The freckles sprinkled across her nose. Her round golden brown eyes that were somehow the exact same shade as her long wavy hair. Her massive brain that was her greatest strength yet also her biggest hindrance in life. Her desire for adventure. Her quick wit. The way she drove me absolutely freaking insane.

In more ways than one.

I had to come. I had already allowed the thought of seeing her to take form. There was no taking that back.

I kick harder at the stubborn panel, remembering the bile rising in my throat as I uttered the words agreeing to come here despite the fact that everything had just changed. Despite the fact that there was someone new invading this secret image I had kept tucked away. The one with the one in a million possibility of actually occurring. The one where Evangeline Jacks and I would cross paths again. Where we'd reenter each other's lives. I wasn't an

idiot. I knew that ship had sailed long ago. But you can't help but, once in a blue moon (*and maybe after one too many beers with the guys*), wonder: *Damn, what if?*

Well, my *what if* certainly never included this. Never included Pricky—
Sorry, Remy. Whatever.

I shake my head, silently thanking the universe for his quick departure about an hour ago that did not include a word to me. It doesn't matter. We don't need to speak. He's not who—not *what*—I'm here for. An old friend of mine needed a favor. An old friend whose love life isn't my concern.

Not anymore.

I hear faint squeaking along with a buzzing sound behind me at the same time a drop of sweat slides straight into my eye. "Shit," I mutter, rubbing at it with the rolled up sleeve of my flannel. I reach behind my head, lifting up my backwards facing baseball cap enough to wipe the sweat collected at the top of my forehead and slick my hair back once before replacing the cap. I suddenly sense something in my peripheral vision, turning slightly to see Evangeline standing in the doorway of the greenhouse, her mouth agape and her hands full of bags, binders, and her cell phone.

"Oh," I say. "Hey."

Evangeline just continues to stare at me, her head slowly tilting to the side. The same strand of hair that always seems to fall in her face does so once again, and I fist my hands, fighting the urge to walk forward and push it behind her ear for her.

As the silence continues to stretch on, I realize that her eyes are trailing up and down my figure. I steel myself, removing my work gloves as I look down at myself and back up to her face when I don't find anything out of place.

"What?" I question her.

Nothing.

"Words, Evangeline."

She startles, as if breaking from a trance. "Oh, sorry. I just...thought I'd maybe stepped into a time machine instead of my shower this morning."

I feel my lips pull into a smirk. "Forget about me already?"

Evangeline rolls her eyes at the same time I register the buzzing sound coming from her phone in her hand, going off every few seconds. "No, it's not that. It's just," she pauses, waving her hand around in a circle in my direction. "I don't know. I just had some weird déjà vu kind of moment. Just

forget it.”

“I’ll try,” I say, finally knocking the glass panel loose.

“You’ve gotten a lot done already,” Evangeline says. “Like, just today. And it’s not even nine.”

“Early riser,” I say, shrugging my shoulders as I scoot past her in the doorway with the panel in hand.

“Since when?” she questions, looking between me and her continually buzzing phone.

“Since I had to.”

“Had to what?”

I lean the panel against the house, turning back to Evangeline. Her gaze quickly flicks from my midsection, back to my face, and then away.

Why does she keep doing that?

“Since I had to grow up,” I respond to her question.

“Oh,” she says, her brows pulling together. “I guess we did that, huh?”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

Unfortunately.

I shift on my feet as Evangeline swipes open another notification on her cell phone. I take the opportunity to examine her more closely. She’s wearing a cream colored button up shirt and light blue pants with white ballet flats. Her outfit, combined with the binders and notebooks still stacked up in her arms and the two large tote bags slung over her shoulder, makes it look like she could be heading to an office. It occurs to me for the first time that I have no idea what she does for work now. We’ve only small-talked about my job since I’ve gotten here and that’s the same as it’s been since the last time we were together. *Well, pretty much the same.*

“Are you heading somewhere?” I ask.

“Oh, yeah,” she responds, her gaze flicking up once from her phone screen. “To work. And to run a few errands. Well, actually, a lot of my work *is* running errands, but, yeah.”

Running errands? That doesn’t sound anything like what she always wanted to do. “Are you doing something with marketing?”

“Um, sort of,” Evangeline replies, pushing back that pesky strand of hair, not quite meeting my eyes. “I actually work for Remy’s company.”

I’m certain I was not able to catch the mixture of pure shock and confusion that just hit me before it made its way to my face. I quickly scoot past her and back into the greenhouse, needing something to do with my

hands as a distraction. “You two...work together?” I ask as evenly as possible, starting in on another panel.

“Yeah. For the last four years actually. It’s been nice.”

Four years? Nice? Seriously? I clear my throat to cover up the choke threatening to escape. “What do you do?”

“Business operations,” she shrugs. “Coordinating and bookkeeping. Scheduling.”

I abandon the panel, standing up straight and turning in her direction.

So...she’s a secretary? It’s not like there’s anything wrong with that, but...that’s just not something I ever would have seen her doing. No, secretary work never would have satisfied the Evangeline Jacks I knew.

Much less secretary work under a man with half the brain of her.

She had such big dreams and every capability of reaching them. Evangeline is the hardest working and most ambitious person I’ve ever known. She’s always had such passion. I can see the light in her eyes talking about her dreams of marketing like it was yesterday.

What happened?

I almost find myself bold enough to ask her out loud, but she speaks again, not giving me the opportunity.

“I’m only there part-time though,” she continues. “It’s given me flexibility to help out at the store.”

“The store? Your parents’ store?” Evangeline drops her head in a slight nod. I notice her cheeks seem a shade pinker than normal. “You’re... You’re still working at the store?”

“Yeah,” she replies, averting her gaze. “Dad needs the extra help as he’s getting older. And I don’t mind. It gives us time to spend together.”

I can feel the deep crease set between my brows but am unable to relax them. I am fully aware and understand better than anyone that things don’t always work out the way we plan them, and that the future is never certain, but, if there was anyone I’d bet on to have complete control over their future, it would be Evangeline. Though I had always felt she was too hard on herself, it was also one of the things I’ve always admired the most about her. There was no one else with the steadfastness and unwavering resolve towards life that Evangeline Jacks had. As much as I could never personally relate to it, I think she had her entire future mapped out the day she was born, and hell if she wasn’t dead set on reaching every destination on her journey.

I can’t help but wonder at what point she decided to throw her map away.

And whether or not it was a good thing.

“When’s the last time you worked there?” I finally managed to ask.

“Last week.”

I begin to nod in response when something occurs to me. I glance up to see Evangeline back on her phone, an exasperated look on her face. “I thought you said you hadn’t talked to your parents in awhile?”

“Did I say that?” She barely gets her head raised before her phone starts buzzing again. “Sorry, one sec,” she says, holding up a finger and typing out some sort of frustrated response with her free hand.

I let out a sigh, watching her as she types. I notice her freckled nose scrunching up in focus the same way it always has. I have a million questions and concerns swirling around in my brain, but, all at once, I realize they’re really none of my damn business. She’s a grown adult. *We’re* grown adults. She’s had an entire life for the past six years that I’ve had no part in. It’s about time that I truly accept that the Evangeline Jacks I knew...might just...*not exist anymore.*

I feel a pinch in my chest and a voice coming to the forefront of my mind trying to fight me the moment I admit that to myself, but I quickly shake them both away. I give the panel I’ve been working on one final kick before it gives way. I catch the glass in my hands, turning back towards Evangeline. “Well, that’s good,” I say with every ounce of enthusiasm I can muster. “As long as you’re happy.”

Her brown eyes snap up to me so fast that I pause in front of her. Our gazes remain locked for several seconds. I can feel another bead of sweat making its way down my face but am unable to swipe it away with the panel of glass in my hands. I want to attempt to dip my head down and wipe it away on the shoulder of my t-shirt, but I don’t feel able to break her eye contact.

Evangeline’s eyes dart back and forth between mine a few times, the tension thickening with each growing second before she suddenly breaks, shaking her head. “Yeah,” she chuckles.

Feeling allowed to move again, I walk past her in the door once again to set the panel down with the others, finally wiping the sweat from my raised brows before turning back to her. “What’s funny?”

She lets out a thoughtful sigh, leaning against the doorframe. “Just... *Happy.*” She makes air quotes with her hands around the second word from under the pile of things still in her arms.

“What about it?”

Her lips purse at the side. “I just feel like that word means different things than it used to.”

I close the distance between us, leaning against the one somewhat stable outer wall of the greenhouse. “Since when?”

She turns in the doorway to face me. “Since we grew up,” she nearly whispers.

I let out a sharp breath, her admission catching me off guard.

There’s the girl I know. My Evangeline—

I quickly shake my head.

No.

“Evangeline...it doesn’t have to,” I say. “Mean different things.”

“I just don’t think it’s that simple.”

“Well, it should be.”

Evangeline steels her spine, her mouth opening like she’s going to say something, but she doesn’t; instead, she simply stares at me again for several more long and painfully silent seconds.

When I suddenly have the urge to say and do a million things I know I shouldn’t—and realize I’m already about to forget that this is *none of my damn business*—I force a half-hearted smirk on my face and push off of the wall. I just make my way past Evangeline in the doorway and back inside the greenhouse when I feel her hand shoot out and grab me by the left forearm, jerking me to a stop.

I blow a breath out of my nose, ignoring the churning feeling in my stomach as I turn around to face her. When my gaze finds her, however, she’s not looking at me; she’s looking down at my forearm, turning it slightly back and forth. When she finally looks up at me, the biggest and most beautiful smile breaks across her face.

“This is home, right?” she asks.

Fuck.

My mouth goes bone dry, a lump settling in my throat. “Yeah,” I mutter.

Evangeline’s eyes sparkle in response as she continues to examine my tattoo. I’ve had it for years now and almost never think about it. I honestly find it funny how big of a deal people like to make out of tattoos. Once they’re on your body, they just become a part of you. You almost forget they’re there.

Almost.

I follow her gaze, really looking at and re-appreciating the artwork for the first time in a long time. Her index finger traces from the mountain peaks extending to the crease of my elbow, down across the conifer trees running all around my mid-forearm, and ending at the body of water the entire image is framing.

Home.

Lake Placid.

The warmth of Evangeline's finger seems to be annoyingly radiating a path straight into my chest. A fuzzy feeling of nostalgia weighs heavier on me the longer we both stare at the image of the lake.

Thankfully, Evangeline pulls away, letting my arm fall.

She swallows hard once, her eyes trailing from the ground to my face and finally landing on my shoulder. She reaches out and my heart rate instantly spikes in response as I realize she must be eyeing my other grouping of tattoos on the upper portion of my right arm, just barely poking out of the collar of my white t-shirt.

"And what's this?" Evangeline asks hesitantly, her fingers just grazing the shoulder of my open flannel before her cell phone starts going nuts again.

She lets out a huff, grabbing her phone from the top of the stack of binders, her brows pulling together as she declines the call and begins typing furiously.

"Is everything okay?" I ask her.

"Ugh, no," she huffs. "Well, yes. But, no."

"Makes sense," I deadpan.

Evangeline blows her hair out of her face before looking back up at me. "Sorry. Yes, everything's okay. I just hate this stuff."

"What stuff?"

"We...uh," she trails off, plopping her phone back on top of her binder and fidgeting with her shirt sleeve. "We have our wedding shower coming up in a couple of weeks."

I resist the urge to grind my teeth as I nod.

"I have a bunch of people asking me questions about planning and preferences and one of my friends is...trying to get me to shop."

"Wow."

"Insisting actually. She's been trying to take me for weeks."

I catch myself mid-snort. "The audacity."

"I know, right?" Evangeline smirks, rolling her eyes as she steps away

from the greenhouse. “Well, I’ve gotta run.”

“Hey?” I call, making her pause. “I’m gonna be doing demo all day today, but, by tomorrow afternoon, I should be ready to get started on some rebuilding. Could we swing by Jacks Hardware tomorrow to grab a few things?”

“Oh,” she mutters. “I– What do you need? I’ll grab it.”

“Well, I don’t need it just yet. And it’s kind of a lot. It’d be easier if I could just take a look in person. And I’d love to see your parents and the place.”

“Yeah, well, I’m going to be there today,” she replies, straightening her stack of binders. “Might as well grab you the immediate stuff in the meantime?” I tilt my head at her. “You’ll be here awhile,” she continues. “We can go together later.”

I think about pushing the subject but decide to leave it. “Well, alright.” She’s right. I’ll be here for a couple more weeks. I’ll get there eventually. She might as well bring some things back if she’ll be there already. “I’ll text you a list?”

“Perfect,” she nods. “See you later?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Evangeline offers one last small smile before exiting the backyard through the gate. It’s only a few seconds later that I hear her truck power to life and pull out of the driveway.



IT’S a couple of hours later when I successfully remove the last pane of glass. I set it with the others, taking a step back to survey the situation. I realize with a lot of love and some elbow grease, I should easily be able to salvage about two-thirds of them, which is a 66% better start than I initially thought I was going to have.

I head back into the greenhouse, planning to get started on clearing out the existing shelves and potting tables, but pause in front of the door leading inside the house. It suddenly occurs to me that I haven’t had a sip of water in hours, nor have I eaten today. My stomach rumbling in response to my thoughts is what pushes my feet forward and into the house.

The door closes behind me and I am met with eerie silence. Well, technically, this house is *always* eerily silent. I think it's impossible not to be with how ridiculously large it is. But, still, being entirely alone in it adds a whole new element.

I make a beeline for the kitchen and have a sloppily made turkey and cheese sandwich and two large glasses of water down within minutes. I move to go straight back to the greenhouse, but hesitate in the large foyer, my curiosity getting the best of me. I make a right instead of a left and find myself meandering through the many hallways that make up this near-mansion.

Every door lining every hall is closed until I turn what is (*I think?*) my fourth corner. Two doors towards the end of the hallway directly parallel to each other stand slightly ajar. I make my way to them, giving the first a small nudge further open to peer inside. I stiffen immediately and start to pull the door closed, however, once I realize what the room is.

Her bedroom.

Their bedroom.

I think for just a second about pushing the door back open and looking anyway, but decide against it, spinning around instead to the second open door. I open it hesitantly, not sure what I'm going to find, but feel a smile across my face the moment the full room comes into view.

The space is large, with built-in floor to ceiling bookshelves lining the entirety of the right wall, stuffed to the brim. A desk sits against the opposite wall, notebooks and binders stacked haphazardly high. The thing that makes me sure I know what purpose this room serves, however, lies directly in front of the window.

A large wooden easel stands tall, a table covered in various paints and palettes sitting directly to its side. Canvases of all different shapes, sizes, and colors lean against the wall in front of the easel. When I make my way closer and crouch down to examine them, I realize none of the paintings seem to be complete. In fact, most of them appear to have been abandoned at a critical point of the project. A point which required major decision making. A point which could ultimately lead to one thing.

Overthinking.

I shake my head, a smile pulling at my lips. This is an Evangeline work space if I ever saw one.

I stand up to my full height, ready to begin my trek back to the

greenhouse, when something pulls me to the bookshelves. I walk over to them, seeing books of all ages and genres filling every available space; it's the various picture frames scattered throughout the shelves, however, that truly draw my attention.

I see several pictures of Evangeline with her sister Steph and a few of her with Remy that I glaze over completely. I make my way further down the wall and see one of her with two girls I believe were her college roommates and a couple of her with her Grammy. Feeling satisfied with my level of prying, I turn to leave, but then pause, a frame catching my eye in my peripheral vision.

I walk over to the portion of bookshelves in the corner closest to the doorway, picking up the small gold frame sitting at my eye level. The photo in this frame is completely different from all the rest. It has to be at least twenty years old, the age showing in the creased corners and yellowed coloring.

I immediately recognize Evangeline's parents. The shot seems to be somewhat candid, both of them laughing and Brett's arm slung around Heidi. I glance to the side and swallow hard when I notice the background. A man stands in the doorway of a room just behind them, a smile I'd recognize anywhere spread across his face and a tiny baby cradled in one arm.

Dad.

Dad holding *me*. My teeth sink into my bottom lip, stifling my grin.

How have I never seen this picture before? And why does Evangeline have it? Even better, why does she have it on display in her office?

I hold the frame up closer to my face, trying to take in all of the details, when a sudden voice startles me, the picture falling from my hands.

"Annie Jacks, I swear to Jesus Christ and Harry Styles themselves, if I have to drag you out of this house by your beautiful fucking hair, *I will*—"

The door of the office is flung all the way open at the same moment I barely manage to regain grip on the picture frame, saving it from shattering into a million pieces. When I look up, I'm met with the wide-eyed gaze of a petite woman, her curly blonde hair fanned around her face and her cheeks pink like she's been in a heated rush.

"Who the hell are you?" she demands. I don't even get a chance to respond before her hand flies to her mouth. "Wait," she says, her spine straightening. "Oh. My. God."

I slowly set the picture frame back on the shelf behind me, making sure to

put it as close to exactly like I found it as possible.

“The man, the myth, the legend.”

My lips twitch into a smirk. I adjust my baseball cap, turning back and taking a few steps towards the woman. Her arms cross over her chest.

“*That little rat,*” she murmurs.

I can’t help the chuckle that leaves me as we both shake our heads at the same time.

“Hey, Leah.”

TWELVE YEARS AGO

Annie

“Oh, sir! Take a left here, please.”

The taxi driver veers sharply to the left at my dad’s direction, sending my mom and Steph’s weight sliding against me, pushing me into the wall of the car. I glance up and out of the window, seeing we are going the opposite way of the arrow on the street sign indicating the direction of Boston College.

“Are we not going straight to campus, Dad?” I question.

“Change of plans. Kyle texted me while we were dropping off our bags at the hotel. The game doesn’t start until 6:30, so we’ve got a little over three hours to kill. A pit stop was suggested.”

“Where?” Steph asks.

“The Boston Public Garden.”

I shake my head, a light chuckle escaping me. “Let me guess who could have suggested that.”

Ten minutes later, we are out of the taxi and walking through the wrought iron gate and cement pillars that make up the entrance to the Boston Public Garden. Once inside, though my breath is taken away by the grand assortment of trees, their leaves various shades of green, yellow, and orange as it is just transitioning to autumn, my attention is immediately drawn to the massive statue of George Washington on horseback one hundred feet in front of me; more specifically, the family clad in shades of dark red at the base of the statue.

As we walk closer, my eyes find Blake right away. Though his back is turned to me, I can tell that he’s smiling as he talks animatedly to his dad about something. I, for some reason, reach up and smooth my hands over my side braided hair, attempting to tuck a few of the loose strands back in place. It would have been nice to have a brush back at the hotel. I pinch the front of my white tank top, bringing it up to my nose. *And maybe some body spray to freshen up with as well.* I adjust the fabric of my thin blue cardigan on my shoulders, wrapping it a little tighter around myself.

I look up just as Kyle spots us, pointing over Blake’s shoulder in our direction. I catch just a glimpse of Blake’s face as he turns around before Emily blocks my view, speed walking straight for me. “Hey girlie!” she beams as she throws her arms around me, her dark curls tickling my face.

“Di Fazios!” I hear my dad shout from behind me.

“Brother!” I hear Kyle bellow back. “Hey, man!”

I turn to see Dad and Kyle pulling out of a hug, Kyle reaching up and ruffling my dad’s hair. “Are those some grays I see there, Jacks? Damn, we should have taken advantage of the senior citizen discount on those tickets.”

“Pfft, yeah, okay,” Dad says.

“I mean it! Should I grab you a wheelchair at the stadium entrance while we’re at it?” Kyle jokes.

“Hey, I’m a silver fox! It’s okay to be jealous, man. I get it, I look good.” Kyle rolls his eyes, laughing in response. “Tell him, babe,” Dad says, turning to Mom, but her face is buried in her cell phone like it has been since our plane landed.

“Yes, totally, babe,” Mom agrees.

“Still Ronnie?” Dad asks, referring to our hardware store manager.

“Ugh, yes,” she says. “The truck finally showed up with the week’s shipment. I swear, every time we leave town something has to go wrong. Sorry, hon. All good now!” She slips her phone back into her purse, pulling Kyle into a hug. He greets her and a yawning Steph, whose napping habits and infinite need for sleep are somehow the same at age eleven as they were at age four.

I shake my head, snapping my fingers to tell Steph to wake up, and then startle, suddenly feeling a presence just behind me. I spin around and find myself staring straight at a maroon t-shirt covered chest.

“Blake,” I blurt out, having to take a step back so I can look up at his face. “Hey.” It’s been less than six months since I last saw him, but he’s somehow grown even taller.

“Hey,” he responds, eyes trailing down to my tank top and back up, his head cocking to the side. “Where are your colors?”

“Ugh,” I say, wiping my palm down my face. “The airline lost my suitcase.”

“All of your family’s?” Blake asks, concerned etched between his brows.

“Nope. Just mine, of course,” I force out a laugh. “But, hey, don’t worry. They said they’d deliver it to the hotel in the morning. Just in time for us to head back to the airport.”

“Oh, dang. That sucks. I’m sorry,” Blake says.

“It’s okay,” I say, shrugging my shoulders. “It’s just one day. I knew I should have worn my game outfit on the plane. This is what I get for wanting

to be comfortable.” I look down at my old loose and ripped faded jeans and slip-on Vans. “Or just for being a lazy slob if we’re being honest here.”

“Shut up,” Blake says. “You look great. You always do.” I look up to meet his gaze, but he looks away. “Besides, it’s not like anyone will notice your team’s lack of representation anyways. Both teams are maroon.”

“*Crimson*,” I, and my dad from several feet away, correct him at the exact same time.

“That’s my girl,” Dad adds.

“Oh, whatever,” Blake chuckles, rolling his eyes, as we follow the rest of our families further into the garden.

When Dad found out Alabama would be playing against Boston College in an extremely rare out-of-conference game to start the football season, all it took was about thirty seconds to convince Kyle to drive his family the five hours down to Boston and make a weekend out of it. Well, *weekend* was an overstatement. Steph and I started school back up last week, so in order to not miss any days this early into the school year, we flew out of Alabama at the crack of dawn this morning and would be catching the noon plane back to Montgomery tomorrow.

We casually weave our way throughout the garden, following the path and general flow of foot traffic. I realize quickly that the name *garden* doesn’t do this place justice. The large park is absolutely stunning, filled with more types of flowers, shrubs, and trees than I’ve seen in my entire lifetime.

Just past the entrance, we make our way across a small lagoon on a bridge that looks like it’s straight out of a movie scene. Real swans and tourist filled boats shaped like swans dot the water below us. Though our parents keep up a steady chatter behind us, Blake and I stay quiet, taking in all of the sights and sounds.

Several minutes into our stroll, we come across a large intricate fountain in our path. Couples and families sit all around its edge as birds bathe and play in the various levels of water. As we round the fountain, a large cart with flowers for sale comes into view. I walk closer, scanning the display, Blake just on my heels. I spot a small single bouquet of baby’s breath sticking out of the bottom row and run my fingers lightly over the tiny white flower buds. I can feel Blake’s eyes on me and pull my hand away before meeting his thoughtful gaze.

“What?” I question.

“Do you like those?” he asks.

I shrug, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “They’re pretty.”

“Wow,” Blake says.

“What?”

“You like a plant,” he states.

“I never said I didn’t.”

“Mhmm,” Blake hums smugly.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“What a *weirdo*,” he teases.

“Oh, shut up,” I say, shoving at his shoulder. “I never called you weird—”
I’m cut off by Blake’s accusatory glare.

“Okay, maybe once or twice,” I correct. We both shake our heads, laughing, as we continue on our way.



HOURS LATER, just after 9 p.m., we are walking out of the football stadium, Dad and Kyle heatedly debating the final play of the game that ultimately resulted in Alabama’s narrow loss. By the time our shuttle van pulls in front of the hotel fifteen minutes later, they’ve rehashed the game’s final seconds at least ten times and Steph is fully asleep against my shoulder. I jostle her awake just long enough for us to get up to our hotel room, her being the first inside the room and promptly face planting onto our bed within seconds.

Mom and Emily stay chatting in the hallway as Dad stands in the open doorway, continuing to go at it with Kyle. I pull my crossbody off my shoulder, setting it on the small bedside table inside the room, and spot Blake leaning against the hallway wall. We both cross our arms awkwardly at the same time.

“Boys?” Emily cuts in. Dad and Kyle’s heads both snap in her direction, pausing their passionate discussion. “I’m pretty sure the entire floor is about to call the front desk and complain. Should we call it a night? Or at least go finish this conversation downstairs over a drink at the bar?”

“I love that idea,” Mom chimes in, poking her head in the doorway. “Annie, do you mind?”

“That’s fine,” I respond. “I’ll find a movie and stay with Steph.” A loud

snore comes from Steph right on cue.

“Or you can go to our room and watch something with Blake,” Emily suggests. “So you don’t wake her up.” Though we’re nearly ten feet apart, I notice Blake’s head perk up slightly.

“Oh, um, yeah,” I shift on my feet. “Okay.”

“You rock,” Dad says, planting a kiss on top of my head. “We shouldn’t be much more than an hour. You still got your key?”

“Yep,” I say, pulling the hotel key card from my back pocket and holding it up.

“Perfect. See you in a bit,” he says, holding the door open to let me into the hallway and then turning to follow after Mom, Kyle, and Emily. The door quietly shuts, leaving me alone in the hallway with Blake.

He starts walking in the direction of his family’s room and I silently follow after him. Something weird starts to knot in my stomach as we get further down the hallway and I suddenly realize my bottom lip is becoming raw from how hard I’ve been chewing at it. As if reading my mind from several paces in front of me, Blake pauses, turning my way.

“We don’t actually have to go to my room,” he says.

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. “Okay,” I reply casually. “What should we do instead—” I start to ask but then pause, seeing a maintenance man over Blake’s shoulder coming out of a stairwell door marked *Employees Only*. I notice the door doesn’t fully shut, catching on a rumpled doormat on the ground just inside. Considering our rooms are on the top floor of the hotel, there’s only one place the stairs could lead. “Nevermind, I have an idea,” I say.

Blake follows my gaze over his shoulder, immediately spotting the open door and turning back to me. “Seriously?” he asks.

A mischievous grin plays on my face. I walk over to the door, pushing it all the way open and looking back at Blake. “C’mon, Di Fazio. Are you in or are you out?”

Blake steels his spine, challenge in his eyes. “Oh, I’m in, Jacks.” He walks straight past me in the doorway and heads up the stairs. “I just better not see you crying when they drag us to jail,” he calls over his shoulder as he shoves open the top door, the warm outdoor breeze flooding the stairwell.

I follow after him, rolling my eyes. “Don’t be a drama queen,” I joke, stepping out onto the roof.

“Wow,” Blake and I both mutter at the same time, the lights of the Boston

skyline taking our breath away. We make our way closer to the edge.

“Holy shit,” I say, crossing my arms.

“*Language*, Evangeline,” Blake teases.

“Shut up,” I say, sitting one hip down on the thick cement ledge. “God, this is beautiful. I’m moving here.”

“I thought you were moving to New York?” Blake asks, sitting down next to me.

“There, too,” I say, keeping my eyes on the city.

Massive lit up buildings stretch on for miles, the electric blue lights of Zakim bridge standing out in the distance. Though the general noises of a city play as a soundtrack all around us, the muffled sound of actual music grabs my attention. I glance to the right, seeing a rooftop party happening at a skyscraper apartment just a short distance away from us. I squint my eyes, seeing twenty or so people all gathered around tables and benches, sipping drinks and swaying to the song playing that I don’t recognize.

“You really love cities, don’t you?” Blake asks.

I let out a sigh, smiling. “Yeah. Yeah, I really do. There’s just so much going on. So many people. It’s just so different from what I’m used to.”

“I’ve always meant to ask you,” Blake says, my attention turning towards him. “What made your Dad go to Alabama?”

“Oh, you don’t know?” I question. Blake shakes his head. “Well,” I chuckle, “you actually have your dad to blame for that.”

Blake cocks his head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“Your dad convinced my dad to take a trip to Gulf Shores, Alabama during Spring Break their sophomore year of college,” I begin. “My mom also happened to be there with her friends at the same time. They met at a party on the beach and the rest is history. Dad fell absolutely head over heels and transferred to the University of Alabama to finish out school with her. Ramer is my mom’s home town, so they ended up moving back there together after college, got married, and worked a handful of odd jobs until they scraped enough money together to open the hardware store. I came a few years later and then Steph five years after that. The end.”

“Wow,” Blake says, his brow furrowed.

“I know,” I say. “Sounds crazy right?”

“Well, obviously not that crazy. It seems like everything worked out for them.”

“Yeah, I guess it did,” I agree. “It’s just so weird. The idea that one girl

on a random trip to a beach across the country made Dad up and change his whole life. And how all of this came out of it.”

“Hmmm...” Blake says, stifling a grin.

“What?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he says. “It just kinda sounds like it was meant to be. Maybe like it was...*fate*?” His eyes meet mine, his lips pulling into a smirk. “Don’t you think?”

I shake my head, hiding my own smile. “I think it's more like a crazy coincidence.”

“Mhmm...”

“That spurred a series of other events—”

“Yeah, totally,” Blake agrees sarcastically.

“Whatever,” I say, lightly shoving at Blake’s hip with my shoe, making him chuckle.

“Well, what about your parents?” I ask.

“What about them?”

“They were high school sweethearts, weren’t they?”

“Yep,” Blake says. “Been together since they were sixteen.”

“Holy shi—”

“*Evangeline*,” Blake shoves me back with his shoe. “Where did this filthy mouth of yours come from?” Blake questions, feigning offense.

I don’t respond right away, still processing the fact that Blake’s parents have been together since they were my age. Since they were basically my *and* Blake’s ages.

Holy shit.

“That just seems so young,” I mutter. “So young to commit to something that long term. Like as in...*forever*.”

I look at Blake, seeing him studying me. After a moment, he shrugs. “Dad’s just always said that when you know, you know. No need to overthink it. Overthinking is life’s greatest waste of time.” When Blake sees my one raised eyebrow, he adds, “Another Kyle Di Fazio original.”

“Well, if that’s true, I have definitely been wasting a majority of my days,” I laugh, shaking my head. “But, see? Your parents are great.”

Blake head tilts. “Yeah, they are great. But, what’s your point?”

“They were just from the same home town and in the same classes,” I say. “And they’ve got it pretty made. They’re happy, successful,” I glance up at Blake, “and they’ve got a pretty decent son, I suppose. There wasn’t some

crazy twist of destiny or divine intervention.”

“Something doesn’t have to be *crazy* for it to be fate, Evangeline,” Blake says, turning towards me. “It’s just about letting life happen and trusting your gut when it shows you the right path. Or person.”

I open my mouth to reply and then my head snaps suddenly to the right. “Do you hear that?” I ask Blake.

“Hear what?”

The volume raises, the lyrics ringing out clearly.

“*Just a small town girl!*” I yell out.

Confusion flashes momentarily across Blake's face until I point my thumb in the direction of the party.

“*Livin’ in a looonely world!*” I continue, throwing my hands in the air.

Blake shakes his head, a smile lighting up his face. I jump to my feet at the same moment whoever is in charge of the party’s music, as if in response to me, turns the volume to what must be nearly full blast.

I continue screaming the lyrics, dancing ridiculously along the edge of the roof. Blake stays seated, watching me with amusement. “Oh, *c’mon!*” I shout, motioning for him to stand. “It’s Journey! You gotta sing.”

“I’m actually great right here,” Blake laughs.

“Our fathers would be so disappointed in you,” I say, spinning around.

“Maybe you should get down from there,” Blake says, glancing over the edge of the building.

“Maybe you should get up and join me,” I shoot back.

“Nah, I’m good.”

“Then so am I,” I say, inching closer to the edge.

“Evangeline.”

“Yes, Blake?” I respond, sticking one foot barely off the roof as I continue to sway my hips to the music.

“Would you just get down—”

“Hmm..?” I ask, turning fully towards the city. I start to dance one inch closer to the edge when an arm is suddenly hooked around my waist, yanking me backwards until I slam into a hard warm chest. I spin around, pushing my hair out of my face, seeing Blake standing just in front of me, all amusement gone from his expression. I glance down, seeing one of his hands still resting on my hip.

“*People!*”

I look up at him, my brows pinched.

“Livin’ just to find emotion!”

My confused expression breaks into a smile when I realize he’s singing along. I start to tease him for giving in but he cuts me off, spinning me around suddenly by my arm. I laugh so hard that tears prickle my eyes.

I grab for his other wrist, standing on my tip-toes, and attempt to twirl him. Our height difference makes it impossible, and our grip breaks halfway through the spin. We quickly recover, both of us singing at the top of our lungs so loudly now that I’d be shocked if everyone at the party couldn’t hear us.

We go through every cheesy dance move in the book, switching between shimmies and disco arm movements when we don’t know what else to do. The guitar solo begins and Blake jumps up onto a box of some sort of mechanical equipment, committing to the performance like he’s trying to win an Oscar. I have one hand shooting repeatedly into the air, fingers formed into the universal symbol for rock ‘n’ roll, and one hand clutching my stomach as my gut starts to ache from laughing so much and singing so hard.

“Don’t stop believin’!” Blake and I both shout when the moment comes, him jumping down from his platform and me spinning on the spot. Our voices start to go hoarse and sweat dots both of our foreheads as we finish out the chorus. Blake grabs my hand, spinning me out and back into him just as the song ends. I crash into his chest, both of us laughing and breathing hard enough to think we just ran a marathon.

When the next song begins, the music is back at its previous volume, making it unable for us to fully hear. I take a step back, pushing my hair behind my ear and fanning myself. It takes a few seconds before I realize Blake is still holding my hand. I slowly look up, seeing his seafoam colored gaze on me. It’s as if gears are turning behind his eyes, his expression one of deep concentration for just a moment before it’s wiped away, my hand falling from his at the same moment.

“Well, that’s probably our cue,” I say, motioning in the direction of the party with my head.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “We should go in. I could definitely use a shower,” he says, motioning towards his sweat soaked shirt.

“Same,” I agree. “About to give myself a full spa treatment with that free bar of hotel soap and get real comfy in that hopefully provided robe.”

“Oh, yeah. Your suitcase,” Blake says, his brows pulling together.

“It’s all good,” I say. “C’mon.”

We head back down the stairwell, me peeking out of the doorway to make sure no employees are lurking in the hallway before we step out of it, playing it cool as we make it back to the main corridor. We both pause when we reach it, remembering our rooms are in separate directions.

“Well, goodnight,” I say hesitantly.

“Goodnight,” Blake says, not quite moving.

“Will we see y’all in the morning?” I ask.

“No, I don’t think so,” he says. “I have a baseball game back home at 2 p.m., so we’ll be heading out early.”

“Oh, okay. Well, goodnight,” I repeat.

“Goodnight,” he says with a small smile, turning and walking towards his room this time, me doing the same.

When I reach our door, I open it slowly, trying not to disturb anyone. When I poke my head in, I see my parents aren’t back yet and Steph is still in the exact same spot, turned away from me now with the comforter thrown over her waist.

I tip-toe over to the mini fridge, bending down to open it and letting out a sigh when I find it empty of water bottles. That impromptu musical performance/dance party really worked up a thirst. I grab a couple of dollar bills from my purse, shoving them in my back pocket and heading out for the vending machine. When I open the door though, I startle, already finding someone in the doorway.

Blake stands frozen just inside the hallway, both of his hands behind his back.

“Hey,” he blurts out.

“Um, *hi*?” I say, my hand resting on my heart. “You scared the crap out of me.”

“Sorry,” he says, averting his gaze. “I was about to knock.”

“Why?”

“I just...um,” Blake stammers, pulling his hand out from behind his back, a blue ball of fabric clutched in his palm. I glance from the material to his face, tilting my head in question.

“I thought you might like something to wear to sleep. Other than the hopefully provided robe.”

My lips part as he stretches his arm out to me, releasing his grip on the fabric. When it unravels, I see that it’s his Jays baseball t-shirt.

“Oh, Blake,” I whisper. “You don’t have to.”

“It’s okay,” he says, a tinge of pink on his cheeks. “I want you to be comfortable.”

“Really,” I insist. “It’s just one night. I don’t want to take your—”

“Evangeline.”

My gaze snaps to his.

“Just shut up and take the t-shirt.”

I blow a breath out of my nose. Taking the shirt from his hand. I hold it up. Seeing *Di Fazio* in all capital letters and the number 13 printed on the back in red font. “Thank you,” I say. “I’ll get it back to you before you leave in the morning.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Blake says.

“No, really—”

“It’s not like we won’t see each other again,” he says, cutting me off.

“But, *really*—”

“Evangeline.”

“Fine, I’ll shut up,” I sigh. Blake chuckles at that, shaking his head. “Thank you, really.”

Blake nods, lingering in the doorway. Even though I know I should probably just say goodnight, something in me doesn’t want to just yet, so I blurt out the first thing that comes to my mind.

“How’s your shed?” I ask.

Blake’s brows raise in surprise. “Oh. Um, it’s good. Great actually. It’s just about done.” He slips his cell phone out of his pocket, unlocking it, then hesitates. “Do you want to see?” he asks, motioning towards the phone.

“Oh, yeah! Sure,” I nod, stepping closer to look at the screen.

Blake swipes through several pictures and I hardly recognize what I’m seeing. He’s completely rebuilt the previous sorry excuse for a shed into a full blown enclosed garden/man cave hybrid situation. He’s installed large panes of glass on one side of the wall, tons of plants and flowers sitting out on a homemade looking wooden table against the windows. The other wall of the shed is covered in a built-in bookcase, paperbacks and knick knacks filling it to the brim. A small table and a wooden chair, also appearing to be made by hand, sit against the back wall of the structure. Though it’s still a little rough around the edges and clearly not finished, I can’t believe how much Blake has managed to transform the space.

“Wow,” I whisper. “That’s amazing, Blake.”

“Thanks,” he mumbles, swiping to the next picture, showing a different

angle of the room.

“Wow,” I say again. “You’d never know it was the same shed, if you can even call it that anymore. It’s crazy to see the progress.”

“It’s not finished yet,” Blake says, refusing again to accept any form of praise. “If you want,” he clears his throat, “I can send you more progress photos. As I finish it up.”

“Oh,” I say, feeling blood rush to my face. “Yeah.”

“Yeah?” Blake questions, surprise in his tone.

“Yeah,” I smile. “I’d like that.”

“Okay, cool,” he says, adjusting his baseball cap with a smirk as he hands me his phone.

I type in my phone number and contact name, double checking it before I hand it back to him. It takes less than five seconds for Blake to change it from *Annie Jacks* to *Evangeline Jacks*, replacing the information without comment. I roll my eyes, smiling to myself as he locks the phone and slips it back into his pocket.

“Well, goodnight,” he says.

“*For real* this time,” I say. “No more heart attacks, please.”

“For real,” he laughs. “I promise.”

I glance from my feet back to him as I let the door close, taking a few steps into the hallway. “Good. I’m just gonna grab a water bottle from the vending machine,” I say, motioning with my thumb down the hall.

“Okay,” he says.

“Okay,” I agree. “Thank you again, for this,” I say, holding up his t-shirt.

“Yeah,” he says, just barely taking a step back. “Goodnight.”

I nod, starting to turn away and then pause, spinning back around and marching forward, closing the space between Blake and me.

He holds up his hands and straightens in surprise as I throw my arms around him, settling into his chest and forcing myself through the foreign feeling. After a few seconds, his arms relax, falling around me and pulling me in closer. His smell invades my nose, a combination of cedar and citrus like I’ve never smelled before. We stay that way for several seconds, neither of us speaking.

I finally break the embrace, stepping back from Blake and barreling straight for the vending machine. “Goodnight,” I call over my shoulder.

When I finally allow myself to look back, Blake is gone.

PRESENT DAY

“**Y**ou have so much explaining to do.”

I climb up into the truck, using the assistant handle as leverage.

“Apparently trust and communication mean nothing to you. Well, I’ll tell you what. You can *trust* me to spit straight into your champagne glass before giving my maid of honor toast and to *not communicate* that to you.”

I set my tote bag at my feet, reaching for the seatbelt with one hand and struggling to shut the heavy truck door with the other.

“Also, you’re the worst best friend to ever exist. Do you come with a warranty? Am I too late to trade in?”

“*Oh my God*. It’s lovely to see you too, Leah,” I retort now that I’ve actually made it into the vehicle.

Leah gives me a look like I’m on some type of drugs before dramatically shifting the truck into drive and peeling out of the parking lot of my office. She doesn’t stay silent for long, continuing her verbal assault the minute we get on the highway.

“I mean, can you really blame me, Annie? You have Blake freaking Di Fazio, a name that may as well have been *Voldemort* for how forbidden we’ve been from speaking it for the last six years, living under your roof for *days*, and you don’t think that’s an important little tidbit of information to share with your best friend? Maybe before she stormed into your house and verbally assaulted him? Which, by the way, she wouldn’t have had to do if you would have just answered your freaking phone and let her take you shopping for a freaking dress for *you* to wear to *your* freaking wedding shower. And then you leave her hanging for an entire week without a single detail? I mean honestly, Annie, do you know how insane I’ve been going?”

“Oh, I think I have an idea.”

“This is not funny, you rat,” she shouts when she sees me holding back a laugh, lightly swatting at me.

“I know and I’m sorry. I just...wasn’t sure what to say?”

I can feel Leah’s eyes burning a hole in the side of my head. “Seriously?” she exclaims. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe something along the lines of: *Oh, hi, Leah. Light of my life. Knower of all. Baddest of bitches—*”

“Okay, I get it—”

“*Remember how I just moved into a new house? And remember how it had a greenhouse in the backyard and how I was thinking of fixing it up? Well, I finally remembered that my childhood star-crossed lover is a big, sexy, delicious smelling freaking greenhouse architect lumberjack and that the only possible answer would be to fly him across the country to shack up with me and my fiancé for weeks while he fixes it—*”

“Okay, that is not at all how it went—” I break off, realizing, in some minor ways, that is somewhat exactly how it went. Leah takes notice, but I continue. “Okay, maybe a tiny bit. But he’s not a lumberjack. And I’m not sure how his smell is relevant.”

“Annie. Have you *seen* the flannel on that boy? And his smell,” Leah pauses, “I know I don’t need to tell you why that’s relevant.”

My mouth falls open. “You’re crazy.” I shake my head and turn to look out the window.

“No, Annie. *You’re* crazy. About him! You have been since we were kids. You know it and I know it, so why won’t you just admit it?”

“Because we’re not kids anymore.” I turn back to her, exasperated. “And as you just pointed out, I have a little *wedding* coming up.” Leah’s lips purse as she glances to the side at me. “He’s here to fix the greenhouse because he’s the best person for the job. That’s it.”

Leah is having one of her rare silent moments, which means she’s thinking more things than she could possibly say. When she does this, I usually end up word vomiting until she gets the answer or information she’s looking for. But that’s not going to happen this time.

Seconds turn into minutes and Leah doesn’t say a word as we continue down the highway. After bobbing my knee enough times for my thigh to start cramping and chewing my bottom lip until I nearly taste blood, I finally let out a sharp sigh. “Is it a crime if I maybe didn’t hate the idea of seeing an old friend again?”

Leah's lips pull up at the corners.

She got me again, dammit.

"No, hon. Not at all. Blake's great. And I'm sure he's the absolute best when it comes to fixing that greenhouse. I'm just worried for you. Both of you."

"Why?"

Leah raises her brows at me. "You know why."

"That was a long time ago."

"What was, exactly?"

My lips part, but I'm not totally sure how to answer that. "Blake. Us. Whatever it was. All of it," I shrug.

"Feels like just yesterday," Leah persists.

Tell me about it.

I shake my head, pushing the sudden onslaught of memories away. "Well, it doesn't matter. Things are different now. We've grown up."

"Oh, trust me, I noticed. He's grown up, alright."

I rub both of my palms down my face, my head pushing back into the headrest. "Do *you* come with a friendship warranty?"

"I'm just saying," Leah chuckles, holding her hands up. "That boy has aged like a fine wine. I can't imagine being stuck in close quarters with him."

"Leah, we're adults. Not wild animals. And I'm engaged—" I falter on the last word, clearing my throat. *That was weird.*

"I *know*, hon," she rolls her eyes. "But, this isn't any ordinary guy. You two have so much history. I'm just looking out for you."

Something pinches in my chest. Leah might not always show it in the most traditional fashion, but she really is the most caring and compassionate friend. And, as much as I hate to say it, sometimes I swear she knows me better than I know myself. I can deny it as much as I'd like, but she's not wrong. Blake and I do have history. And he *has* so unfortunately aged like the finest of wines. But I wasn't lying when I said that none of that matters *now*.

Though having Blake abruptly back in my life has brought up a lot of old things I've kept buried internally for so long, and has made me angry with my body at times for its unwarranted reactions, having Blake back, having him here, has been...*nice*.

And knowing the greenhouse will be fixed.

Only the greenhouse. That's the main thing.

Definitely.

I blow out a deep breath. “I know you are. And I love you for it. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about him coming sooner. Honestly, I think I was—*am* just still processing it myself.”

Leah rubs my shoulder, her expression softening. “I get it, babe. It’s a lot to take in. Just remember that you don’t have to do it all on your own.”

I can’t even count the amount of times that Leah has said some sort of variation of that last statement to me throughout the course of our friendship. All on my own has been my go-to way of dealing with life for a long time. Inside my head might not be the nicest place sometimes, but at least I know it’s safe.

“I know. Thank you,” I smile at her.

“And for the record, I love you, too,” Leah says. “Even if you get on my last fucking nerve sometimes.”

We both burst into laughter, relieving the last of the bundled up tension in the truck.

“Okay, but really,” Leah pushes on after a few moments. “How have things been with Mr. Di Freakishly Hot-zio?”

“Leah Annette Tucker, I swear to God—”

“Oh, whatever, you prude. Just answer the question. It’s been *years*. What’s it been like? Does he seem...different?”

My lips roll into my mouth as I ponder her question. “I don’t know,” I finally respond. “I think he *is* different in a way. I mean, we both are. We’ve grown up, matured. But...in so many ways...”

“It’s like nothing has changed at all?”

I let out a sigh. Like I said, she knows me better than I know myself. “Yeah, exactly. Is that weird?”

“I think it depends on your definition of *weird*.”

“I mean, it’s like, one minute I’m getting my things together to go to work and thinking about what I want to make my fiancé for dinner that evening and the next I’m nearly stumbling face-first through the currently half-built frame of a century old greenhouse because a backwards baseball cap and scrap of flannel made me question what decade I woke up in.”

“I knew you noticed the flannel.”

“I grew up with that flannel, Leah,” I shake my head. “How could I not?” Leah’s sly smile falters and something in her green eyes shifts, like she’s studying me. “I don’t know,” I continue. “It all just feels very strange. And I

know I brought it upon myself by bringing him here, and I'm not saying I regret it because I really want the greenhouse fixed, and it's not like I've hated having him around, but I just can't help but feel like an idiot and not have any idea what I'm doing or why I have felt like I could projectile vomit at any moment since the minute he agreed to come, which I still don't even understand *why* he agreed to come—"

"Okay *sloooow* down, tiger. Take a breath," Leah cuts off my tumultuous ramble, patting my back.

I do as she says, feeling the blood rush back to my face. "Sorry. I guess I did have some things to say about the situation after all."

"Uh huh. I'm glad I got through to you when I did. I think you may have exploded if you were left to your own devices for another day."

"Sorry," I repeat, pushing my hair out of my face.

"Stop apologizing, Annie. It's okay to feel confused and freaked out. This is a very...confusing and freaky situation." When I just groan in response, Leah continues. "Look, you're not an idiot. You're a human. And this is a very human reaction to what's happening in your human life. Yes, you invited Blake to come, but, if you're somehow forgetting, he *agreed* to come. So, chances are, maybe he also didn't hate the idea of seeing an old friend, just like you."

I turn to look at her. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, obviously. I mean...why else would he agree to fly across the country and spend weeks fixing up some rickety old greenhouse?" Her gaze flicks to and from my face, her expression unreadable. I swear I see her lip twitch, but I choose to ignore it.

"Right. Yeah, of course." I swallow hard.

"So he has, what, another week or so until he finishes?"

"Just about."

"And then he'll be done."

"Right," I confirm.

"And then he'll leave."

"Yes," I mutter.

"And then everything will be good?"

Something strange suddenly burns at the back of my eyes. I blink hard, pushing the feeling away. "Yep."

"Well, there you go. No big deal," Leah says.

"None at all," I say firmly, I think convincing myself as much as I'm

convincing Leah.

“In the meantime, however, you might want to see a doctor about that constant projectile vomit urge. I think that may be the one thing I can’t help you out on.”

I chuckle as Leah brings the truck to a stop, turning into the parking lot of the dress store she’s been trying to drag me to for weeks. I see a blur of pink pulling in behind us and wince. “Crap. I forgot to tell you.”

“What?” Leah asks, her head twisting to follow my gaze. “Oh, *hell.*”

“Lori Beth may have asked...or insisted...that she join us.”

Leah and I both watch as the bubblegum pink Cadillac parks next to us in the parking lot. After a quick reapplication of her bright lipstick in the exact shade of pink as her car, Remy’s most notorious, and only, aunt pops open her door and steps out into the gravel parking lot with impressive ease for someone wearing nearly five-inch stiletto heels. She fluffs up her bleached to a crisp and teased to high heaven hair in her rear view mirror before she catches sight of me and Leah. We both instantly and robotically plaster on the fakest of smiles, waving at her.

“*I’m back to wanting to trade you in. That still not an option?*” Leah whisper-shouts out of the corner of her mouth as we both open our doors.

“*It’s funny that you think I had any say in this matter—* Oh, hi, Miss Lori Beth! It’s so nice to see you.”

Lori Beth smiles as much as her standoffish personality and tightly stretched skin allow. “Yes, it is, isn’t it?” she affirms, side-stepping my hug and extending her hand to me like a queen would to a peasant. I accept it, shaking it awkwardly as I try to ignore Leah’s gaze burning a hole in my back.

Aunt Lori Beth is an enigma I’m not sure I can even explain. She is somehow one of the coldest and most isolated people I’ve ever known while also being the most insistently present and involved. Although she always seems like she’d rather poke needles in her eyes than have to socialize or participate in anything, she manages to show up without fail to every gathering in town, always coming dressed to the nines and entering the room as if every establishment or event exists for her and her alone.

I am 99% sure that the only person Lori Beth has ever shown or felt any true human emotion towards is her oldest nephew, which just so happens to be my fiancé. So, when I became a figure in Remy’s life, I simultaneously became a figure in Lori Beth’s life.

Yay for me.

Since the moment Remy and I got engaged, she has been sending me passive aggressive text messages on a daily basis, attempting to involve herself in the wedding planning process, and, because I barely want to be a part of the process myself, I have done absolutely nothing in satisfying her needs. Leah and I making this appointment to shop for my dress for the wedding shower was the first and only solid wedding related plan I have actually nailed down, so it was safe to say Lori Beth had given herself an invitation to come within the very second she caught wind of it. I'm still not even sure if the woman likes me, yet she wants to watch me try on dresses for hours.

Yeah, that makes total sense.

Although I may not be the biggest fan of Lori Beth and all the quirks and unpleasantries that come with her presence, I can pretend for Remy's sake. *Leah, on the other hand...*

"You remember my friend, Leah, I'm sure," I say to Lori Beth, motioning behind me.

"No, we haven't met," Lori Beth states, outstretching her hand in the same strange way once again. "Hello, Lilah."

"It's Leah. And we have definitely met on at least four occasions. But, yes, hello," Leah replies, subtly mimicking Lori Beth's intense southern drawl as she shakes her hand.

I camouflage the chuckle that bursts from my throat as a strangled cough, covering my mouth to hide my dumbfounded expression.

Jesus, Leah.

Lori Beth turns her unnaturally tiny nose up at both of us. "Right. Well, you'll have to excuse me. I do attend many occasions."

"Oh, but of course. No hard feelings," Leah replies with a tone and smile as sweet as candy, managing to keep her eye from twitching more than once.

"Well, shall we, ladies?" Lori Beth asks, motioning towards the dress shop. "Mustn't be late for your appointment. That is never a good look."

I glance at my phone, seeing we are over fifteen minutes early for our appointment that is taking place ten feet away. When I look up and meet Leah's eyes, we exchange one of our wordless telepathic messages that we've been able to share since the second grade. We both turn to face Lori Beth at the same time.

"Well, we wouldn't want that," I smile. "After you, Miss Lori Beth."



“THIS ONE’S CUTE.”

“That’s what you’ve said about the last seven,” Lori Beth exhales.

“*Actually*, she said the last seven were *nice*,” Leah corrects. “I think this is the best we’re going to get out of her.”

“Ugh, I’m sorry,” I dig my palms into my temples. “I’m just not feeling it for some reason.”

“Well, babe, you’re going to need to figure out how to feel it in the next ten minutes because you’ve got exactly one week until this shower,” Leah frowns.

I groan, twisting around in the mirror.

“And you’ll surely need alterations,” Lori Beth piles on. “You could probably help the snugness in the toosh area if you lay off the carbs for the rest of the week, but, regardless, your legs are absurdly long. If you don’t plan on going barefoot, you’d need most of these lengthened. I’m not sure how there will be enough time.”

Why is she here, again?

“I believe there is still one more dress in the fitting room for you to try on, Ms. Jacks,” the shop consultant I nearly forgot was there chimes in.

“Okay, thank you,” I say, stepping down from the pedestal with a huff and heading back into the fitting room, trying my best not to trip over the seven discarded white evening gowns spilling off of the bench inside.

“This one is the one! I feel it!” Leah calls.

“I think it has to be,” Lori Beth mumbles as I close the door.

I don’t even bother to look at the dress as I slip it on, shimmying the spaghetti straps over my shoulders. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’ve never been much of a dress girl anyways, but I have literally felt like I wanted to crawl out of my skin after every one I’ve tried on today. I feel the cool air conditioning hit my backside, causing goosebumps to prickle, and realize that most of my back is exposed. I turn my back to the skinny mirror set up in the fitting room, seeing that the strings of the straps continue in a criss-cross pattern all the way down, ending just above my *toosh*, as Lori Beth would call it. I reach for the strings, tying them in a sloppy bow as I push the door open, feeling rushed as I know our appointment time is nearly up.

I don't even get fully out of the fitting room before I see Leah's jaw drop. I may be hallucinating, but I swear I also notice a flicker of emotion cross Lori Beth's face. "Well, that's almost lovely—" she starts to say, but is drowned out by Leah.

"*Damn, Annie! Look at you, hot shit!*"

"Really?" I chuckle, ignoring Lori Beth's look of disgust directed at Leah as I move to look in the grand mirror. "*Oh...wow.*"

"*I told you,*" Leah purrs, raising her brows in the mirror's reflection. "That one fits you like a glove. Not a single alteration needed."

I stare at the dress, the white shiny satin hugging every curve of my body in the right way. The front of the fabric drapes down the perfect amount, showing off just enough cleavage to make me feel unusually sexy but not enough to be inappropriate for a family occasion. The gown is the perfect length, hitting just above the floor and swimming over every inch of my 5-foot-9-inch frame. I spin around, looking once again at the open back and piecing together the full picture. It's beautiful. It makes me *feel* beautiful. But...

"What is it?" Leah asks. My gaze snaps to hers in the mirror.

Dammit. Does she have to be able to read me so well all the time?

I blow out a breath.

Of course she does, dummy. She's your best friend.

"You don't like it?" she pushes.

"No. *I do.* I really like it. I just...I don't know. Something about it doesn't feel...totally like...me?"

The shop consultant reappears out of nowhere, wheeling a clothing rack full of dresses. She stops in her tracks when she sees me, pushing her cat eye glasses up on the bridge of her nose. "Oh, that is just stunning on you, Ms. Jacks! Surely this is the one?" she asks expectantly.

"I— I'm...not sure. It's beautiful, but I just can't place my finger on what's not clicking."

"Perhaps a different color?" she suggests. "It's best to stand out at a party anyways— Oh, look. I have a few of the same style on the rack right here," she says, pulling a couple of dresses free, blocked from my view. "We have it in black. And this lovely wine-red shade." She holds each variation out individually as she speaks. "I think there's one more here. Let me see..."

"Well, as it is a wedding event, it is traditional to go with white," Lori Beth speaks up. "Annie, you'll just have to choose one of the ones you've

tried on.”

I hear the clink and scrape of another hanger being pulled from the rack. “Oh, yes. Here we are. Oh, and look! This one is in your size,” the consultant says, straightening the dress behind the wall of other options before holding it out.

“I know it’s isn’t the easiest to find a flattering fit for your body type,” Lori Beth continues, “but they’ll have to do—”

“That one.”

“What?” Lori Beth questions, causing me to register that I even spoke. “*That one?*”

“Oh, fantastic!” the consultant squeals, handing the dress to me.

I take it from her, not sure why my hands are suddenly shaky. I swallow hard, tracing my fingers over fabric. So specific of a color. Light blue with a hint of purple. Pressure gathers in my throat and behind my eyes. “Yeah,” I say, my voice raspy, feeling a smile creep to my lips. “This one.” I hold the dress up in front of me, taking in the details all over again and letting out a sigh I didn’t realize I was holding. “This one...is me.”

I glance up, catching Leah’s green eyes in the mirror, her chin resting in her hand, lips slightly parted, and one eyebrow lifted.

Lori Beth’s grating voice starts up again. “But it’s a *wedding*. You can’t wear that—”

“It’s a *wedding shower*,” Leah cuts her off. “And it’s *hers*. She can wear whatever she wants.”

My heart instantly swells as Lori Beth’s mouth snaps shut and she crosses her arms, leaning back into the couch to take an aggressive swig from her champagne glass. I give Leah a small smile in the mirror and she winks at me.

Telepathic message received.

As I look back down to the blue dress, I feel my pulse begin to pound and my mind start to swirl. I glance from it to the white dress on my body and instantly search for the buried urge I always have to second guess myself.

But it’s nowhere to be found.

I want to wear this dress.

“I’ll take it.”



IT'S a little after 5 p.m. when we pull up to the house in Leah's truck, the pink Cadillac hot on our heels.

Once Lori Beth saw the time as we were leaving the dress shop and realized she'd probably be able to catch Remy coming home from work, there was no keeping the woman from making a pit-stop at our house on the way home to hers. I didn't even put up a fight when I saw a rare flicker of light pass through the woman's normally dark and severe eyes. I did, however, insist Leah stay for the duration of Lori Beth's visit. It only took groveling three-quarters of the ride home and the bribe of ordering pizza to get her to agree.

I hop out of the truck, letting the door fall shut behind me and heaving a sigh when I realize Remy's car is nowhere to be found. I shift the large black bag with my dress in it to one arm and pull my cell phone from my tote bag, typing a message to him.

Me: Working late? Lori Beth is here and dying to see you.

Or more so, *I'll* be dying if she doesn't see him.

I wait for his conversation bubble to pop up showing that he's replying, but it doesn't.

"You better be ordering that pizza," Leah says when she rounds the truck and sees me on my phone.

"I will, I promise," I reply. "Let's just get inside first."

"Do we have to?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

Leah huffs dramatically and then we both jump, Lori Beth appearing out of nowhere.

"Where's my little Remy Timmy?" she asks, referring to Remy as if he's a five year old boy rather than a thirty year old man.

Leah's eyes widen at me in disbelief, hidden from Lori Beth's view, and it takes everything in me to keep my face neutral. "He should be home any minute," I say, heading up the pathway to the front door and motioning for both of them to follow. "Just come in and get comfortable for now." I turn the key in the lock, pushing the door open. "I'll get some pizza ordered—"

My voice breaks off and my feet skid to a stop as I enter the foyer, my

dress bag nearly slipping out my grasp as the most incredible smell hits my nose. In fact, it almost smells...just like...*pizza*? The best pizza I've ever smelled in my life. I hear a faucet turn on and the light clattering of pans and am suddenly brought back to my senses.

What the hell?

I take one very slow step at a time towards the kitchen. As I round the corner to face the doorway, the first thing that comes into view is a Dr. Pepper can on the corner of the kitchen counter. My mouth falls open as my eyes flick from the can to the entire spread of Italian food laid out across the kitchen counter to the large flannel clad back standing at the kitchen sink.

"Holy shit." Leah appears at my side, reading my mind.

Blake barely startles at her words. "Oh, hey," he says, shutting off the faucet and turning to face us.

"Holy shit," a Southern drawl echoes behind me, causing both Leah and me to turn and face a dumbfounded Lori Beth, fully and shamelessly staring at Blake like *he's* the five course meal.

I tear my gaze from the most color-filled version of Lori Beth's face I've ever seen back to Blake. "Um, hey. What's all this?" I ask, motioning towards the steaming hot meal fit for twenty people.

"You've been hosting me for over a week now," Blake shrugs. "I thought it was time I return the favor."

I take a few steps towards Blake as he pushes away from the counter, my brows pinched in confusion. "Blake, you're already doing so much for us by fixing the greenhouse. It's not like you've been here squatting. Also, I've been the worst host in the history of hosts. I'm pretty sure you've been living solely off of turkey sandwiches and Cinnamon Toast Crunch."

He shrugs again, running a hand over his backwards baseball cap. "It's not a big deal."

I glance at the pan of lasagna, two different types of pasta dishes I probably can't pronounce, the massive bowl of salad, and tray of seemingly homemade bread spread across the counter and back to Blake.

"But it really is," I insist. "You didn't have to, but thank you."

Blake crosses his arms, his head tilting. "You make it seem like you've never been made a meal before."

I straighten, my lips parting as Blake's eyes search mine. When I don't respond right away, Blake swallows hard, his gaze flicking down to my arms. "You found a dress?" he questions.

“Oh. Um, yeah—”

The loud sound of a throat clearing cuts me off, making me realize for the first time that Blake and I had been whispering to each other.

“*Ahem,*” Lori Beth makes her presence known again. When I turn to look at her, I see her bright pink lips pulled into a tight smile. “Well, Annie, aren’t you going to introduce me to your guest? That would be the polite thing to do.”

Leah snorts, shaking her head and looking away. “Right,” I say. “Sorry. Blake, this is Lori Beth, Remy’s aunt. Miss Lori Beth, this is Blake, my...old friend,” I say motioning to him, feeling his eyes still glued to me but ignoring it. “He’s remodeling the greenhouse.”

“Oh my,” Lori Beth exclaims, clutching her chest. “Grandma Mary Lou’s old greenhouse? Well, just bless your little heart then,” she says, holding her hand out to him. “I’ve always adored that little greenhouse.” I grind my teeth, holding in the retort that she had previously called it a crooked pile of sticks and dirt and had encouraged Remy to tear it down. “It’s a downright pleasure to meet you, Blake...?” she trails off, looking at him expectantly.

“Di Fazio,” Blake finishes. “And the pleasure is all mine.” He grips Lori Beth’s frail hand in his giant one, shaking it firmly. I think she nearly squeals. So apparently there are *two* people Lori Beth is capable of showing true human emotion towards.

How did I get so lucky?

“The pleasure is mine, too, Blake,” Leah chimes in, fake batting her eyelashes to mimic Lori Beth. It goes completely over her head. “Could we eat your amazing looking food now? Please? Before I chew my arm off?”

“Yeah, go ahead,” Blake chuckles. “Dig in.”

“Well, aren’t you just the bee’s knees, Mr. Di Fazio?” Lori Beth says, brushing her hand across Blake’s chest before reaching for a plate.

I blink twice, attempting to understand the absolutely bizarre scene before me that I wish so badly Annie from a month in the past could see. “I— I’ll be right back. Going to put this up,” I say, holding up my dress bag. “Think y’all can keep him company for a minute?”

“No.”

“*Absolutely.*”

Leah and Lori Beth both speak at the same time. Leah laughs silently and flicks her head towards the kitchen door, telepathically letting me know they’ll be fine. I blow out a breath, heading for one of our many empty hall

closets to store my dress. I hear Lori Beth's voice in the distance as I go.

"So, Blake. These tattoos. Tell me about them. Tattoos have never been my cup of tea, but they just suit you so well..."

I miss Blake's response, but just know that he handled the odd and somewhat inappropriate remark like a champ. I have the dress bag hung up and am closing the closet when I hear Lori Beth again.

"Oooo, I see. You just have sooo many. Could you ever choose a favorite?" she purrs. I resist the urge to gag. I'm back in the hallway closest to the kitchen now.

"That one?" she probes. "But it's so small—"

The front door opens at the same time I reach the kitchen doorway. I turn to see Remy pushing inside, running a hand through his messy blonde hair.

"Babe," I acknowledge. "Hey."

"Hey, Apple Jacks," Remy sighs.

I walk over to him as he sets down his briefcase on the bench.

"Did you not see my text message?"

"Text? No, sorry, babe. Been busy. Why—"

"Remy Timmy!" Lori Beth squeals.

Remy looks past me, his face lighting up when he sees his aunt. "Aunt Lori Beth! I didn't know you were coming!"

"You would have if you checked my text—"

Remy moves right past me and accepts the bear hug Lori Beth has offered him up on the tip-toes of her hot pink stilettos. "Wow, hey," he says. "It's great to see you. Wow, it smells great. What did you make—"

Remy stops in his tracks when he reaches the kitchen. I follow behind him, seeing Blake crouched down, pulling another tray of baked bread from the oven. He makes eye contact with Remy, never breaking it as he sets the tray down on top of the stove and removes his oven mitt.

"Oh, it wasn't me, darlin'," Lori Beth responds. "It was y'all's lovely friend Blake here. Did you know you've had a chef under your roof?"

Remy makes a sound resembling something of a scoff. "No, I had no idea Annie's friend was so...comfy in the kitchen."

Annie's friend. Not *our* friend. I didn't miss the distinction. I press my fingers into my temples.

"He really is something, isn't he?" Lori Beth continues. "Now, Blake, you must give me your lasagna recipe. What's the secret? There's something special in here. Something *other* than love," she winks at him.

Blake tears his eyes from Remy, his lip twitching once before smiling at Lori Beth. “Yes ma’am. It’s actually a *lasagne*, if you want to get technical. It’s probably the béchamel you’re tasting.”

“Oh my, what is that? Sounds *very* fancy.”

“Not at all. Just a simple white sauce. Milk and herbs thickened with a roux.”

“A what?” Lori Beth questions.

“A roux. It’s just butter and flour—”

“Oh my God,” Remy snorts, shaking his head as he walks to the fridge, pulling out a beer.

I feel my ears and face heat.

“What’s so funny?” Lori Beth questions cluelessly.

“Oh, nothing,” Remy chuckles. “Just realized I got you wrong the first time, bud.” He nods towards Blake.

Blake turns to him calmly, his posture rigid. “Care to elaborate, *bud*?”

“Well, I said you were a man’s man, didn’t I? Maybe Daddy’s not so proud after all—”

“*Remy*,” I fume, storming further into the kitchen. “Seriously?”

Blake doesn’t move a muscle, however, his lips pull into a smirk.

“*Dick*,” I hear Leah mutter under her breath.

“What, babe?” Remy shrugs. “I’m just saying, he’s clearly spent a lot of time with his mom to have learned all of these cooking skills. I’m impressed. Truly.”

“My dad actually taught me everything I know about cooking,” Blake responds evenly. Remy pauses his beer bottle halfway to his lips. “I’ve learned lots of things from both of my parents.”

Despite the angry tears pooled in the corner of my eyes, I can’t help but smile.

“Clearly,” Remy says a few seconds later. When he catches my sharp gaze, he continues. “Sorry, man. Long day,” he grits out, taking a long drink from his beer.

“Clearly,” Blake echoes.

The tension remains thick in the room for all of one second before a completely oblivious Lori Beth carries on. “Well, give both of those parents a kiss on the cheek for me, Blake. How much longer will you be here? I think I’m going to need to come over for dinner every night until you leave.”

Absolutely fucking not.

“I’ll be done with the greenhouse in the next five days.”

“*What?*” I blurt. “That’s it?” I knew Blake had made tons of progress and that it was starting to come together beautifully, but had no idea he was that close. Five days?

Only five?

“Yep,” Blake replies, not meeting my eyes.

“Oh, five days?” Lori Beth confirms. “Well, then surely you’ll be coming to the shower right?”

My mouth falls open. Why had I not even thought about this possibility yet. *Wait*. Something suddenly clicks into place in my brain. *Oh my God*. How could I have not realized this until now? *How could I—*

“The shower?” Blake repeats.

“Oh, yes!” Lori Beth cheers. “Remy and Annie’s wedding shower. You have to have known—”

“He knows,” I cut Lori Beth off. “But, I guess we hadn’t really talked about it—”

“Well, let’s talk about it now! You’ll *be there*, darlin’. I won’t take no for an answer,” she insists, waving her arms towards Blake.

“When is it?” Blake asks.

“Blake,” I start, “you don’t have to—”

“Just a week away— September 1st! It’s at the Old Scarlett House. It’s the most fabulous venue, darlin’. Please, just take your time for a few extra days on that old greenhouse. Truly, you *won’t* want to miss it.”

“Miss Lori Beth, I don’t think Blake—”

“I’ll be there.”

My lips part. “Blake, really. It’s your—”

“I said I’ll be there,” Blake declares, his darkened teal gaze meeting mine for the first time in several minutes.

My spine steels, my brow furrowing. My throat burns and my eyelids feel heavy. Lori Beth is jumping for joy. Remy is grabbing another beer. Leah’s head is swiveling back and forth between us. I’m frozen in place, Blake not seeming far off. I notice his throat bob, his eyes flicking down and back up to mine.

“Okay,” I breathe.

TEN YEARS AGO

“**E**vangeline!”

I am ripped forcefully from my dream, the Boston skyline and music fading away.

“No,” I grumble, pulling the comforter over my head and rolling on my side, unwilling to let the moment go.

“Evangeline, get up!” the voice whisper-shouts again. “We don’t have much time.”

Huh? I roll onto my back. “Time? For what?” I slowly allow my eyelids to open, the teal eyes in my dream being replaced with real ones. Older ones. “Blake?”

Blake sits on the edge of my bed, leaning over me. His hands are still resting on my shoulders where he was just shaking me awake. “Nice of you to join me,” Blake says, his mouth pulling into that crooked smile of his.

I blink the sleep from my eyes, coming back to reality as I take in my surroundings. Baby blue walls and a quilt that doesn’t belong to me. *Oh, right.* I’m in the Di Fazios’s guest bedroom. It’s the last week of July and we’re in Lake Placid to visit them and Grammy before I start my freshman year at the University of Alabama.

“Now, get up. We gotta get a move on,” Blake says, hopping up from the bed and clapping his hands.

I glance over at the digital clock on the bedside table.

12:47 a.m.

“Are you insane?” I sit upright, pulling the blanket up with me in one hand and rubbing my face with the other. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“We have to start now,” Blake says. “There’s much to do and so little

time to do it.”

“Are you sleepwalking? Or high?” I ask.

Blake crosses his arms, drawing my gaze to his body for the first time and bringing to my attention that he’s wearing all black, from his backwards baseball cap to his darker than usual flannel to his tennis shoes. I also notice he’s wearing both long sleeves and pants which makes no sense considering it is the dead of summer.

“Or am *I* high?” I ask, tilting my head to the side. “Why are you dressed like a bank robber?”

When Blake just frowns in response, my exhaustion starts to seep back in. “Oh, forget it. Goodnight,” I say, flopping back down in the bed and rolling over.

“Well, you’re especially pleasant this morning,” he says.

“It’s literally midnight,” I mumble back, eyes still closed.

“And today of all days.”

My eyes snap open, met once again with the digital clock on the table right in front of my face. My gaze shifts from the time to the corner of the screen where the date is displayed.

JULY 31.

“Crap,” I say, sitting back up and rubbing my eyes. Blake smirks, arms still crossed, once he knows the realization has hit me. “Happy Birthday!” I sing, mustering up as much enthusiasm as I can.

“Thank you,” Blake chuckles, dropping his arms and walking closer to my bed. “Now, get up.”

“Er... why?” I ask, my eyes shifting the side.

“Because,” he begins, plopping back down on the edge, “it’s my birthday today.”

“Yes?” I agree, my brow furrowed.

“Which means tomorrow is your birthday.”

“...Yeah?”

“Which means we only have twenty-three hours left of both of us being seventeen.”

I blink at him, still not following.

“Which means you only have twenty-three hours left to be a rebellious minor on the brink of adulthood with me.”

My lips part, pulling into a smile. “I’m listening,” I say.

“So, I propose we sneak out—”

“Very rebellious.”

“I’m not finished,” Blake continues. I thought we’d sneak out and tick off a few things tonight that are perfectly legal for eighteen year olds to do but very illegal for us measly seventeen year olds to do.”

“Like?”

“I’ve got a few things in mind,” Blake says with a mischievous grin, “but you’ve got to get up to find out.” He hops off the bed, nodding towards me. “Are you in or are you out, Jacks?”

Excitement prickles at my skin and swims in my stomach. “Oh, I’m in,” I confirm, whipping the covers off myself. “Can you grab my jacket from my backpack behind you?”

Blake doesn't move, his mouth hanging open and his eyes trailing down. I follow his gaze, my cheeks instantly heating when I realize what he sees.

I’m wearing his t-shirt. The t-shirt I definitely promised I’d give back a year ago.

“Oh,” I blurt, clutching at the bluish-purple fabric. “Sorry, I was going to give it back to you,” I lie.

It wasn’t always meant to be a lie. I had totally intended on returning the shirt to him when he loaned it to me back in Boston, but the fact is, it was the comfiest t-shirt I had ever worn. The ridiculous woodsy citrus smell that seemed to be embedded in the very threads of the shirt was just an added bonus. I wore it to bed one more time after coming back from Boston out of pure laziness. I was so tired and the shirt was just *right there* at the foot of my bed sticking out of my suitcase. Then, after that, I told myself I was wearing it to see how long the scent would last, purely as a scientific experiment. Then, I think I somehow forgot about the experiment all together and simply found myself wearing the shirt to bed almost every night since. I didn’t even think about it when I packed it for this trip.

“Here, um, I’ll change right now,” I say, scrambling out of the bed.

“No,” Blake says, making me stop my movements and meet his gaze. “Don’t.” Almost entirely without taking his eyes off of me, Blake steps back and reaches behind him into my carry-on backpack, grabbing my denim jacket and tossing it to me. He takes a step closer. “That color was made for you,” he barely whispers.

I swallow against the sudden lump in my throat. “Er–thanks,” I mumble, averting my gaze. “I, uh, I’m just gonna go to the bathroom real quick,” I say, nodding towards the bedroom door.

Blake nods and I slip past him out the door without another word, closing it quietly to not wake Steph who is sprawled out sleeping on the game room sectional sofa just outside the door. We were supposed to share the queen-sized bed in the guest bedroom, but Steph, being very particular about her sleeping experience and freedom to move throughout it, opted for the couch.

Once in the bathroom a short ways down the hall, I splash some water on my face and quickly brush my teeth with my toothbrush from my toiletry bag I thankfully left in here before going to bed. After running my fingers once through my hair, I'm out the bathroom door and slipping back inside the guest bedroom.

"Ready?" I ask as the door latches shut, turning towards the room. "Hey!" I scramble over to where Blake is sitting on the end of the bed, my backpack zipped open at his feet and my high school yearbook propped open in his lap. "What are you doing? Give that back!" I try to snatch the yearbook from Blake, but he blocks me.

Even though we had received our yearbooks on the last day of school over a month ago, I hadn't had a chance to fully flip through it yet. I threw it into my backpack last minute as we were running out the door to the airport, thinking several hours on a plane would be the perfect time to do that.

"Nosy, much?" I grunt, still fighting and failing to get the book back as Blake just laughs, keeping me away with one hand as he flips through the pages with the other.

"Hey, I just wanted a look inside your world. Can you blame me?" he questions.

"Yes, I can," I snap back.

"Oh, look, there you are!" Blake points me out in the seniors section, ignoring me completely.

I huff, seizing my attack. "Fine, yes. There I am. Happy?"

"Very. Thank you," Blake chuckles, his eyes trailing back down to the book. "Hey, isn't that your friend?"

I look over her shoulder, seeing his finger pointing at the name *Leah Tucker*, Leah's bright smile and long blonde curls easily making her stand out from the rest of the pictures on the two-page spread that makes up our entire senior class.

"Yep, that's her," I smile.

"Wait," Blake says. His finger just barely starts to shift to the right and I groan immediately, already knowing where he's going.

“Jeremiah Van der Michael? *Van der Michael*...That’s that family you talked about before, right?”

“The Van der *Mooch* family, yes,” I confirm begrudgingly. “And we are not to talk about them,” I say, snatching the book from Blake’s hands and snapping it shut before he can even react. “Not ever, but especially not now. Unless you want my head to explode.”

“Why?” Blake questions, his eyebrows pinching.

“They’re trying to buy the hardware store out from under my parents,” I mutter, pushing my hair behind my ears.

“*What?*” Blake repeats, more forcefully, getting to his feet.

“Yep. Dad has told them a firm ‘*hell no*’ on multiple occasions, but they won’t stop. They’re threatening to get the city involved. Pull some strings. Dig in deep. They’ve assured us they will be going through our business records with a fine tooth comb and that they’ll find something to ruin us if we don’t give in.”

“Why do they even *want* it?”

“Because they want *everything*,” I growl. “They’re mooches. Leeches. They just want to come in after all the work is done and buy up whatever land or business they can to have something else to slap their name on.” I blow out a deep breath, seeing concern etched all over Blake’s face. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Don’t we have some illegal shit to do, birthday boy? I’m not getting any younger.”

“*Language*, Evangeline.”

I don’t respond, my brows raising and tongue pushing into the side of my cheek. A smile slowly breaks out on Blake’s face and he shakes his head.

“Yeah,” he says. “Let’s go.”



“A GAS STATION?”

“Yep,” Blake replies, pulling the keys from the ignition, shutting off his absurdly loud diesel engine.

“I’m second guessing this, Di Fazio. I’m pretty sure SWAT will be on us before we even step foot outside the vehicle,” I say sarcastically.

“Hey, we’re starting small and working our way up. Come on,” he says,

opening his door and hopping out of the truck. Well, more like stepping out. I, on the other hand, have to quite literally hop out of the truck as it's so high off the ground.

"What are we even doing here?" I grunt, pushing myself off the seat and successfully sticking the landing without rolling any ankles.

"Buying a scratch-off ticket."

"I'm already feeling the adrenaline high," I deadpan.

"Shut up," Blake says, rolling his eyes, opening the cracked glass door of the old gas station.

"I just expected a little bit more, being awoken from my slumber, is all," I whisper as Blake makes a beeline for the register.

"Hi," Blake says, planting his hands on the counter.

The girl behind the counter looks up lazily from her magazine. She looks to be in her early twenties, with an unnaturally bright shade of red hair and neon pink fake nails longer than I've ever seen before. Her eyes seem to brighten up when they land on Blake. "What can I get you, baby?" she asks, blowing a big pink bubble with her gum.

"Two scratch-off tickets please," Blake answers right away. The girl's red eyebrows raise and, despite my earlier trash talk, I suddenly feel a wave of nerves. Her eyes shift from Blake to me and back to him.

"Which kind?" she asks.

Blake leans forward, laying on a level of charm I didn't know he was capable of. "Surprise me," he says. I'm almost positive he winks at her.

What the hell?

I must be right because the girl plasters a huge grin on her face, blowing another bubble as she reaches under the counter. She slaps two bright green tickets on the counter and turns toward the register, pressing a few buttons to ring us up.

"And a pack of cigarettes," Blake adds suddenly with firm confidence. I feel my mouth fall open.

She surveys him for an extra moment before she responds this time. "Which kind?," she asks again, narrowing her eyes just slightly.

"*Surprise me,*" Blake replies again, grinning as he pulls out his wallet and hands over a wad of bills. When she doesn't react right away, his lips pull up further at one side, his smile widening to its fullest extent. "It's the dealer's choice tonight," he shrugs. I swear his eyes damn near sparkle as his singular cheek dimple that so rarely comes out goes fully on display. The girl tilts her

head, her eyes trailing up and down Blake's figure once, causing a feeling I don't like to appear deep in my chest.

"Mmm..." she hums, her lips pursing as reaches behind her to grab a pack of cigarettes from the wall, plopping them into the bag.

Once the girl has grabbed the cash from Blake and before she has any more time to think or question us, Blake snatches the bag and barrels for the door. "Keep the change," he calls over his shoulder.

"Thank you," I blurt without looking at the girl as I spin on my heel and follow after him.

Blake already has the truck started when I jump inside.

"What the hell was that?" I say, bewildered.

Blake puts his hand on my seat's head rest, turning to look behind us as he backs the truck out of the spot. Once he's back in drive, he meets my gaze. "You said you wanted more. I gave you more," he says with a smirk, tossing the plastic bag from his lap to me.

I feel a smile spread across my face. "Well, color me impressed." I pull the tickets and cardboard box of cigarettes out of the bag, a thought suddenly hitting me. "Did you go to that gas station on purpose? Knowing she wouldn't ID you?"

"Now, what would make you ask that, Evangeline?" He turns into the parking lot of a closed business just up the road, finding the closest spot and putting the truck back in park.

"I don't know. Maybe the fact that we passed three perfectly decent gas stations before getting to that sketch fest. And maybe the way that cashier was batting her eyes at you so hard I thought she was going to accidentally choke on her gum," I say.

"I'm sensing jealousy."

I pause at my attempt to pry open the cigarette box, my cheeks heating. "I wasn't jealous."

"It's okay. Not everybody has my natural charisma and undeniability," Blake says.

Oh. Jealous of that.

"You wish," I say, rolling my eyes as I fish a coin from one of the cupholders. "Mind if I start?" I ask, holding up one of the scratch-off tickets.

"Go ahead," Blake says, reaching across me to open the glove box, grazing my thigh in the process and sending an odd shiver through me. He digs through it for a few moments until he finds a lighter and then grabs the

cigarette box from my lap. “Do mine, too,” he adds, ripping the box fully open with his teeth and dumping one out into his hand.

“You don’t want the full experience?” I ask, raising my brows.

“Nah, it’s okay,” he confirms, bringing the cigarette to his lips and lighting it easily, the end turning a bright cherry red color as he slowly inhales. I pause my scratching, watching the various emotions flickering over his face all at once. After a few seconds, he blows out a steady breath, creating a large cloud of smoke.

I waft it away with my hand, the pungent smell overpowering all of my senses. “I guess it’s probably a good idea. We know good luck doesn’t exactly run in your blood when it comes to gambling,” I joke, referring to Kyle’s lottery success rate.

Blake takes another drag from the cigarette, this one much smaller than the last time. “Want to try?” he asks.

“Well, I suppose we must follow through on the law breaking,” I say. I start to reach for the box, but Blake beats me to it, plucking a fresh one from it. I lift my hand up to grab it from him, but he settles the cigarette straight into my lips. My brows raise, hands scrabbling for the lighter.

“I got it,” Blake says, flicking the flame to life and leaning in entirely closer than necessary to light the end of the stick. My gaze focuses in on his face, his eyes intent on the cigarette, the reflection of the flame dancing within them. His tongue pokes out of the corner of his mouth as a crease sets between his brows. Time slows down as his eyes flick to meet mine.

“Evangeline?”

“Yeah?” I mumble as best as I can with the cigarette still between my lips.

The corner of his mouth pulls up, the dimple appearing for the second time tonight. But this time it’s just for me. I think I love that dimple. I know I never want to share that dimple again.

“Can you suck for me?”

“*What?*” I sputter, nearly biting the end of the cigarette clean off.

“The cigarette,” he nods, chuckling. “You need to inhale for it to light.”

Oh.

I do as Blake says, inhaling deeply from the filtered end. I hold the smoke in for a moment, not quite feeling anything. I start to wonder if I did something wrong when, approximately one second later, the inside of my chest suddenly pinches, my lungs feeling like they’re on fire. I cough

violently, one hand on my chest and the other waving away the cloud of smoke coming out of me with each heave.

“Are you okay?” Blake sits up, hitting my back in an attempt to help.

“Yeah, yeah,” I reply through strangled coughs. “I think I sucked it too hard.”

Blake makes a snorting sound. “That’s what she said.”

“Shut up,” I roll my eyes, swatting at him. After my choking fit subsides, I look over at Blake. “This sucks,” I say, holding up the cigarette.

“It really does,” Blake agrees.

“Why does anybody do this?”

“I have no idea,” he says, both of us bursting out into laughter. “But we crossed it off the list.”

“And on top of that, you won \$10,” I say, holding up his scratch-off ticket.

“Like the cigarettes never even happened,” he smiles.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, after making a pit stop at an eighteen-and-up bar and sneaking past the non-existent bouncer (because it’s a Tuesday night and we’re in Lake Placid) just to get two Dr. Peppers to-go (which garnered an extremely confused look from the middle aged man tending the bar that obviously didn’t care enough to ask), Blake brings the truck to a stop in front of a building that’s even shadier looking than the gas station we stopped at first. Other than neon lights in the shape of skulls in the windows, there is absolutely no other signage.

“Um, Blake?”

“Hmm?” Blake hums, already out of the truck.

“Where the hell are we?”

“The location of our third illegal-under-the-age-of-eighteen activity,” he grins.

“I’m pretty sure kidnap and murder are illegal at all ages,” I say, glancing back at the dark building and then examining our surroundings, realizing we’re on a one lane street pretty much in the middle of nowhere.

“Oh, the drama,” Blake rolls his eyes. “Come on, it’s fine”

“Blake, I don’t know—”

“Evangeline. It’s fine. I promise.”

I have no idea why I trust him, but my legs are suddenly moving and I’m in the parking lot walking behind Blake towards the unmarked building’s door. When Blake pushes the door open, light floods out of the small space, and I realize the windows must have some sort of tint on them to make it look dark from the outside. Artwork hangs all over the walls and the smell of cleaning supplies fills the air. I faintly register a buzzing sound before I notice a man sitting in a chair in the back corner of the room, another man sitting beside him and tattooing his arm—

Wait, what?

“Blake—”

“*Di Fazio!*”

Blake’s attention turns from me to another guy in the room I hadn’t noticed before. He’s wearing all black, tattoos covering the entirety of his visible arms and neck. He’s really quite handsome, with striking brown eyes and dark hair. He can’t be more than a few years older than us.

“Carlos! Hey, dude,” Blake says, shaking the boy’s hand. “Carlos is one of the guys on my baseball team’s older brother,” he says, turning to me. “Diego. Do you remember him?” I’m pretty sure you met him once.”

I can’t remember much of anything right now but I nod anyway.

“This is Evangeline,” Blake introduces me.

“Annie,” I mumble, shaking Carlos’s outstretched hand.

“Nice to meet you. And good to see you again, man,” Carlos smiles, clapping Blake on the shoulder. “What are you doing here? You guys looking to get something?”

“Yeah, we are actually,” Blake says.

We are?

How have I suddenly lost the ability to speak?

“We’re just a hair under age,” Blake continues, “but we were hoping you could make an exception?”

“Pshhh. It’s a Tuesday night. Who gives a crap? Mike is just finishing up on someone else. You guys can come on back and we can do you both at the same time,” Carlos heads deeper into the studio, motioning for us to follow.

“Great,” Blake says, starting to follow Carlos before I grab him by the elbow, yanking him back towards me. His gaze meets mine, confusion in his expression. “What?” he asks, as if I have no reason to be questioning him.

“*Tattoos?*” I hiss. “Don’t you think you should have given me a bit of a heads up?”

Blake's face remains neutral, but his lips pull up just slightly. “You said you were in.”

“Yeah, before I knew what *in* really meant. I mean, Blake, this is permanent!”

“*No*,” Blake says, feigning a shocked expression. “Are you serious? I had no idea.”

“Shut up,” I grumble, shoving his shoulder. “I’m serious!”

“So am I.”

“Our parents will freak.”

“That’s why we get something small. In a place not that visible.”

“What would we even get?”

“I figured we’d pick for each other,” Blake replies casually.

I steel my spine, my brows raising. “It seems you’ve put some thought into this.”

“Maybe a little,” he smirks. “Are you in or are you out?”

I blow out a deep breath. I’ve always figured I’d get a tattoo at some point. I’m not against them by any means, I just assumed it’d be something that I planned for and would have some ounce of meaning behind it.

What the hell am I doing? And why can’t I just say no? And why do I kinda not even want to say no?

“I’m in.”

A huge grin breaks out on Blake’s face as he grabs my hand in his, lacing our fingers together as if in some sort of binding contract, dragging me back to where Carlos and Mike are wiping down their stations.

“So what are we doing?” Carlos asks as we approach.

“Are you gonna do hers?” Blake asks Carlos, nodding towards me.

“Sure,” Carlos replies, raising a brow.

“Great,” Blake says, dropping my hand and walking over to Carlos’s table, picking up the sketchpad laying on it. He quickly scribbles something down, showing it to Carlos and blocking my view with the notebook as he whispers to him, pointing back to the page to confirm details of whatever is about to be permanently inked onto my skin. The longer their conversation goes on, the more nervous I get.

“Um, you said *small* didn’t you?” I ask hesitantly. “It’s like you’re planning a mural over there.”

“Yes, small,” Blake confirms. “Stop stressing and tell Mike what I’m getting.”

“Oh,” I blurt. I was so focused on the fact that Blake is about to pick something that’s going to be drawn on my body for the rest of my life that I completely forgot I would be doing the same for him. How am I supposed to do that?

“I– What do you want?” I ask Blake.

“Nope, not how the game works,” Blake says.

“This is a game now?”

“Just pick something,” Blake says, ignoring my question. “I trust you.”

“That makes one of us,” I gulp. “I mean, this is a lot of pressure. How do I–”

“Evangeline.” He locks eyes with my over top of the sketch pad. “Stop overthinking it. Just pick the first thing that comes to your mind.”

I blow an anxious breath out of my nose. “Okay,” I say, turning to Mike. I do as Blake says and whisper the first thing I think of to him.

“Easy enough,” Mike confirms.

A few minutes later, Blake and I are both sitting in chairs facing each other, our respective small stencils ready to go.

“So, where are we putting these?” Mike asks. Blake looks at me, giving me a nod telling me he wants me to choose.

“Oh, um...” I lift up my arms, glancing over my body, trying to think of a spot that could easily be hidden the majority of the time but also would look good with a tattoo on it. I twist my right arm to the side, zeroing in on a spot on my upper inner bicep. Literally any short sleeve shirt would cover that, and, even without sleeves, that spot would so rarely be on display unless my arm was straight in the air. “How about here?” I ask, pointing to it.

“Works for me,” Blake agrees.

Carlos and Mike clean the same small area on both of us. “Alright, good to go. You ready?” Carlos asks me. I nod, biting my lip as the tattoo machine starts up.

“No peeking,” Blake says as Mike starts his machine as well.

“You either,” I shoot back.



FIVE MINUTES and a few cat-scratch-like pains later, Blake and I are standing in front of a mirror and I'm questioning my life choices.

"We really just did that, didn't we?" I ask.

"We did," Blake grins.

"How much do you think tattoo removal costs?"

"You haven't even looked at it yet."

"Ugh, I know. I just feel like I should be prepared. Who knows what you did to me."

Blake's head tilts, his eyes softening. "You think I'd purposely put something you'd hate permanently on your body?"

"Not necessarily something I'd hate. Just something you'd get a kick out of? Like a skull and crossbones with crossed tools instead of bones because of the hardware store? Or a piece of pineapple pizza with an X through it? I don't know—"

Blake's mouth hanging open causes me to pause. "How... Did you peek?" he whispers.

I feel all the blood rush to my face as I shove Blake's shoulder. "Blake, are you kidding me? What the hell is wrong with you?!" I fume. I yank up the blue sleeve of his t-shirt I'm wearing, ignoring the sting of pain coming from my inner bicep as I twist it to look at the monstrosity Blake has just stamped on my body for life.

"I knew I shouldn't have—" I start to say, but then stop. Because there is no monstrosity. "What...what is this?" I ask, staring at the two thin lines spanning about two inches across my arm, crossed at the center with letters in each of their four openings, one letter slightly bolder than the others.

I look up at Blake, seeing him chewing on his bottom lip, containing a smile. "It's a compass," he says.

"A compass?" I repeat.

"Yeah, a simple one."

I hold my arm out straight, turning towards the mirror to get a better look. I realize now that the two thin lines are actually arrows crossed in an X. The letters within each of the quadrants are N, E, S, and W. The cardinal directions. The E is a few shades darker and just a little thicker than the other letters, as if it was traced over several times.

"Because I know how much you want to travel and see new things." My eyes snap up from the tattoo, meeting Blake's in the reflection of the mirror, my lips parting. "So it's a compass. To guide you..." He mutters, averting his

gaze.

My brows pinch together, my mouth suddenly feeling very dry. “Why... why is the E bolder than the other letters?”

Blake clears his throat. “For *Evangeline*. To...to remind you at the end of the day to trust yourself and your instincts when you don’t know what direction to take next. For...you know, when you’re overthinking things.”

My heart feels like a rock in my chest. I blow out a steady breath, staring intently at the tattoo in the mirror.

“Do you like it?” Blake asks. My eyes slowly trail from my arm to his face, my vision blurring as tears well.

“You hate it,” Blake sighs, removing his baseball cap to run a hand through his hair. “You’re pissed. God, I’m sorry, *Evangeline*—”

“I love it.”

“What?”

“I fucking *love* it,” I breathe.

“You do?” Blake questions, his coloring somewhat returning to normal.

I nod. “I *am* pissed though because you told me to give you the first thing I thought of when you’d planned this deep sentimental ass masterpiece.” I glower, punching him unintentionally in his newly tattooed bicep.

“*Ouch*,” he grunts, clutching his arm.

“You deserved that,” I say, turning back to the mirror to admire my tattoo once again. “Thank you though, really. It’s amazing.” I feel a tear finally spill over as I look back at Blake. “I can’t believe I just gave you a freaking—”

“*Un-uh!* Nope, shush,” Blake cuts me off, clamping a hand over my mouth. “I want to be surprised.”

“Fine, look for yourself,” I mumble behind his hand.

Blake drops his hand, turning towards the mirror to peel back his sleeve. His brow furrows momentarily before a smile pulls at his lips. “Is this...a plant sprout?” he asks, glancing at my frowning face.

Another singular tear spills over as I nod. I look at the tattooed thin stem with short roots coming out of the bottom and two small leaves shooting off its sides. “I gave you a freaking plant sprout. I’m sorry. It’s so—”

“Perfect.”

“*What?* But you put so much thought—”

“It’s perfect, *Evangeline*,” he rolls his sleeve back down. “Because you picked it.” I meet his gaze and he doesn’t look away. “I love it. Okay?”

My back straightens. “Okay.”

Silence stretches on for several moments, the air becoming thicker the longer our gazes hold. Blake opens his mouth as if he's about to say something and we both jump, the loudest crack of thunder I've ever heard rattling the entire tattoo studio.

"*Shit*," he says as a torrential downpour of rain starts pounding against the windows.

"Damn, it's coming down hard!" Carlos whistles from his station.

"We better get back," Blake says. I nod in agreement. "Thanks, Carlos!" He waves to his friend.

"No problem, man. Happy birthday! Nice to meet you, Annie!" Carlos waves back.

"We better make a run for it," I say. Blake nods in agreement and I push the door open.

PRESENT DAY

I brace my hands on the bathroom countertop, inhaling deeply as I stare at the floor. I step back with one leg, stretching my calf muscles and then switching to the opposite side. I roll one ankle at a time, trying to focus on keeping my breathing even as I do anything I can to clear my mind.

Inhale.

Exhale.

I lift my head slowly, my baby blue pajama tank top coming into view before the reflection of my face in the mirror, my hair still damp and cheeks still flushed from the shower I just took.

I stare at myself for a long time, not breaking my own eye contact. I feel my breathing intensify the harder I try to relax myself. My mind feels like it's racing a million miles an hour. My eyes fall shut and I rub my hands once over my face before lacing my fingers together and resting them on top of my head, using a trick Steph taught me from her many years of athletic experiences. I instantly feel the air refill my lungs, my heart rate becoming manageable.

The same thoughts and questions swirl in my head on repeat, each one fighting for my attention. I feel tears threatening my eyes and immediately open them, not allowing any such thing. I blink hard a few times, raising my arms even higher. My gaze flicks to the side, my heart instantly slamming once painfully against my ribcage when my attention lands on the two inch span of black ink fully on display on my right inner bicep.

My breathing stops altogether as I study the decade old tattoo I always forget that I have until it randomly comes into view once in a blue moon. Even when I am reminded of its existence, I never allow myself to give it

thought, always instantly looking away from it.

This time, however, I don't.

I trace the thin arrows with my eyes, the edges slightly blurring over time. I glance over each of the four letters, purposely finishing on the boldest of the group.

I zero in on the *E*, letting out a sharp breath.

For Evangeline.

I blink harder.

To remind you at the end of the day to trust yourself and your instincts when you don't know what direction to take next.

I drop my arms roughly, hiding the tattoo from view.

If only it were that simple.

My eyes flick back to the mirror when I hear a rustle behind me and what I see causes conflicting feelings to rise in my chest. A comforting warmth of familiarity and an uneasy pang of frustration.

"Hey, babe."

Remy leans against the doorway. His slacks are still on from work but his boots and button-up top are gone, leaving only a gray t-shirt still covering his chest.

"Hey," I respond, meeting his gaze in the mirror.

His lips pull to the side as his hazel eyes study me. I can't decide if it's regret or concern I see flickering through them.

Remy stares at me for several more seconds before letting out a sigh and pushing off the wall. He closes the distance between us, sweeping my hair over one shoulder. My body instantly stiffens in response.

"I'm sorry, Apple Jacks," he says, wrapping his arms around my waist and trailing kisses across my shoulder.

Regret.

It was regret in his eyes.

"I'm sorry if I was a dick to your friend."

I begin to tell Remy he should tell Blake that himself, but the kiss he presses at the hollow of my throat cuts me off, making me giggle involuntarily. I shrug his arms off, spinning around to face him. I barely open my mouth to speak before Remy's lips are crushing against my own, the taste of beer mixing poorly with my freshly brushed teeth. I don't know why, but I have every urge to pull away. Right as I think I might, his arms encircle me once more as he attempts to deepen the kiss. My hands raise to his biceps,

grabbing on to them to push him away, but I force myself to pause. To count to three in my head and allow myself to sink into this moment. Sink into this man that's been present in my life nearly every day of the last five years. The only comfort and home I have known. I shut my eyes tighter, mentally recalling my image of the future that's been so crystal clear for so long. I'm able to find it after a few moments, but it's not quite the same now, appearing blurry around the edges for some reason.

My fingers dig into Remy's arm, nudging him back just enough to make my wishes clear. He resists at first, his lips continuing to pull at mine until I lower my head out of his reach. My eyes are still closed as I take several steady breaths, trying to understand my thoughts. Trying to rationalize why one of the only confident decisions I've ever made in life suddenly doesn't feel like it was made by me. Like I was a bystander in the entire act. Like I have simply been an alien inhabiting the body of a woman with an entirely different brain. One that's logical. One that does what needs to be done. One that understands contentment and doesn't complicate things with her senseless whims and child-like wistfulness.

Just let it go, Annie.

"You were a dick." I had muttered out the thought before I had even processed it.

Way to let it go, Annie.

When I allow my eyes to open, Remy's staring at me, a smile playing on his lips. It takes a few seconds for him to realize that I'm not making a joke, his face gradually falling. "Apple Jacks, c'mon," he mutters, reaching for my face.

"No, Remy," I insist, quickly dodging his advances and walking around him into the bedroom. "I'm serious." My gaze catches on our open bedroom door, Remy's button-up shirt, open beer bottle, and very muddy boots deposited on the floor just inside of it. I make myself look away before I let myself overreact, not allowing the small frustrating act to be the straw that broke the camel's back.

Remy quickly blocks my view of the scene as he comes out of the bathroom, frustration clear in his posture and in the pinch of his brows. "I said I was sorry."

"Yeah, well, that doesn't just make it okay." I turn away from him, busying myself with unnecessarily refolding the throw blanket on the end of our bed. I hear Remy take a step closer to me but ignore it, fidgeting now

with the comforter and wiping nonexistent crumbs from the top of it.

“Can you blame me?”

My spine straightens. I slowly turn back around to Remy and am immediately met with a look in his eyes I know I don't like. “What?”

Remy's gaze trails me once before landing on my face. He takes another step, leaving barely any room left between us. “What's the deal with you and him?”

My shoulders instantly slump, my lips parting.

Concern.

There had also been concern in his eyes.

I grit my teeth, ignoring the nausea churning in my stomach. “There is no deal.”

“Does *he* know that?”

“I can assure you, he does,” I affirm, slightly more forcefully than I intended. Remy lets a breath out of his nose, the crease between his brows deepening. The longer he stares at me the heavier the weight currently pressing on my chest becomes. I run my hands through my hair, attempting to reset my thoughts. “Look, there's just...a lot of history between us—”

“He looks at you like he's seen a ghost.”

My mouth goes dry. I swallow hard, my lips pressing together.

Of all things to say. Why?

“Well, in a lot of ways, I'm sure it feels like that.”

I don't feel that Remy has even been around enough since Blake has been here to draw that conclusion. *Not that he's ever around much anyways.* I shake my head, blinking away the burning in my eyes.

It doesn't matter. He's wrong. Blake doesn't look at me like anything.

I won't allow myself to think that.

Remy's head tilts. “You two really never got together?”

“No.”

He sighs, resigned, closing the last of the distance between us and putting his hands on my shoulders. “Anything else I should know?”

Where would I even begin?

“Nothing that matters now.” And that's the truth.

“Good,” Remy mutters, pulling me into a hug. I let him, allowing my eyes to fall shut and my head to nuzzle into his shoulder. When something feels stiff and uncomfortable about it, I wrap my arms around his waist and lace my fingers together.

There we go.

This is nice. This feels right.

Just as the most stubborn traces of my uncertainty are melting away, I feel Remy's warm breath ruffling my hair.

"I should have known better anyways," he says. "Nothing could ever take you away from me. Away from this town."

My eyes snap open. I go rigid in his arms, but he doesn't seem to notice.

"It's where you belong. Where you'll always belong."

My teeth sink into my bottom lip. "Yeah," I rasp, my lung capacity gone.

The loud sound of a phone ringing suddenly pierces the air. Remy pulls back, and I feel a silent tear spill over. I quickly take the opportunity to swipe it away as Remy reads his caller ID. When he glances back up, I smile tightly, crossing my arms. "It's Chuck," he says. "Gonna take this and hop in the shower."

"Okay, yeah. Of course," I babble, perfectly okay with having a few minutes to myself.

Remy nods, spinning and walking towards the bathroom.

My body relaxes and I start to let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding, until I hear Remy's voice again.

"Apple Jacks?"

I look up to see him paused in the bathroom doorway, phone pulled just slightly away from his ear. "Yeah?"

"You know I love you." It's not a question, but rather a withdrawn statement.

"I know."

Blake

A sharp pain suddenly registers in my balled fists, causing me to tear my gaze away from the scene in the open doorway I never should have walked past. I make my way silently out of the hallway, opening my hands to reveal the tiny half-moon indentations in my palms left by my fingernails. I'm not sure if that happened when she wrapped her arms around him or when I heard the deep sigh escape her as she rested her head against his chest.

I don't even know how I found myself at her—*their* room anyways. One minute I was in the greenhouse, sanding the same potting table unnecessarily for the third time, trying to convince myself that the greenhouse couldn't have already been fully done by yesterday, and the next, I was there, my gaze flicking between Evangeline's intertwined fingers connecting herself to a man that only wishes he could deserve her and her fluttering eyelids falsely assuring him that he does.

I find that I've entered the kitchen as my side bangs directly into the corner of the countertop. "*Goddammit!*" I hiss out in a strangled whisper, biting down on my knuckles to divert the pain.

I move one elbow to rest on the counter, running my hand through hair, flicking off my baseball cap in the process, as my other hand clutches at my surely bruised side. "*What the fuck am I doing?*" I whisper to myself out loud, barking out a sad chuckle.

She's engaged. She's getting married. She's having a wedding shower in a week.

Yeah, one you agreed to go to.

On September 1st.

I won't soon forget it.

Jesus Christ.

I run my hands roughly down my face. This is ridiculous. We're grown adults and I'm acting like a freaking kid. She doesn't even want me there. She tried to stop his aunt from inviting me several times, but I wouldn't let it go. Why wouldn't I let it go?

Because she's getting married.

No. I'm here for her greenhouse. Here to fix what's broken and go.

If only.

No. I've known for six years and I still know. I just need to accept it.

It's over.

I let out a sigh, pulling open kitchen drawers and searching for some sort of notepad and pen. Everything for the greenhouse is done. The glass panels are all ready, the tables are all finished, the plant hangers have been delivered, the new tile flooring is in. Everything just needs to be put in place and cleaned up. I had an order in for all the plants I hand selected at a local nursery days ago. I'm sure if I work through the night and call them first thing in the morning that I can have the plants delivered and in place by midday tomorrow while she's at work. It'll be finished. I will have done my part.

I've known for over twenty years and have reaffirmed in the last week and a half that Evangeline never eats breakfast, always flying out of the house with not a minute to spare. I begin thinking of her flushed freckled cheeks and golden brown hair falling in her face as she does so, but catch myself, pushing the image away. Today's Saturday, so, if she's keeping the same schedule she did last week, she should be helping her parents out at the store all day tomorrow.

The store.

Her parents.

I swallow hard, realizing I'm not going to get to see it or them before I leave.

God, it's been so long.

I begin to reconsider my decision but quickly recall the scene from just a few minutes ago. Her in his arms. *No.*

It's over.

I scrawl out the note before I can stop myself, placing it on the least obvious kitchen counter so that she'll find it when she gets back from Jacks tomorrow.

Last minute job came up back in Lake Placid. Not going to make the shower after all. Greenhouse is done. Thanks for everything. Tell your parents I say hi.

– Blake

I stare down at the note, knowing it's all that should be said, but that it's not even scratching the surface of what I *want* to say. I roll my lips into my mouth, bending over and starting to add one last line, but stop myself. *No.*

Just leave it be, Blake.

It's over.

I shove the note back further on the counter, leaving it out of plain sight, and head back to the guest room to pack up my things. The quicker that's all sorted, the quicker I can get the greenhouse together and catch a ride straight to the airport to hop on the soonest standby flight back to New York.

Once I get into my room, I only get a couple of things folded and into my suitcase before I remember I ran a load of laundry earlier today. I quickly reenter the hallway, taking the long way around to the laundry room to avoid their room at all costs.

I make it into the absurdly large laundry room, quietly pulling open the washer and dryer and finding them both empty. I turn around, examining the ten plus hampers that line the wall, seeing what looks like my clothes folded and set atop the one furthest away from the door.

Dammit, Evangeline.

The worst host in the history of hosts, my ass.

Of course she had to give me another reason not to leave without even trying. I shake my head, gathering up the laundry. It doesn't matter. I'm doing the right thing. My dad always taught me growing up that one of the most important things in life is to know when to walk away.

The other half of that statement is *and to know when to stay and fight*, but I'm just going to choose to ignore that part right now.

Sorry, Dad.

But it doesn't matter. It's not applicable anyways.

It's over.

I grab my last stray sock from the basket, shoving it into the pile of clothes in my arms. I start to make my way out of the room when something catches my eye in my peripheral vision. I freeze in place, slowly turning my head back to the hamper directly next to the one I just pulled my laundry from. Back to the blur of color I swore I saw.

I lean over, seeing the hamper in question is entirely empty aside from one wadded up clothing item at the bottom.

There's absolutely no way.

I shift my pile of clothes to balance only in my left arm, reaching out with my right hand to pull the blue fabric from the bin. I don't even get it all the way up to my face before the rest of the clothes fall from my hand. The shirt is inside out, but it doesn't matter. I can clearly see the outline of the numbers

through the worn out fabric. Can feel the texture of the crackling wording.

I manage to shake the shirt right side out, feeling a pit deep in my stomach at the same time the biggest smile pulls at my lips.

“*Well, I’ll be damned,*” I mutter to myself, holding up my old Jays baseball t-shirt.

I turn the decade and a half shirt around, seeing the number 13 and, more importantly, *my* last name, clear as day across the top.

I feel something click into place in my mind and something snap in my chest. Before I even realize what I’m doing, the shirt is once again inside out and at the bottom of the hamper exactly how I found it and I’m strolling back into the kitchen.

In one swift move, I swipe my baseball cap and the note off the counter, crumble the paper in my hand as I replace my hat, and drop it straight in the trash can as I head back out to the greenhouse. Not because I’m trying to get it finished, but because I know there’s no way in hell I can go to sleep right now. Because I know.

It’s not over.

TEN YEARS AGO

Annie

Blake and I bolt out of the tattoo studio and across the rain soaked parking lot towards his truck, both of us flinging our doors open at the same time.

Blake is inside the truck with his door closed before I can even set my foot on my side step. Rain is coming down in sheets, making the step ridiculously slick. The door hangs open as I struggle to get my footing, absolutely soaking my side of the front bench seat. I hear a slamming sound and, before I even have time to register what's happening, Blake's behind me, grabbing me by the hips, his fingers digging in my sides and sending a shockwave through my body that nearly takes my breath away, raising me up into the car seat within a split second as if I weigh nothing.

My door shuts and moments later Blake is back in his seat. I'm still attempting to get my heart rate under control when Blake removes his hat, shaking his dark curls out and sending water flying all over the truck cab like a dog. "Oh my God, that was nuts," he says.

"Yeah," I breathe.

My eyes stay glued to Blake as he replaces his hat, wringing his t-shirt out onto the truck floor and adjusting his mirrors. I watch as the muscles in his forearm flex as he reaches for the rear-view mirror, the cords rippling under his tan skin. I look back to his face, seeing his sea colored eyes deep in focus, water droplets gliding down his face. His tongue sticks out of the corner of his mouth in concentration as it has his whole life, but something about the action makes me feel differently this time. I feel like there's a rock in my throat, my chest pinching in a way I don't understand and can't explain.

Blake must feel my eyes on him as he suddenly glances my way, questioning in his gaze.

"Thank you," I whisper.

He rolls his bottom lip into his mouth, surveying me. "Yeah, of course," he says.

I don't respond, content to just stare at Blake for a few more moments.

He finally clears his throat. "I don't think you're going to get to see my bank robber outfit in action tonight, unfortunately."

I raise a brow. "What do you mean?"

"I brought some spray paint. I thought for our final rebellious act you'd

like to create some art on a little bigger of a canvas than normal.”

My other brow joins the first, raising higher

“Like maybe under Mann Bridge,” he smirks.

“*Graffiti?*” I gape. “That’s another thing definitely illegal at any age, Blake.”

“The paint’s washable,” he chuckles. “I just thought you’d like it. But it doesn’t matter now. No way we’re getting down there in this,” he motions towards the rain outside.

“Well...it’s the thought that counts,” I smile. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” he says again. Before the silent tension can thicken once more, Blake starts the truck and pulls out of the parking lot.

As I adjust my sitting position, the heel of my foot swings against something hard under the seat. I lean over to investigate, discovering an old Polaroid camera.

“Is this yours?” I ask Blake, holding the camera up.

“It’s my mom’s,” he replies. “She must have left it in here after our fishing trip last weekend.”

I turn the camera around, staring into the lens and leaning towards Blake. “How does it work— *Ah!*” The flash goes off, nearly blinding me. Blake bursts out laughing.

“That’s going to be a good one,” he says.

He’s right and wrong at the same time. The picture is amazing in the most ridiculous way. My face is right in the camera, my brows raised and mouth hanging open as my soaked wavy hair flings out to one side from me being startled. Blake is in the background of the picture, one hand on the steering wheel and a massive smile across his face, his eyes crinkling in the corners.

“This needs to be destroyed immediately,” I shake my head, staring at the developed picture.

“No way,” Blake says, snatching it from me and securing it into the mirror of his pull-down sun visor.

“C’mon, it’s so bad!” I groan.

“It’s a memory,” Blake replies, keeping his eyes on the road as he flips the visor closed, trapping the picture from my reach.

I sigh, giving up, knowing there’s no way I’m getting that picture back, and settle back into my seat.

We remain quiet for several minutes, both of us staring straight ahead out of the windshield at the empty road and unrelenting rainstorm. I glance at the

clock on the dashboard. 2:30 a.m.

Jesus Christ.

“Come here,” Blake says, stealing my attention.

“What?” I question, confused.

“*Come here,*” he repeats, motioning me towards him and patting the middle section of the bench seat.

“... I– Why?” I stammer.

“Because you’re shaking like a leaf.”

I glance down, not having realized I had my arms wrapped around myself. I suddenly become aware of my teeth chattering and my body shivering.

“Your seat is soaked,” Blake says. “Scoot over here.” He opens up his arm closest to me, flicking his fingers toward himself.

I open my mouth to tell him I’m fine and then change my mind. “Okay,” I say, giving in.

I shift towards him, just enough that I’m no longer sitting directly in a puddle. Blake keeps his arm raised, inviting me to move closer. I blow a breath out of my nose, slowly doing so. When my side is flush with his, he finally relaxes his arm, letting it sit on the back of the bench momentarily before it slowly glides down, resting on my shoulder and encircling me.

I exhale, but it comes out as a shudder, a chill sweeping over me. Blake instantly tightens his hold, pulling me into his side, his citrusy cedar scent filling my nose and lungs and hitting me like a brick wall. His hand slowly rubs up and down the outside of my arm and I suddenly become aware of his heart pounding in his chest against my side. I glance up at him, his face only inches from mine. His eyes flick down to mine once quickly and he clears his throat. “Gotta get warm,” he mutters.

“Right,” I whisper. “Thanks.”



BLAKE BRINGS the truck to a stop in front of the house, removing his arm from my shoulder to kill the engine as soon as we are parked parallel to the front yard.

“I don’t want to risk waking anyone up,” Blake says. “Are you okay to

make another run for it?”

“I’m right behind you,” I nod.

“Ready, set, *go!*” Blake pushes the truck door open, stepping out in one swift motion and jogging across the front yard through the pouring rain.

I pull my denim jacket around myself tighter and adjust my still soaked athletic shorts before sliding out of the seat after him. The rain obstructs my vision as I try and fail to find the side step. With a huff, I shove myself fully off the seat, taking the jump in full. I stick the landing, grinning to myself in pride before I take off after Blake and promptly slip on my first step.

“Woah, *shit!*” I cry, my feet flying out from under me. I see mud fly up into the air and feel it squish into my back and hair as my backside smacks firmly flat onto the ground.

“Evangeline? *Oh my God!*” I hear Blake whisper-shout from across the yard. “What the hell—” As he gets closer I hear his words breaking off into chuckles. “Walk much?” he laughs, extending his arm to me.

“Shut up,” I groan, accepting his hand and letting him pull me up. We both glance down at my clothing, nearly every inch of it and my skin caked in mud.

“Crap, your shirt!” I blurt. “Blake, I’m so sorry—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Blake says.

“But, it’s covered in mud—”

“Evangeline. I don’t care about the shirt. It’s yours.” I feel my eyes go wide. “Come on,” he says, pulling me by the hand he’s still holding. “Let’s go in the back and rinse you off.”

I let Blake guide me into the backyard, us staying quiet and tip-toeing through the rain when we have to graze past the outer wall of the house. He stops when we get just behind the back deck and under the cover of the overhanging roof. “Wait here,” Blake says, ducking back into the rain to unroll the hose from a few feet away.

“This is ridiculous,” I grumble as Blake starts spraying me off.

“Your coordination skills? Yeah, I know.”

“No,” I scoff. “*This,*” I say, waving my arms over myself as he continues to aim the hose at me. “I feel like a dog.”

Blake halts his spraying, standing up straight and tilting his head. “Huh.”

“What?” I ask.

“You kind of look like one too.”

My mouth falls open. Without thought, I scrape a handful of mud from

my side, flinging it right at Blake's chest. It hits him square on target, some ricocheting onto his face. Blake gapes, looking between the mud and me before an evil gleam I've never seen before enters his eyes. "You did *not* just do that," he growls.

"Hmm...I think I did," I respond, putting my hands on my hips.

Blake brows raise, his arm coming up to wipe the mud from his cheek with the back of his hand.

"Oh, you asked for it, Jacks," he mutters before ducking to the ground in a flash, scooping up two handfuls of mud and grass and flinging them right at me. I gasp as the mud splatters me from my knees to my neck.

I look down at Blake's blue t-shirt, the Jays logo completely unreadable with the amount of muck covering it. I shrug off my denim jacket, letting it fall to the ground. "Well, you better bring it then, Di Fazio."

Blake and I both dart fully out into the rain at the same moment, grabbing any ounce of mud we can from the ground and launching it at each other. Strangled squeals and laughter fill the air as we each attempt to dodge each other's blows, both of us failing nearly every time. Blake's cap has fallen off at some point, mud plastering his curls to his forehead and making his light eyes stand out even more in the moonlight.

We both slip and slide around the yard, neither of us willing to back down. At one point I try to throw Blake off by faking a run to the left but instead bolting directly for him. He catches me in my path, his arm shooting out to hook around my waist, pulling me backwards to him.

"No!" I giggle. "Stop!" I throw mud at him over my shoulder, his own laughter shaking his chest against my back. We both lose our footing at the same time, nearly falling down into the grass before Blake corrects us, lifting me off the ground by my waist to do so.

"Truce?" Blake asks, his warm breath tickling my ear.

I'm still laughing, the pouring rain streaming down my face and through the long strands of my hair. "Ugh, *fine!*" I give in.

Blake sets me down gently and I spin around to look at him, almost slipping once again on the swampy mud pit we've created. Blake's arm shoots out, grabbing me by the elbow and steadying me.

"Oof, thanks," I sputter. I'm still chuckling when I've fully regained my footing. I feel Blake's arm still on mine and glance up at him to see him staring intently at me though the sheet of rain separating us.

I open my mouth to say something, but something in his eyes stops me. I

can't even begin to decipher the emotion plastered across his face. His eyebrows are pinched deeply, his lips parted slightly, his chest rising and falling rapidly. His eyes have darkened to an olive sort of green, his pupils dilated and searching my face.

I feel my own breathing begin to labor, the air in my lungs suddenly thicker than it was moments ago. Something twists in my chest as Blake slowly raises his hand to my cheek. His eyes trail slowly from mine to his hand as he wipes away a streak of mud from my cheekbone, the pad of his thumb grazing roughly against my skin, making me shudder.

I feel the mud fall from my face, but Blake doesn't drop his hand, his gaze slowly returning to mine. My lips part as I suddenly become aware of his thumb tracing back and forth across my cheek. Raindrops cling to my eyelashes and I blink them away, not willing to miss a split second of this dream I'm convinced I'm about to wake up from back in the Di Fazios's guest bedroom.

Blake blows a breath out of his nose, rolling his lips into his mouth as he takes a step closer. My breath hitches as his hand fully wraps around my cheek, tilting my face up towards his.

I can hear my pulse pounding in my ears, drowning out the noise of the surrounding rain, goosebumps spreading across my entire body. Blake's eyes burn into face, glancing downwards momentarily before returning to my eyes. He moves in closer, the tip of his nose grazing mine.

"What are you doing?" I manage to whisper.

"I don't know," Blake says, bringing his other hand to my face, eyes darting back and forth between mine. "Do you want me to stop?"

A knot forms in my throat and I swallow, trying to force it down. My heart slams against my rib cage. I feel my hand trembling as I raise it to Blake's wrist, wrapping my fingers around it. "I don't know," I breathe.

Blake blows out a steady breath, his thumbs stroking across both of my cheeks. His eyes trail down as he closes the distance between us painfully slowly, just barely brushing my lips with his. I hear myself gasp; though it's barely audible, Blake senses it, pausing for a moment to make sure I'm okay. My head nods of its own volition, giving Blake all the confirmation he needs. His lips come back down on mine, this time with more force, and I instantly feel myself melt and mold against him.

A warmth I've never known spreads from where we touch throughout my entire body. His touch is rough yet so gentle all at the same time. He kisses

me like he's starving and I'm the first source of food he's seen in weeks; there's an obvious excited hunger to him, but it's as if he doesn't know when or if he'll see food again, causing him to hesitantly savor every last morsel.

My heart skips several beats as Blake pulls back just slightly, my eyes fluttering open to see him looking at me. I feel my walls melting away, my brain turning to goo. I'm putty in his hands, at his will, ready to take anything he's willing to give me. His lips pull into a smirk, my chest aching between the flood of emotions and the rate of my heart, as he leans back in. I'm ready for it, the rest of the world not existing in this moment.

Until...

I feel the gears turning, my mind racing, thoughts piling up, scenarios playing out, my plans for the future no longer entirely clear. My eyes snap open just as Blake's lips are about to meet mine again.

"Wait."

Blake freezes, confusion in his eyes when they open to look at me. "What's wrong?" he asks. "Are you okay?"

"We— We can't," my voice quavers.

Blake's eyes dart between mine, his brows pinching. "Why not?" he whispers.

"Because—" I grab his wrists, pulling them from my face and blowing out a shaky breath. "Because it's *us*, Blake."

Blake tilts his head. "Exactly, Evangeline. It's us. So what's the problem?"

"You can't just kiss me."

"Why not?"

"Because!" I throw my hands into the air, exasperated. "This. *Us*," I wave my finger back and forth between us. "This isn't just anything." He tilts his head further to the side, obviously confused. "*You're* not just *anyone*. You can't be."

"I don't have to be," Blake whispers.

I swallow against the gravel in my throat. "But it's not that simple."

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't!" I cry. "And please stop asking why not." I run my hands through my hair.

"I just don't understand," he shakes his head.

"Blake, I start college in a few weeks. And you have another year of high school. And you don't even know what you're doing after that yet."

“Okay?” he blinks.

“And I’m not even sure exactly what I want to do when I graduate. I mean, I know I want to do marketing, but I’m not sure what sector I want to go into. Or what field. And I haven’t decided between applying for jobs in New York City or Boston after graduation and—”

“Evangeline.”

“What?” I look up at Blake, exasperated.

“I asked you why I can’t kiss you and your reasoning is not knowing the city you might want to apply for jobs in four years from now.”

“Well, it’s important!”

“Tonight? Right now?”

My teeth worry at my bottom lip. “But that’s what I mean. You’re not just a *right now*. If you and I do this, we have to do it full out.”

“So, let’s do it.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re not ready, Blake. We live across the country from each other and are in totally different places in our lives right now. And we’re going to be for the next several years.”

“You know cell phones exist, right? And transportation methods?”

“Is that what you want? A relationship with your cell phone? Seeing each other a couple times a year? If we can even swing that? Not being able to really be in the moment for your senior year of high school? And whatever may come after that? You want that?”

Blake stares at me, his head shaking slowly. “I just want you.”

I stiffen. “You think I’m overthinking it,” I whisper.

“I know you are,” Blake says, reaching up to stroke my cheek. “But that’s okay. I can wait.”

“I just—” My throat tightens and my vision blurs. “I just want it to be perfect.”

“Nothing’s ever perfect, Evangeline.”

“I know. I just... I can’t lose you.”

“You won’t. Ever.”

“I just want to do it right.”

“I know.”

“Because...because it’s us,” I stammer. “Because it’s—”

“Fate?”

I meet Blake's eyes. A smile pulls at my lips and I shake my head, my rain soaked hair falling away from my face.

"It's okay," Blake says, a smirk appearing on his own face. "I can wait for fate." I pull my bottom lip into my mouth, Blake's gaze dropping to it. He swallows hard, and I know he's fighting an internal battle. "Look, how about we reevaluate the next time we're together? A few months, a year, whatever it is."

"Is that okay?" I ask meekly.

Blake steps forward again, bringing a hand to my cheek. "It's not preferred," he replies with a smirk, circling his thumb on my face. "But I told you, I can wait. However long it takes." The lump in my throat keeps me from responding with words, so I just smile at him, leaning into his hand. "But in the meantime, can I at least give you your birthday present?"

"What?" My brows pull together as Blake drops his hand from my face and pulls out a rolled up brown paper bag, placing his hand over top of it to shield it from the rain.

"But it's *your* birthday. Mine's not until tomorrow." My mouth falls into a frown. "And I didn't even get you anything."

"You've given me plenty," Blake says. "Here." He places the bag in my palm.

"But I—"

"Evangeline." My mouth snaps shut. "Shut up and open it."

"Fine," I grumble, unrolling the bag. I peer inside but can't see anything in the dark. Feeling a definite weight of something at the bottom of the bag, I turn it over, letting the contents fall into my hand. Something smooth and round attached to some sort of rough string hits my palm. I bring my hand closer to my face, angling it so I can see better in the dim lighting. My stomach drops, my mouth falling open.

"Blake..." The lump reforms in my throat. "Is this...baby's breath?" I choke.

"Yeah," he breathes, averting his gaze.

"You made this?" I ask, dumbfounded. When he just nods, my eyes trail from his face back to the homemade bracelet in my hand. A thin rope like cord circles and connects to a flat round mold of clear resin, encasing tiny pressed flower buds.

I was so distracted by the baby's breath that I hadn't noticed the small amount of another flower sprinkled into the mix, their bluish purple color

almost exactly the same as the t-shirt I have on.

“And these blue ones?” I ask.

“Oh,” Blake says, running a hand through his hair. “Yeah, they just sort of...reminded me of you.”

I examine the resin more closely. “What are they?”

“Forget-me-nots.”

My gaze snaps back to Blake, my brows raising and mouth falling open.

“I’m sorry it’s not much,” Blake says. “I was on a budget and in a bit of a time crunch.”

“Hey” I say, taking a sudden step closer to Blake, grabbing his chin so he’ll look me in the eyes. “It’s perfect.” Blake’s lips part. “The best present anyone has ever given me.”

Blake reaches up slowly, gently removing my hand from his chin and wrapping it behind his neck. His other hand finds my waist, pulling me closer to him, causing my breath to hitch. His gaze flicks down to my mouth and I feel my willpower beginning to slip. I don’t know if he leans in first or if I do, but we’re suddenly a hair width apart. I start to let my eyelids fall close when a bright light suddenly switches on just to our side, causing both of us to jump back a step.

“*Shit*,” Blake and his father say at the exact same time.

I see Kyle Di Fazio through the pouring rain standing in the back door of the house up above us on the deck in a white t-shirt and plaid pajama pants. His eyes dart back and forth between Blake and me, taking in the scene of us both covered in mud and in each other’s arms in the backyard at 3:00 a.m.

“Dad—” Blake starts, but Kyle cuts him off, throwing his hands in the air.

“Nope. I don’t want to know,” he says, reaching out and switching off the light as he spins in the doorway to go back inside. “Go to bed!” he calls over his shoulder as the door shuts and Blake and I are left alone, eyes wide and jaws unhinged. A few seconds pass until Blake breaks the silence.

“Well, shit,” he says, breaking out in laughter.

My head falls into my hands. “Oh my God.”

PRESENT DAY

“*O h my God!*”

“I know,” I groan, closing the door behind me as I enter the greenhouse, my hair instantly sticking to my neck from the post rain humidity.

“I don’t even know what to say.”

I switch my cell phone to my other ear, sidestepping a puddle on the floor under the last remaining portion of roof that Blake has yet to install the glass panels in. “I didn’t either, Steph. Which is why I didn’t tell you. I’m– God, I know I’m the worst, but–”

“Annie, stop,” Steph cuts me off on the other end of the line. “I get it. I’m not mad. I think I’m just in shock for you. I mean, this is *Blake*.”

I blow a steady breath out of my pursed lips, running my finger along one of the many gorgeous potting tables I still can’t comprehend that Blake made from scratch. “Yeah,” I mutter.

“I mean, the last I saw him was when I found you guys in his–”

“Can we please not talk about that?” I croak out. I realize my hand is reflexively moving to clutch my chest. Probably because I’ve pushed the thought of that day out of my brain for over half a decade and the mention of it alone makes my heart want to tear straight in two.

“Yeah, I’m sorry, just– Jesus Christ, Ann.” Even though I can’t see her, I can picture Steph shaking her head clear as day, her dark brows pulled together. Leah may be my best friend and the one I’ve told everything about my past to, but Steph is my sister. She lived through some of the darkest parts of it right there next to me.

“I know,” I respond, not sure what else there is to say. “When is your

flight getting in again?” I know exactly when her flight is getting in, but I’m desperate to shift the subject.

“Day after tomorrow at noon.”

“*Day after tomorrow?*” I echo.

“Yeah? Saturday? The day of the shower?”

How in the hell is that already the day after tomorrow? How in the hell is the shower just *one day away*? The past few days have been an absolute blur between work at the office and helping Dad at the store and answering Lori Beth’s thousands of texts about shower planning details... *And trying my best to avoid Blake.*

I hate myself for admitting that, even if it’s only inside my own head. I can’t decide if I hate myself even more for thinking of one day away more as the expiration date on Blake’s trip here rather than the date of my wedding shower. My finger stops its lazy trailing along every surface of the beautiful greenhouse that isn’t even done yet but already looks better than I could have imagined it. *The date.*

September 1st.

How could I have been such an idiot—

“That’s fine, right?” Steph questions, snapping me from my daze.

“Yes!” I blurt. “That’s fine. Sorry, the date has just totally snuck up on me. I didn’t realize you’d be here so soon.”

“Please, do sound more thrilled to see me,” Steph deadpans, earning a chuckle out of me.

“Never been more thrilled in my life,” I assure her.

“Uh huh.”

“Sorry, I’m just distracted.”

“I can imagine,” Steph says.

“Are you still bringing a plus one?” I ask, dodging her bait.

My leisurely phone call pacing has found me at the corner of the greenhouse closest to the outside entrance, where Blake has most of his tools and equipment stacked up and laid out. His large black tool trunk sits at my feet, the lid closed but the latches unsecured.

“No,” she replies flatly.

“What? Why not? What happened to what’s-his-face?”

“Turns out the face was the only redeeming quality he had to offer.”

“Oh. Well, I’m sorry to hear that. I was looking forward to meeting that face.”

“Annie.” The tone of Steph’s voice quickly dismisses that conversation. “...How’s he doing?”

“Remy’s great,” I say, squatting down to the floor. “He closed a big deal last week and is a day or so away from closing another one.”

“Oh. That’s great...but...”

She wasn’t asking about Remy.

I was almost positive of that before I answered her question, but was hoping I was wrong or that she’d just let it go if I played dumb. Suddenly needing to do something with my hands to distract myself, I open the tool trunk. My eyes are immediately drawn to the spray painted stencil writing on the inside of the lid, Blake’s last name branded on the upper half and *Landscaping & Design* underneath it. I can’t believe the amount of tools crammed into the case. Though they’re not the newest or nicest, I can tell every one has been cleaned and perfectly organized, not a single one straying or without a dedicated place. *Of course.*

“I sort of meant Blake,” Steph finishes.

“Blake’s fantastic,” I say, a little too quickly, picking up a random wrench to fiddle with for no reason. “The greenhouse looks great. He managed to keep most of the original frame, so it still has the same bones, aside from a few rotted sections he had to rebuild. But he’s restored or replaced every panel of glass and put in this new tile that looks straight out of a magazine. He also made these potting tables from scratch. I think he used cedar wood—”

“Annie,” Steph cuts off my ramble. “I’m very happy for you about your new greenhouse and your cedar wood, but come on. How *is* he?”

I let out a deep sigh. “He...” My eyes fall shut. “He seems okay, Steph.”

“Really?”

“I think so? I mean, we haven’t really talked much, but—”

“This man has been in your house for nearly two weeks and you ‘*haven’t talked much*’?”

“Not about that,” I mutter. “Not about any of that.” When I let my eyes fully open again, I’m staring at the toolbox lid once again.

*Di Fazio
Landscaping & Design*

My head tilts to the side as I run the wrench along the top of the lid.

“Well, if you’re planning to, you might want to get to it,” Steph says. “He’s leaving right after the shower isn’t he?”

“Pretty much. He flies out the following evening,” I confirm, not allowing any emotion into my voice.

“Well, Ann. You’ve got that trade show for Dad all day tomorrow, right?”

“Yep.”

“And then the next day will probably be pure chaos with everyone coming in and getting ready for the shower.”

“Probably,” I agree, continuing to scrape the wrench against the rough trunk, creating an extremely annoying sound that actually comes off as enjoyable compared to the various voices screeching in my head. “Then Remy needs me to help him in town most of the morning after the shower.”

“So, it sounds like tonight’s the night,” Steph says. “Take advantage of this bizarre situation you’ve put yourself in. Talk to him, Annie. If y’all don’t give yourselves a chance to unload all of what’s happened, you’ll probably never get another chance.”

“I think that’s way too big of a load to take on in one night.”

“Well, that’s definitely what she said.”

I nearly fall flat on my ass at the sound of Blake’s voice. I scramble upwards, slamming the toolbox shut and standing to face Blake. It takes a solid five seconds of him staring down at my hand at my side before I realize I’m still holding the wrench. I fling the box back open, quickly shoving it inside and let the lid fall shut again. Blake’s hand raises to rub over his mouth, hiding his smirk.

“Shut up,” I grumble, dusting my blue jeans off.

I register the sound of Steph’s throat clearing through the phone. “I have a feeling I know who that is,” she whispers. I don’t even get a chance to respond before she speaks again. “I’m gonna let you go. Talk to him, Ann. If you hold this all in any longer, you’re gonna bust.”

“That’s what she said,” I mutter, almost inaudibly, before hanging up the phone and slipping it into my back pocket. “Hi,” I say to him, crossing my arms.

Blake crosses his ankles, leaning against the doorway, amusement flashing across his face. “Whatcha doin’?” he asks in a mocking tone, like he’s caught me in an act.

“Oh, just checking out your progress,” I respond casually.

“And is it up to your standards?”

“Still to be determined.”

“Yeah?” Blake plays along, pushing off the doorway and walking straight for me. I take a slight step back, thinking he’s going to slam straight into me until he stops suddenly. “And what’s your determining factor?” he asks, bending over and flicking open his tool trunk just long enough to replace the wrench I haphazardly threw inside to its rightful spot.

I don’t have time to stop the smile that breaks out on my face before Blake stands up again. He’s so close that I can see the beads of sweat sprinkled across his forehead and his damp curls poking out from his baseball cap. I’m suddenly thankful for the inconvenient rainstorm earlier today. It takes Blake’s gaze flicking down to my lower lip for me to realize that I’m biting it. I snap back to reality, letting it slip from beneath my teeth and my smile fall.

“The glass panels,” I blurt out, resuming the game as if it never had a pause. “The ones on the roof.” Blake stands up straighter, his brows pulling together. “Are they set exactly to a 45 degree angle?”

“Why do you ask?” Blake questions.

I walk to the other side of the greenhouse to lean against the only potting table currently in place, feeling the need to put some distance between us. “You know, for optimal chloroform growth.”

“For chloroform growth,” he repeats, straightfaced.

“Obviously.”

“Unless you were planning on getting into the kidnapping business, I think you mean chlorophyll.”

My lips purse momentarily as laughter threatens to escape. *Good one, Annie.* I quickly recover, continuing the schtick. “Well you know me, always chasing new opportunities.”

For just a split second, I can almost swear I see Blake wince.

Oh.

“Right,” he says, face neutral once more. “Well, I can’t promise you any help in that department, but, I assure you, you’ll have all the chlorophyll you could ever want in a couple days’ time.”

I swallow, still focusing on the wince. “That’s good. I’m really passionate about the chlorophyll.”

We stare-off for several seconds until Blake finally breaks.

“Shut up,” he chuckles, shaking his head.

My own body shakes with laughter in response and I feel myself relax. “No, but really, Blake. It’s amazing. I knew I could count on you, but this far exceeds any expectations that I had. You’ve seriously outdone yourself.”

Blake pushes off the wall he’s been leaning against, heading for the doorway to the outside. “Well, I appreciate it, Evangeline, but I’ve just had a lot of years to grow and improve my skills.” He ducks out of the doorway, stepping carefully but swiftly out into the uneven yard, still wet and mud-caked from the rain. He returns only a few seconds later with a couple of hanging pots in hand. “And it’s been a long time since you’ve been around me and seen what I can do,” he says, setting the pots down on the ground against the glass filled wall of the greenhouse, brushing his hands together. He starts to head for the door again but pauses right in front of me. The next words he speaks, whether he intended for them to or not, shoot straight from my ears to deep in my lower belly, leaving a trail of electricity in their wake. “You probably have no idea all the things I’m capable of nowadays.”

I attempt to gulp down the newly present lump in my throat as nonchalantly as possible. “Well, I’m thankful—and appreciative—” *Don’t those mean the same thing?* “of your...skills.” Blake’s lips pull up just a tad at one corner as he steps out of the door again, and I feel like he knows *exactly* what he just did. I take the short opportunity of him being outside to roll my shoulders. “But, really,” I say as he walks back in with more pots in tow, “you wouldn’t even know it’s the same greenhouse aside from the shape of it.”

Blake turns to look at me as he transfers the next round of pots onto the floor. “I hope that’s okay,” he says, hesitation clear in his voice. “I didn’t originally intend to scrap so much of it. I just kind of got more inspired the longer I spent in here.”

“Totally okay,” I confirm. “I gave you free reign, didn’t I? Besides, I’m not that sentimental about hanging on to old things anyways.”

Blake visibly stiffens, just long enough that I notice, as he sets the last pot down. Once it’s on the ground, he slowly stands up straight, his hands going to his hips. He doesn’t meet my eyes as he turns for the door again, but I see his tongue pushed into the side of his cheek, his jaw ticked. “Right,” he agrees.

I see him just barely shaking his head as he walks out again. I start to wonder what that’s about, but quickly forget everything when he faces my direction from the outside and I catch the biggest smile I’ve seen out of Blake

throughout the entire duration of his visit through the glass.

Not just any smile—the smile. The smile that was created for and solely belongs to Blake. Huge and perfectly crooked, with nearly every one of his straight white teeth on display. The corners of his eyes crinkled and right cheek dimpled. When the smile fades and his tongue quickly pushes out of the corner of his mouth as he strains to pick up a heavy planter, my eyes threaten to water. That’s Blake. The real Blake...My Blake. He’s still in there.

And I think it just truly set in how much I’ve missed him.

It takes Blake’s gaze lingering on me for several seconds too long as he shuffles back inside, his brows pulled together and steps slowing, for me to register the expression of astonishment and adoration that must be plastered across my face. I quickly allow it to drop, attempting to cover it by pretending I suddenly have a nose itch. “Well,” I stammer, “just make sure you’re keeping track of everything cost wise so we can get you what we owe you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Blake replies dismissively.

“Blake, I mean it,” I say, my hand shooting out to grab his arm before he can walk out again. “All the labor costs as well. You don’t need to do us any favors. You already came all the way out here for us.”

Blake stares down at my hand on his arm, blowing a breath out of his nose. I instinctively move to release his arm, but his hand comes down on top of mine before I can do so. “Evangeline,” he sighs, his blue-green gaze flicking up to my face. “It’s not a favor if I’m doing it for you. And I’d build you a greenhouse on the goddamn moon if you asked.”

He removes his hand and my arm falls abruptly, smacking against my thigh as I’m too stunned to catch it. “But—”

Blake takes a step back, the look in his eye and his tone softening. “Really, Evangeline. You already bought all of the main supplies. I have the plants and everything else handled.”

“But what about your time?”

“It’s covered.”

“But—”

“Evangeline,” Blake pleads, stopping in his tracks in the doorway and spinning around with an exasperated look on his face.

“What?” I question, throwing my hands in the air.

“Shut up,” he states, the ghost of a smile crossing his face as he continues

out the doors.

I think I literally stomp my foot in frustration like a toddler. “Fine!” I shout, shrugging off my denim jacket and flipping my head over to pull my hair into a ponytail.

“Um, what are you doing, Jacks?” Blake questions, back inside.

“I’m in, Di Fazio,” I reply, standing back up and pulling my fastened ponytail tighter.

“And what exactly does that mean?” he asks, the amusement on his face betraying his flat tone of voice.

“My afternoon is free. If you won’t let me pay you, I’m gonna help.”

“That really won’t be necessary—”

“Blake,” I cut him off, causing his brows to raise. “Shut up,” I finish, smiling at him sweetly.

He lets out an impressed scoff. “Yes ma’am.”

“Put me in, Coach. Where do you want me?”

Blake looks me up and down, shaking his head and chuckling in defeat. “Well, I was going to start hanging those pots—”

“Got it!” I say, walking over to the first pot closest to me on the ground. They are all varying in shapes and sizes and I’m not sure what Blake’s plans are for them. “Where do you want this one?” I ask, nodding towards the pot in question as I squat down. “What’s your vision?”

“The back left corner. But I was going to say—” I attempt to lift the pot, instantly grunting loudly and feeling like I’ve thrown out my back, not at all anticipating how heavy it was going to be. “I was going to say those are probably too heavy for you to lift,” Blake says, finishing the thought I cut off with my sounds of struggle.

“Yeah. Sorry, Coach,” I sigh. “I think I’m gonna have to let you down on this one.”

“No worries. I can get them,” he says. I suddenly register that he was just carrying multiple of these at a time while holding a conversation with me and without breaking a sweat. *Jerk*. “You could maybe help me carry in a few more finished tables though?” he suggests.

“Sure thing!” I agree, hopping up and heading straight out the door towards where the finished tables are sitting under the overhang of the house in the side yard. I never make it there, however.

I barely get two steps out of the greenhouse, turning my head over my shoulder to Blake. “Is there a certain one we should get first—*Whoa!*”

My foot hits a slick puddle just right, causing me to slip and immediately throwing both my feet out from under me. I feel the wet, cold smack of mud against my backside the instant I come in contact with the ground.

“Oh my God!” Blake shouts, bursting out laughter. I peel my eyes open when I can sense the shadow of his silhouette above me, blocking the sun. “Are you okay?” he asks. I just groan in response, the wind still knocked out of me. I can tell Blake is genuinely worried if I’m hurt but also physically can’t stop laughing. I can’t say I blame him, to be honest.

“Oh, hilarious!” I grumble, suddenly becoming aware of the mud that made its way to the tops of my shoulders and front of my neck when I fell.

“Here,” Blake says, offering me his hand. I try to reach for it, but he’s laughing so hard that his body is shaking. I have no idea what comes over me, but I grapple for a handful of the mud squished against my neck, throwing it straight at Blake’s face. I hit my target spot on, smacking him straight in the cheek.

I bring my hands up to cover my mouth and Blake freezes, his laughter stopping instantly. “Oh my God. I’m so sorry, Blake. I—”

I break off when Blake suddenly swoops down, wiping mud from his cheek and smearing it across my own. I scoff loudly as our faces mirror each other with equal shock, both of our eyes wide and jaws unhinged.

I start to shuffle to get up, but continue to slip and slide against the mud. Blake extends his hand once more and I accept it this time, right as I kick up another chunk of mud that lands on the top of my thigh with a plop. Blake starts laughing again and I give his arm a hard yank. Instead of him pulling me up, I just end up pulling him down. His feet start to skid and I flail beneath him as he attempts to regain his footing. We both break into laughter at the absurdity of our situation. That act ends up distracting Blake and he slips, flinging his arms in a final effort to stop himself before he ultimately falls right on top of me.

I gasp, dropping my head back and squishing my back as far into the muddy grass as it’ll go before Blake catches himself on his elbows, his face stopping just inches above my own, the rest of his body practically flush with mine.

We are both breathing hard, my chest meeting his with each inhale. Blake’s eyes search mine as he slowly pushes himself up, giving us just enough distance so that I can somewhat think again.

I’m thinking I need to move. I’m thinking Blake needs to move. I’m

thinking this entire situation is bad. I'm thinking this situation is also entirely too familiar.

I'm also thinking that I like it.

I'm thinking that it's bad that I think I like it.

I realize I've zoned out into my own mind when I see Blake shaking his head. I notice his furrowed brow and assume he's angry at first, but then, when I meet his eyes, a smile spreads out on his face.

"What?" I question, my own brows pulling together.

"You haven't changed a bit."

Something about his tone of voice makes me stiffen. He says it as if he's just had an epiphany. As if he's just desperately found the answer to a question he's long been searching for. Even more, it sounds like the answer has pleasantly surprised him. Like he'd just about given up hope of it ever being true.

I'm not sure what to make of any of it, and I'm not sure my brain has the capability to unpack everything else lying beneath the very surface of that statement at this moment. I suddenly feel a heavy (*metaphorical*) weight settle on my chest. I feel like I'm suffocating and wiggle out from under Blake, desperate for some space. He complies immediately, removing the arm caging me in and rolling to sit on his bottom. I do the same, taking two very obvious scoots to my left and instantly feeling my lungs start to cooperate the moment I do so.

We stare at each other for several moments, both of us covered in half soaked clothes and caked in mud, sitting in the grass in broad daylight like a couple of kids. Though I desperately try to ignore it, my brain won't rest, simply replaying Blake's last words over and over. I feel my bottom lip becoming raw from the rate I'm gnawing on it, but I can't seem to stop that either.

"Evangeline."

I allow my eyes to refocus, Blake coming into view, the smile on his face no longer anywhere to be found. "Yeah?"

"Please stop thinking so hard and just talk to me."

No matter how badly I want to, I don't allow myself to tear my eyes from his. "Who says I'm thinking anything?"

"I do," Blake says, unwavering. "C'mon. Use your words."

I blow a breath out of my nose, trying to formulate an answer. I realize after a few seconds, when I feel Blake's gaze burning a hole in me, that I'm

defeating the whole purpose of just using my words by thinking so hard about what words I want to use. So I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. “I think you’re wrong.” Blake tilts his head. “That I haven’t changed. I don’t think I agree with you.”

“Well, you’re not under any obligation to agree with me, Evangeline.”

“I– But, why did you say it?” I ask. It’s Blake’s turn to go silent now, apparently. He opens his mouth like he’s going to say something, but just ends up closing it again. “I mean, do you really believe that?” I push. Still no answer.

So much for using our words, huh?

I take Blake’s lack of response as an indication that I probably don’t want to hear whatever said response was going to be. I decide to take a different route, no longer being able to hold in my inner thoughts now that I’ve opened the floodgates.

“Can I ask you a different question?”

“You don’t need to ask permission, Evangeline.”

I ignore the rush of heat that answer sends to my cheeks, carrying on. “Do you...do you think people ever change? Ever *can* change? *Really?*”

Blake glances upwards thoughtfully, his lips rolling into his mouth. “Yes. And No,” he finally says, meeting my gaze again.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Yes, I think people can change what they do and how they act. I think people’s circumstances can change, causing their emotional responses and life priorities to shift.” Blake pauses and I swallow hard. I catch him surveying me and quickly blink away the burning sensation suddenly present in my eyes, nodding and urging him to continue. “But I think we’re all hard wired to a certain extent,” he says. “That no one truly *changes*. It’s just a matter of if someone chooses to ignore who they really are in an attempt to be something that they’re not.”

I let out a scoff, shaking my head. “You make it sound so simple.”

“Well, it is, isn’t it? It all comes down to choice.”

“No, it really isn’t,” I reply, running my hands over my mud-caked ponytail in frustration. “What if someone has to make a choice that affects other people? What if they can’t always be selfish?”

Blake’s lips press together, deep frown lines etching into his forehead. He looks away, and slowly back at me. “Human life is so short and non-guaranteed, Evangeline. Why on Earth would you live it any other way but

selfishly?”

My lips fall apart, a reservoir instantly forming in my eyes. *Fuck.* “I—”

The piercing sound of my phone ringing makes me shoot to my feet. I quickly brush my hands off on my pants, nonchalantly wiping at the moisture in my eyes with my shirt sleeve during the process. I fish my cell phone from my back pocket, thankful it survived the mud dive, and answer right away when I see Remy’s name flash on the screen.

“Hey, babe,” I mutter sweetly, a feeling of guilt twisting in my stomach.

“Hey, Apple Jacks. So, uh...”

I can already tell by Remy’s tone of voice that I’m not going to be happy with whatever he’s about to say. “What is it?”

He lets out an exhausted sigh. “So, about tomorrow—”

My spine steels. “Remy, you promised.” *Very reluctantly, after nearly fifteen minutes of pleading,* I don’t add. “You’ve known about this for months. Dad hasn’t had time to expand or refresh inventory in forever and hardware trade shows practically never come to this area. You said you’d come help me.”

“Annie, I know, but I just can’t. Chuck needs me.”

“You know that I’m not going to be able to accomplish anything worth the time and cost to attend without an extra set of eyes and your help to load and transport things home. I don’t want to let Dad down. I get Chuck needs you, but, Remy, *I* need you—”

“I’ll go with you.”

I spin around, startling at the sound of Blake’s voice and the sudden heat of him right behind me.

“What?” I ask, covering the bottom half of my cell phone where the microphone is.

“You said you need someone,” Blake says. “I’ll go with you.”

“But— I mean, *really?* Are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t have offered if I wasn’t sure, Evangeline.”

My mouth hangs open as I debate whether or not to protest. I don’t want to make Blake come with me, but I wasn’t lying when I said it’d be a waste of a trip to go alone. My desperateness wins out in the end. “Okay,” I nod. “Thank you.”

“Annie? Hello?” I hear Remy’s voice calling and shove the phone back to my ear.

“It’s fine,” I say.

“You’re fine to go alone?”

“No, Blake’s coming with me.”

“...Oh.” I can hear the hint of hesitation and distaste in Remy’s voice but ignore it. He’s the one that put me in this situation.

“Yep,” I say, my tone clipped. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Babe, wait—”

I pause right as I’m about to hang up, hope creeping into my chest that Remy’s about to take back what he said and agree to go with me as originally planned.

“Aunt Lori Beth called a few minutes ago.”

Oh.

“She asked if you could meet her at the Old Scarlett House,” Remy continues. “She wanted to go over some things for the wedding shower. She asked for you to meet her at five.”

I pull my phone away from my ear long enough to see that it’s 4:21 p.m. It’ll be a rush, but I can make it. *Unfortunately.* “Yeah,” I say. “I can do that.”

“Great. See you later, Apple Jacks. Sorry about tomorrow.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Love you,” Remy says, ending the call.

I pull the phone away from my ear, turning back around to face Blake, a deep crease set between his brows.

“So,” I say, shifting on my feet, “Lori Beth needs me to meet her at the shower venue in just over half an hour and I’m kinda really covered in mud—”

“I heard,” Blake says. *Oh. What else have you heard?* I almost ask, but don’t. “It’s okay,” he confirms. “Go.”

“Okay. Thank you again for going with me tomorrow. It really means a lot.”

“You need me, I’m there. You know that.”

“Right,” I mutter, swallowing down whatever is suddenly rising in my throat. “Okay, I’m gonna go shower. I’m not sure how long I’ll be gone.”

Blake makes his way back into the greenhouse, slowly sliding off his muddy flannel and tossing it over the edge of a table. “I think I’ll be alright, Evangeline. I’m a big boy.”

“If you say so,” I say, rolling my eyes. I take a step back, crossing my arms and admiring the greenhouse in full. “I really do love what you’ve done with the place, Blake. You’re not going to get re-inspired and completely redo

the whole thing while I'm gone, are you?"

"Nah." Blake shakes his head with a grin, bending down to grab the hanging pot I failed at lifting. "You have to know when to walk away."

"Or when to stay and fight."

Blake freezes, his hands clutching the chain of the pot. I had said the words automatically, them flying out of my mouth before I even realized it. Blake's head slowly turns to look at me. "A Kyle Di Fazio original," I shrug, a smile tugging at my lips.

Blake's throat bobs, his eyes searching. "Don't give him so much credit. He definitely didn't make it up."

"He may as well have."

Blake's lips part, several long seconds going by of us having what has to be our hundredth stare-off in the last two weeks.

"Well," I say, my mouth dry. "I'll see ya." I forfeit the staring game, tearing my gaze away and quickly stumbling towards the back door.

"See ya, Evangeline," I hear Blake mutter over my shoulder.

NINE YEARS AGO

The buzz of my phone vibrating on my nightstand wakes me just as it has everyday for over a year now.

I roll over and unlock my phone to check the notification even though I already know what it is. The text message lights up my screen and, regardless that it's the exact same as always, it still brings a smile to my lips.

Blake: Good morning, Evangeline.

I sit up all the way in bed, stretching my arms into the air and letting out a deep yawn before typing my response. Also the same as always.

Me: Good morning, Blake.

And just like that, the routine remains. Sometimes the conversation will continue throughout the day, sometimes it won't. I've been insanely busy over the past year adjusting to college life and trying to scrape by in the required finance and accounting classes needed for my marketing degree. Blake has been busy as well, closing out his last season of baseball and graduating from high school.

I told Blake last year that I wasn't going to have a relationship over the phone and I meant it. But that didn't mean we couldn't keep in touch. Blake had started the *Good Morning* ritual the day after my family left Lake Placid last summer and, though I'd be lying if I said it didn't make me miss him more at times, it kept us in a perfect sweet spot.

Friends.

I hop out of bed, heading into the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee. I see one of my two roommates, Carmen, sitting at the kitchen counter. She has several books and piles of notes splayed out in front of her and her cell phone wedged between her ear and her shoulder. Only Carmen would have this

much homework and be studying at 8 a.m. this intensely less than a full week into the semester.

She glances up at me as I approach her. “Good morning, sunshine,” she whispers, not wanting to interrupt the conversation she’s having. I can tell it’s her mother by the exasperated expression on Carmen’s face.

“Good morning. Your mom?” I mouth back.

Carmen rolls her eyes, nodding in response.

I laugh under my breath as I pour myself a cup of coffee from the pot Carmen luckily already made.

“Yes Mamá, they’re good. Just as good as they were at 9 p.m. last night. Annie says ‘hi’.” I turn back to Carmen and she greets me with another eye roll. “Madeline, too,” Carmen adds, referring to our other roommate that’s definitely not even out of bed yet.

I shake my head at her, taking an extra large gulp of coffee when my phone buzzes in my hand.

Leah: Good morning, rat.

I chuckle. *Sunshine* from Carmen and *rat* from Leah. Sounds about right. And I love her for it.

Leah: You still okay to come tonight?

Me: It’s your birthday! Of course I’m coming.

Leah: Ugh, I know! But you literally just left for school and haven’t even been in Tuscaloosa for a week. It’s so annoying to make you drive back to Ramer so soon.

Me: It’s only a two hour drive and I only have a 9 a.m. class today. I’m coming whether you like it or not.

Leah: Sigh. I’m not worthy of you, Annie Jacks.

Me: You got that right. See you tonight, rat ;)

I slip my cell phone into the pocket of my pajama shorts, waving goodbye to Carmen as I head back in my room to get ready for class and finish packing my weekend bag so that I can head to Ramer straight after my 9 a.m. lets out.

Leah’s been taking classes at Montgomery State and, since campus is only a half hour from Ramer, she still lives with her parents in our hometown for the time being and makes the commute.

Even though Leah is right that it’s not the most convenient time for me to head back to Ramer, having only had one week of classes so far, I wouldn’t miss my best friend’s birthday for the world. And besides, my parents (and

Steph, though her newly independent fourteen year old self would never admit it) are always thrilled to have me back home any chance they can get. Dad even insisted he'd drop me off at Leah's house tonight and that he would leave the hardware store to Ronnie over lunch tomorrow so he could pick me up at noon and we could grab a bite.

I pull my phone from my pocket, seeing a new message.

Leah: I'll bring the beer. You bring the cheese.

My phone vibrates again in my hand.

Leah: Because you're a rat.

Me: I got it, Leah. Thanks.

I chuckle, setting the phone down on top of my dresser and getting to work.



LEAH HAS JUST TAKEN her second dive on the mechanical bull as my phone starts to buzz in my back pocket.

I ignore it at first, helping Leah up and taking another sip of my beer. That fake ID Madeline talked me into getting freshman year has really come in handy. Even though it's really just a formality here at Ramer's most popular (and basically only) bar, Rodeo Billy's, considering almost every bartender working here graduated with my high school class and knows I'm definitely not twenty-one.

I barely get Leah's jeans dusted off before she's jumping back on to the bull, getting a round of cheers from our high school (*and* middle school *and* elementary school, because they were all the same) friends.

When my phone buzzes for the fourth time in a row, I realize it's not just a text message coming through. I pull it from my back pocket, squinting at the bright screen in the dim smoky lighting of the bar.

Blake Di Fazio

"*What the...?*" I mutter to myself. I can count the amount of times Blake has called me in our entire lives on one hand.

"Annie! This is a new record right?" Leah's voice pierces through my concentration.

I throw her a smile and a thumbs up before I make my way to the back of

the bar and step out into the night air, the smell of stale beer and cigarettes hitting my nose. I stroll further into the beer garden, leaning against an empty picnic table as I answer the call, bringing the phone to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Evangeline.” Blake’s husky voice sends a chill down my spine and brings a smile to my face.

“Blake.”

“Eeevaaangeliine,” Blake repeats, drawling it out this time.

I open my mouth to respond but he cuts me off, continuing.

“Eeevaan. Van. An– Annie? Huh, I guess that makes sense.”

“Um,” I chuckle. “Have we had a little bit to drink tonight?”

“Just a little,” Blake says, feigning innocence.

“Uh huh.”

“Hey, I’m eighteen years old! An adult. Perfectly allowed to have a drink or two.”

“I think you’re a few years ahead of yourself there, buddy,” I laugh. “But calling you out would make me the biggest hypocrite right now.”

“Ooo you too? You at a big fancy college party? Crashing a frat house?” Blake slurs.

“Not quite. I’m actually back in Ramer for the weekend.”

“Already?”

“Yeah. It’s Leah’s birthday. I couldn’t miss her being flung off a mechanical bull twice.” A loud shriek comes from inside the bar, followed by a round of cheers and Leah’s unmistakable giggle. “Sorry, make that three times. Thrice? Is that a real word?”

Blake chuckles heartily. It might be the most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard. “You’re weird,” he says.

I can’t help but smile. I know he’s on the verge of being wasted, but I weirdly love hearing him like this. Care free (*and filter free*) suits Blake.

“Not as weird as you. Where are you?”

“At Diego’s house.”

“Carlos’s brother?”

Blake gasps dramatically. “Wow, you *do* listen to me.”

“On occasion,” I smirk. “What are y’all doing?”

“Diego’s parents are out of town. Carlos hooked us up with a keg.”

“Wow, hitting the big boy stuff, are we?”

“Mmmm,” Blake hums. There’s a lot of shuffling and whistling sounds in

the background.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I’m in the backyard.”

“You always manage to find the grass, don’t you?” I chuckle.

Blake laughs. I can practically hear his eyes rolling through the phone.

“The plants. They call to you. I get it,” I continue.

“Shut up,” Blake says.

I laugh at my own joke. “Speaking of plants, how’s the new job?”

After a lot of thought and going back and forth with his parents, Blake decided college just wasn’t for him. Though my nervous overplanning self couldn’t have imagined skipping out on getting a degree, I can’t say I was surprised at all to find out Blake would be doing so. Even though Blake is completely smart and capable, not everybody is built for college education and desk work. I’m fairly certain Blake would have gone stir crazy by a week into his first semester.

Though Blake was not exactly stressed to figure out his next step after high school, an absolutely perfect opportunity fell right into his lap by Spring Break of his senior year. A new guy on his baseball team this last season’s dad happens to own a landscape construction company and, once their family was over at the Di Fazios’s one night and the dad got one look at Blake’s beautifully constructed greenhouse shed and side garden, he let Blake know he was welcome to come work for him anytime.

Blake is going to quite literally be paid to grow grass and play with plants. He’ll have to start out doing mostly grunt work and manual labor but will gradually get to work his way up into design and project management if he sticks with it, which I know he will; the job was literally made for Blake. He, of course, said it was fate the way it all worked out. I say he just got incredibly lucky. That sure seems to happen to Blake a lot. Regardless, I couldn’t be happier for him.

“S’good,” he says. “Finished my first full project last week. I got to pick some of the plants.”

“That’s great, Blake.”

“Mhmm,” Blake mumbles, his voice muffled and a clinking sound coming from the other end of the line. “God, ice cream is so good,” he groans.

A chuckle bursts out of me. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s your favorite kind?”

“Caramel,” Blake says without hesitation.

“*Caramel?*” I repeat.

“Mhmm.”

“I don’t think that’s a flavor.”

“What? It totally is!” Blake insists through another mouthful of ice cream.

“No, I think that’s definitely a topping.”

“Mmmm...” Blake murmurs, noncommittal. The line goes comfortably silent for a few moments as the breeze rustles the fallen leaves and discarded beer cans on the ground around me. I move to sit on top of the picnic table when Blake’s voice comes through again, making me freeze.

“Your hair’s kinda like caramel.”

My heart stutters in my chest, my lips parting.

“I love it,” Blake says, clear as day.

I don’t respond, still processing and not sure what to say to a statement like that. I hear a rustling sound through the phone, Blake’s voice momentarily sounding further away.

“You know what else I love?” he asks.

Without waiting for a response from me, Blake continues. “That little freckle just below your left eye. And the way you scrunch your nose when you’re caught off guard.”

I feel my brows pinch, bringing my hand up to my nose. “Those are really specific details... Like...you’re looking right at me— *Wait.*” Even though I can’t see him, I know Blake is smirking. “Blake, are you looking at that awful Polaroid?”

“Maybe.”

“I told you to burn that thing.”

“Never.”

I hear a shout from inside the bar. “*Last call!*” Pulling the phone away from my ear, I see the time is 1:50 a.m.

“Jesus, Blake, it’s almost 2 a.m. We shut the bar down.”

“*Wiiild* child,” Blake croons.

I pull my bottom lip into my mouth, my cheeks starting to hurt from smiling so much. “Totally,” I affirm. “But, unfortunately, you’re just a *child*, sweetie,” I tease. “If it’s 2 a.m. for me it’s 3 a.m. for you. Way past your bedtime.”

“You're barely a year older than me. Calm down, *sweetie*,” Blake shoots back.

“Regardless,” I chuckle, “I need to go find Leah, so I gotta go. Finish your ice cream and get your ass to bed.”

The line is quiet for a moment and then I hear Blake click his tongue before he whispers something gruffly, not sounding remotely like a child. “I'll get *your* ass to bed.”

My mouth flies open, heat flooding my entire body. “*Blake Alexander Di Fazio!*”

“Evangeline Marie Jacks.”

I shake my head, letting out a nervous chuckle. When my laughter fades into a sigh, Blake speaks again.

“Can I ask you something?”

I blow out a breath, bracing myself. Questions that need permission to be asked usually aren't good ones. “Sure.”

“Have you...dated anybody? Since going to college?”

My brows pull together. “No, Blake.”

“Did you date anyone in high school?”

I run my hand through my hair. “No.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Blake.” He doesn't respond right away, so I continue. “It's not like I've never had any dating experiences. I've gone out with some guys. Had some fun. I just don't really... *date*.”

“Why not?”

“Because nobody I've been around in high school or college has ever been worth it. There's never really been that spark.”

“Spark?”

“Yeah. That feeling deep in my gut like...like I just *know* I want to be with this person. Like I can see it going long term. And if there's no spark, I just feel like there's no point. I'm not into wasting time.”

Blake stifles a laugh.

“...What?” I question.

“I don't know. It's just kinda funny.”

“What is?”

“You not wanting to waste time. It's interesting.”

“Why?”

“Because, Evangeline,” he pauses, “...isn't that exactly what we're

doing?”

My chest constricts, my spine steeling. “Blake...” I breathe. “You know that’s different.”

Blake lets out a sigh. “I know.”

I chew at my bottom lip. I seriously wish Blake wouldn’t have brought this subject up, because now I have to ask. I can’t allow myself to stay in blissful ignorance any longer.

“Have you? You know, dated anyone...? Like, since—”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Guilt pangs my chest. I hate this. I wish it was easier. Why can’t we just fast forward five years? Or why can’t we just live within the same *region* of the United States? I know Blake wants this. Wants us. And I want it too. So bad it hurts. But I know we’re doing the right thing. We can’t do this half ass. Can’t live phone call to phone call and spend every night sad and lonely constantly in anticipation of seeing each other again. That’s no way to live. We deserve better than that. Blake deserves better than that.

I clear my throat, having no desire to say what’s on the tip of my tongue, but knowing it’s the right thing.

“You know...you can. If you want to.”

Blake snorts. “Thanks for your permission, Evangeline. But I’m not really interested in dating anyone.”

“Oh...okay.”

A few moments of silence pass before Blake lets out a deep sigh.

“What?” I whisper.

“I guess I just...” he trails off.

“What?”

“I miss you.”

The night surrounding me has suddenly gone dead silent. I glance up at the full moon, blowing a deep breath out of my nose. The pinching feeling in my throat that I never wanted, the one that inevitably comes with feelings and missing someone you can’t be with, makes its debut for the first time since I last saw Blake.

“Just three more months,” I say steadily. “We’ll be up there for Thanksgiving.”

Blake blows out a breath of his own, then whispers, “I’d give anything to have you here sooner.”

I swallow, pushing away the rush of feelings trying to cloud my thoughts and already impaired judgment. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

I look down at my old cowboy boots I’ve had since the eighth grade, trying to focus on counting up the scuffs on their worn leather rather than counting up the minutes until I’ll see Blake again. Now’s not the time. I still have three more years of school. He’s just getting started on his life. We can’t go there. Not yet.

“Goodnight, Blake,” I breathe.

“Goodnight, Evangeline.”



“ANNIE, you’re welcome to stay here all day, but I’m leaving for work in five minutes.”

I sit straight up in bed, wiping the sleep from my eyes to see the baby pink walls of Leah’s bedroom and Leah standing up, curling her blonde hair in her waitressing uniform in front of her vanity.

“You have work the morning after your birthday?” My voice comes out groggy, a yawn interrupting my train of thought. “Why would you do that to yourself?”

“Um, it’s not exactly morning, hun,” Leah chuckles, meeting my gaze in the reflection of her mirror.

“Huh? What time is it?” I ask, reaching for my phone. When the bright screen lights up I have to momentarily shield my eyes. When the homescreen comes into focus, I read it once, and then read it again.

Saturday, September 1st. 12:45 p.m.

My stomach drops a little. 12:45 p.m? Seriously? First of all, how did I even physically sleep this late? Second, my dad was supposed to pick me up at noon. I pull down my notification tab and the weird feeling in my gut twists even further.

No new messages.

None from Dad checking in or explaining why he’s late. But also...

Nothing from Blake.

No Good Morning.

Maybe he's still asleep? He was up late last night too...but something in me seriously doubts that. Though Blake isn't exactly a morning person, I can't remember ever waking up before him.

I run my hands through my hair, replaying our conversation from last night. Was I a jerk to him? He was being so vocal, packing on all the flirtation and making advances. Saying he missed me. *Crap*. I didn't say it back, did I?

God, Annie, you suck.

I start to type out my own *Good Morning* message to him and then pause.

Is that the best idea?

Nothing's changed on my end. Our relationship can't advance any further than it currently stands. Not right now. I can't get needy and clingy the second Blake actually listens to me about keeping things casual. Backtracking on my own ground rules will just lead to confusion and more heartache that could be avoided if we just play it cool until our time comes. I can't lead him on. Not that it's really leading him on but—

Ugh.

Blake is my friend.

Liar.

My own thoughts are at battle with each other. *That's seriously what this has come to?*

I put my phone down, looking up at the ceiling in thought, when something catches my attention in my peripheral vision. I turn my head sideways, surveying the flower vase on Leah's bedside table. It's full of pale pink roses and some other type of orange flower I don't recognize...and baby's breath.

I reach out, plucking a sprig from the vase and twirling it between my fingers. Without thinking, I pick up my phone and take a photo of the flower in my hand. I never took my bracelet off from last night, so it's also showing in the frame.

I open up my and Blake's message conversation. Even though I already know there's no message from him this morning, seeing it makes my heart sink all over again. I open the photo I just took within our conversation, zooming in on my bracelet and seeing the flowers Blake picked out, hand pressed, and sealed in resin. Just for me.

God, I'm an idiot.

I've been so scared of something going wrong with Blake that I've

refused to even attempt to let something go right. Have refused to let him in. Or at least I've pretended to refuse. The heavy feeling currently sitting in my chest tells me he's already been in there for a long long time.

I've been so against the feeling of missing him when we're apart, but here I am, missing him anyways. Hurting anyways. Wouldn't it make so much more sense to at least be able to steal moments of happiness when we are allowed rather than letting the sadness and longing last all the time?

Sure, I hadn't factored the idea of a relationship into the next few years of my life, especially not a long distance one at that, but surely we could figure it out. I'm in college. Blake has a job. We're adults. We could do this. *Right?*

The second I attach the photo to my message, all the alarms and second guessing buzzers go off in the back of my head at once. I push those along with my sudden feeling of nausea away, shoving them into a box and placing them in the far corner of my mind.

"*Oh, what the hell?*" I mutter to myself, hitting send. I realize one second after doing so that I should have added a message to the photo telling him I miss him too. I start to type it out but Leah distracts me, snapping my attention to her.

"What's wrong?" Leah asks. "Can't get ahold of your Dad? He was supposed to get you at noon, right?"

"Oh," I blurt, hiding the baby's breath from her view. "Yeah, he hasn't said anything. I was just texting him to check up. I'm sure he just got busy at the store and lost track of time."

I start to type a message to Dad asking where he is before Leah interrupts me again. "I drive right past y'all's store on the way to work. Do you want me to just drop you off there?"

"Oh, yeah. That'd be great. Thank you," I say, backspacing my current message to Dad and typing out a new one.

Me: Forget about me, old man? Haha. Leah's gonna drop me off at the store. See you in a few!

"What are rats for?" Leah winks, both of us chuckling as I peel myself out of bed and start attempting to get my life together within the next three minutes.



LEAH PULLS to a stop across the street from the hardware store, hugging me goodbye over the center console of her truck and thanking me for the hundredth time for coming down to celebrate. I wave to her from the sidewalk, waiting for her to pull away before I cross the street.

The writing of *Jacks Hardware* on our main store sign stands out in bright white letters against the dark green background. but, as I approach the building, I realize something is not quite right.

The inside is dark and the neon sign we have of our logo in the window is turned off. When I reach the door, I see the *Open* sign is turned over to read *Closed*. I shield one hand over the top of my eyes, peering inside and not seeing any signs of life. I try yanking on the door handle, but it's firmly locked. I have my own set of keys, but, after walking around the side of the building, I see that neither of my parents' vehicles are here, nor is Ronnie's.

I pull out my phone again, checking the date and time once more to make sure I'm not crazy.

Saturday, September 1st. 1:04 pm.

Nope, not crazy. We should definitely be open right now.

I check my messages, seeing my inbox is still empty. I try calling both Dad and Mom twice each and neither of them pick up.

Seriously, what the hell?

Even though it's pushing ninety degrees outside right now, I take off walking. Our home is luckily only about a ten minute walk from the store, just down the street and around the corner. Dad has always said if it were any farther than that he'd never make it into work and would probably have to fire himself. I'm internally thanking him right now for our mutual lack of patience.

When I approach my family's home, I quickly spot both my dad's truck and mom's SUV parked in the driveway. It's extremely rare that only one of my parents are at the store at a time and literally unheard of in my entire life that they *both aren't* there unless we are on vacation.

Why are they at home?

I wrack my brain, trying to figure out if there's something I forgot. I unlock my phone, seeing I still have no new messages before I scroll back a few days on both of my conversations with my parents. Nothing. No reason why the store should be closed. I'm so confused.

I reach the side door of our house that we always use over the front door and peer through the glass. Dad is sitting on the couch with his head in one of

his hands. I glance down to see he is scrolling on his phone with his other hand. How could he not have seen my text? Why hasn't he messaged me?

Dad doesn't look up as I slowly push open the door. Movement in my peripheral vision catches my attention, and I turn my head to see Mom pacing on the back porch through our glass back door. She's having a heated phone conversation and keeps running her hands through her hair. Maybe there was a shipment delay?

I glance back to my dad, seeing him in the same position. I step further into the room, letting the door close behind me.

"Um, what happened to Ronnie?" I ask, trying to trigger Dad's memories of his plan to pick me up and for us to go to lunch.

"He had to go out of town this weekend," Dad answers robotically, not looking up from his phone.

I stay silent for several seconds, so very confused by my dad's uncharacteristic response and demeanor. "Um..."

Dad finally glances in my direction and then does a double take. "Annie. Oh, God, crap," he sputters. "What time is it? 1:18? Are you kidding me? *Shit*, I'm sorry." He runs both of his hands down his face, exasperated.

His apology is the least of my worries right now. "Dad, why's the store closed?"

Dad freezes, his hands still on his face. He blows out a long breath before looking back to where I stand just inside the doorway. "Annie...this morning, there was..." he trails off, seeming to search for the words. "There was a robbery," he finishes, his voice tight.

"*What?*" My eyebrows shoot to my forehead and my tote bag falls from my shoulder to the floor. "A robbery? Oh my God." I start pacing; like mother, like daughter. "What did they take? Tools? Money from the registers? If so, there wouldn't be much there, right? Since it was early in the day--"

"Not at the store, Annie," Dad mutters.

I stop in my tracks. "Huh?"

Dad's head hangs, his lips rolling into his mouth. "At the bank."

"The *bank*?" I ask, approaching Dad. "What does that have to do with--" I freeze, realization hitting me when Dad's gaze lifts to meet mine and I see his eyes are red-rimmed and puffy. "Wait..." I say. "You mean..."

"Kyle's bank."

I feel my brows pull together, still not understanding what's going on.

“Kyle got involved. Tried to stop it. He...got in the way.” He shakes his head, an expression on his face I can’t read.

“What does that mean?”

Dad blows a breath out of his nose, his back straightening. “He was shot.”

I have to put an arm on the back of the couch to steady myself, my knees giving out from under me. I can hear my pulse pounding in my ears. My blood feels like it’s on fire.

“Wha-what?”

Kyle Di Fazio got *shot*? No wonder I hadn’t heard from Blake this morning. Oh my God, I could kick myself for being such a self-absorbed idiot. “Is he in the hospital?”

“No.”

“No? Oh, so he’s okay then?” My shoulders relax.

Thank God.

“No, Annie,” Dad says. “He’s not okay.”

My lungs deflate, my stomach twisting in knots. “Then, what...?”

My dad’s brown eyes meet my own, a look of anguish and defeat within them like I have never seen before in nineteen years. I know the words that are coming before he says them, but it doesn’t feel like my heart is being ripped straight from my chest any less when I hear them out loud.

“Kyle’s dead.”

PRESENT DAY

Blake

I run my finger down the glass encasing the yellowing photograph. Though the background where he stands is grainy and in the shadows, my Dad always knew how to make his presence known. I glance from his face down to the baby in his arms. The tiny little human that would grow up to me. If only he had any idea when this photo was taken that he'd never get to see that.

Sorrow and anger simultaneously swirl painfully in my chest as I try and fail to make myself put down the frame for the third time. *Why am I back here again?*

Oh, right. Because Evangeline is running late.

Shocker.

She texted me late last night to let me know she'd like to leave for the trade show by 8:00 a.m. this morning. I was up far before that working in the greenhouse and waiting for her, however, 8:00 turned into 8:10, and then at 8:20 I found myself knocking on her bedroom door to make sure she was alive. I heard a muffled "*Coming!*" before Evangeline tore the door open just enough that I could see her flushed face. She had bobby pins shoved between her teeth and her hair halfway braided to the side and clutched in one fist. I caught sight of her bare back, the reflection in her standing mirror leaning against the wall behind her showing me that she was only wearing jeans and a bra. I quickly forced my gaze away, swallowing hard, and registering the sound of the shower running, realizing that's where Remy must be.

"I'm so sorry," she mumbled, pulling the bobby pins from her mouth. "I'll be out in just a few."

"Hey, I'm just along for the ride," I replied. "Just wanted to make sure you didn't fall in the toilet or anything."

"Shut up," she laughed, and I swear it sounded like music to my ears. "It's only a half hour away and the doors don't even open until 9:00 anyways, so I gave us a little wiggle room by estimating we'd leave at 8:00."

"Us?" I asked, raising my brows.

"Us. Me." She rolled her eyes sarcastically. "Is there a difference really?"

I bit down on the inside of my cheek, forcing myself not to think too hard about that question, knowing she didn't mean anything by it. When I was silent for a second too long, Evangeline's face fell just a little bit, her eyes

blinking hard and fast like they always do when I know she's thinking a million miles an hour. Some masochistic part of me hoped she was thinking exactly what I was thinking. Her lips parted like she was going to say something, but I cut her off before she got the chance, not wanting that conversation to go any further when there was a door between us and we were not truly alone.

"I'll just wait in the greenhouse," I said, nodding down the hallway.

"Okay," she replied. "I'll be there in just a few."

I had every intention of going to the greenhouse when she closed the door, but, for whatever reason, my feet drug me straight across the hallway and back to this damn picture frame. You'd think I've never seen a picture of my own father before.

Well, if I'm being honest, I haven't. Not in the last seven years since I've had my own house. I avoid looking at the ones Mom has out when I go to visit and I sure as hell don't have any on display at my place. I just can't. For so many reasons. This one's different, however. I think it's because the photo isn't directly attached to a day or memory of my life that I was consciously there for. This one I can detach myself from. This one I can just take for what it is. My Dad. Young, happy, smiling.

Alive.

I hear a rustling sound and startle. I lean back enough to see Remy making his way out of their bedroom. "Well bye, babe. Have a good day," I faintly hear Evangeline's voice say. I'm pretty sure my eye twitches when the man all but ignores her, barely waving his hand once over his head. He pauses briefly to straighten his suit jacket, and his eyes snap straight to me. A scowl flickers across his face for just a second before he recovers, his lips spreading into a smile.

"Bye, babe," he says, entirely louder than necessary, spinning around and reaching his arms through the still parted doorway, grabbing Evangeline's face and bringing her lips to his. I feel my blood go ice cold, a bitter taste flooding my mouth. He holds her to him for several excruciatingly long seconds, her eyes shut and shoulders somewhat rigid, unless I'm imagining it. "Love you," he says, finally pulling away, planting a kiss on her forehead, and closing the door in her face before she has a chance to become aware of my presence just across the hall.

It's not until I register the sound of the metal straining against my hands that I realize I've been gripping the frame for dear life. I set it straight back

on the shelf in front of me, not breaking eye contact with Remy the entire time I do so, only tearing my gaze away as I pass him in the hallway on my way out.

“Good morning,” he calls to me smugly from over my shoulder.

“Hey, man,” I respond neutrally, not turning back as I make my way out of the house, gritting my teeth the whole way.

Dick.

I can still hear him following behind me when I make it to the greenhouse. I walk straight over to the potting table I’m currently staining, bending down and grabbing my brush from the can to resume without looking his way, not willing to give him the satisfaction of thinking I care about his presence.

“Place is lookin’ great, bud,” Remy says, obvious sarcasm in his tone.

Bud. *I swear to God if he calls me that one more time—*

I shake my head once, telling myself silently to get a grip. “Thanks, man,” I mutter, still refusing to look at him.

“Reminds me a ton of this house I made out of popsicle sticks in my second grade art class.”

My teeth clench onto the inside of my cheek. “That so?” I ask coolly.

“Mhm. If I remember correctly, I won the class competition. Actually, I definitely won. Yes, of course I did,” he confirms, taking a step in from the doorway. “I *always* win, you know?”

My jaw goes taut as I slowly peel my eyes away from the brush in my hand and settle them on Remy. “Well, that must be good for your ego,” I deadpan.

He brushes off my comment as if I never even spoke, a complacent grin appearing on his face. “I got a cookie for it. My prize for winning the competition,” he says, turning to the side, seeming to examine the wall of the greenhouse. His eyes travel across it for a few seconds before he speaks again. “Is that what you’re here for, Blake? A cookie?”

I don’t let a flicker of emotion cross my face, doing everything I can to keep my breathing even and not snap this wooden paint brush clean in half. “Is there something I can help you with, Remy?” I grit out.

He seems to have selective hearing again as he once again doesn’t acknowledge me, instead bending down to survey my open tool trunk. “These are cute,” he scoffs. “Daddy so graciously pass ‘em down to you instead of putting them in the trash where they belong?”

I stiffen, letting the paint brush fall from my hand and splash into the bucket. I take my time rising to my feet, slowly turning to face him. “You seem to be very concerned with my daddy, bud. Got some issues with your own?”

I can tell I’ve struck a nerve by the way Remy seems to freeze, his mouth falling open and tongue pushing into the side of his cheek. “*You son of a—*”

“I asked if I can help you with anything, Remy,” I repeat, my arms crossing over my chest defiantly as he starts to charge for me. He skids to a stop a few feet away, looking up at me and seeming to somewhat come to his senses.

Smart man.

“Yeah, you can help both of us by getting out of here,” he spits, shoving his finger towards the door. “I mean, what the hell are you even doing here?”

“I’m fixing the greenhouse.”

“I don’t give a fuck about the greenhouse. And I don’t want you here.”

“Well it seems *she* does,” I counter, leaving it up to him to decide which statement I’m referring to.

Remy shakes his head, a self satisfied expression plastered on his face. “It’s time to let it go, bud. It’s pathetic, really.”

“I don’t have a fucking clue what you’re talking about, *bud.*”

“She’s *mine.*”

“Evangeline isn’t *anybody’s,*” I growl, closing the distance between us.

Remy leans his head back to look in my eyes, a snort coming out of him. “Well she sure as hell ain’t yours.”

I feel myself rear back, my fist clenching, when a new voice instantly makes me snap back into my previous posture.

“Alright! I’m ready when you are, Di Fazio—”

Evangeline pauses in the doorway, looking between Remy and me. Though my facial expression is neutral and my eyes are trained on her, I know my chest is still rising and falling rapidly, my hands balled into fists at my sides. Remy’s back is to her, still sporting the same smug smile as his gaze burns into my face.

“Is everything okay?” she questions.

“Yeah, babe. All good,” Remy assures, his smile widening. “Blake and I were just having a little chat about sports. The game.”

“The Alabama game?” Evangeline asks, one brow raised.

Remy doesn’t answer her question as he continues. “Blake and I seemed

to disagree on who the winner really was and still is at the end of the day. But, I think we worked it out. Didn't we, bud?" he asks, clapping me on the shoulder.

My nails dig into my palms as I fight the urge to slap his hand off of me. "Yeah," I grit, shrugging out of his grasp. "We worked it out." I side step Remy and walk for Evangeline, spinning around to face Remy right before I reach her. "Alabama just better make sure their defense is as strong as they like to pretend it is. Wouldn't want the other team to swoop in and steal the trophy they know damn well they don't deserve."

Evangeline chimes in, "Blake, Alabama's football team has the best defense in the league—"

"Are you ready to go?" I interrupt her, desperately needing to get out of this glass box I worked far too hard on to ruin over knocking some worthless prick through one of its walls.

"Sure," Evangeline says, her head tilting. "Let's go. Bye, Remy. See you tonight?"

"It'll be a late one. Chuck needs me with him on a pitch," he replies, his jaw tight and eyes locked on me.

Evangeline's lips pull down slightly, and I hate that she cares that he's going to be home late, just like he has been every single night since I've arrived. I hate that it still affects her even though it's probably her norm. I hate that it's her norm at all.

She deserves so much better.

"Well, okay. See you then," she says with a wave, turning to head out of the backyard gate and to her truck in the driveway.

I turn to follow after her, then hear Remy's voice again behind my back. "Too bad you're only here one more day, bud." I ignore him, not turning back as I follow after Evangeline. He waits until the exact moment that the gate closes behind her and he and I are the only two people left in the backyard to finish his thought. "So sad you can't take your little trophy with you." I freeze as I reach the gate, my hand shaking as it grips the handle. "Don't worry, I'll take *real* good care of it." I can sense him right behind me, his whispers coming out like hisses. "Shine her up real nice every night and keep her right on my shelf for the rest of her life. Exactly where she belongs."

I yank the gate open so hard that one of the hinges snaps. Remy comes up at my side. "*Tsk tsk tsk*, that just won't do," Remy drawls. "Mind fixing that up for us before you leave, yard boy?"

If looks could kill, the one that I give him has to come pretty damn close. It's unsuccessful, however, Remy just chuckling as he claps me on the shoulder once more. I turn my head to see Evangeline watching us thoughtfully through the windshield from where she's sitting in the front seat of her truck.

"See ya, bud!" Remy calls over his shoulder, faking niceties. He blows a kiss in Evangeline's direction before hopping into his own truck and pulling out of the driveway.

I pull the half dangling gate closed, grinding my teeth the whole way until I reach the passenger door, climbing up and closing myself in the truck cab with Evangeline. As if she can sense my lack of desire to talk, Evangeline pulls out of the driveway without a word. It's not until she's made it onto the highway heading towards Montgomery that she finally speaks.

"Blake?"

"Evangeline."

"Are you okay?" she questions, her eyes flicking from the road to me.

When I don't answer instantly, she shakes her head. "Nevermind. Can I ask a different question?"

"You don't need to ask—"

"Permission," she cuts me off. "Right, yeah. Sorry." She lets out a sigh. "What were you and Remy talking about?"

"Sports," I reply evenly, turning to look out the window. I'm not going to outright say to her that her fiancé is an asshole. She knows. I know she does. She's the smartest woman I've ever met. And telling a smart woman what she already knows has never gotten anyone anywhere in life. Besides, I know words have never gotten through to Evangeline anyways. She needs action. And I intend to show her what she's missing for every last second until my time here is up. Though it makes me sick to my stomach to even fathom the idea, some action obviously led her to choosing Remy to spend her life with. I just need to figure out what that possibly could have been.

"What did he say to you?" Another moment of silence goes by while I process how best to respond, but Evangeline beats me to it, continuing. "I thought...I thought I heard him say something about your dad again."

I sit up straight in my seat, my head falling back against the headrest and turning to look at her. *Of course, of all the shit he said in that conversation, that would be the thing she picks up on.*

"Did he?" she pushes.

I look at her thoughtfully as her eyes shift between me and the road. There's no sense in lying to her. I know that.

"He did."

Evangeline's lips purse tightly as she blows out a shaky breath, her cheeks pinkening. "Goddammit. I'm sorry, Blake." My eyes stay trained on her, watching as the pinkness in her freckled cheeks works its way in patches down to her neck. "Blake, he— He doesn't know," she whispers, her head shaking.

"What *does* he know about me?" I ask.

Her eyes stray from the road a few seconds longer than they probably should have, meeting mine. "You haven't exactly been a topic of conversation."

"In five years?" I question.

Evangeline takes several long seconds to answer. "Is it really that hard to believe?"

Yeah, yeah it is.

"He knows we're old friends. And that we have a lot of history between us," she continues. "I mean, that's the truth. Isn't it?"

"I guess it depends if you consider an omission of truth to be a lie."

She flinches in her seat, turning to gape at me. "I'm not lying. What else is there to tell?"

I can tell by the way her voice cracked at the end of her question that she doesn't even believe herself. I blow a deep breath out of my nose, letting my eyes fall shut. I don't want to fight with her. This isn't the way. When I open my eyes, I see hers are glassy, shining extra golden in the sunlight coming in through the windshield. When her gaze meets mine, I let my lips pull up at the side. "It's your life, Evangeline," I say. "It always has been."

Her lips part, but she doesn't say anything more, focusing solely on the road until we park and walk into the convention center.



ANY TENSION that existed between Evangeline and me dissolved shortly after arriving at the hardware trade show— mostly out of necessity of us having to work together, but, nevertheless, we were back to normal. As

normal as the two of us could get, at least.

We make our way down the many aisles of booths set up throughout the convention center showcasing various types of hardware, tools, and equipment for projects ranging from construction to plumbing to home improvement and so much more (*including landscape design*). Evangeline manages to hold off on rolling her eyes and yanking me by my flannel sleeve until the fifth time I make her stop and look at one of those. Her and I both know Jacks isn't in much of a market for gardening supplies, but I can't help myself. Yes, because they're my bread and butter; but, I'd be lying if I said the flustered look in Evangeline's wild eyes and her teeth biting down on her lower lip as a result of our deviation from her precise (yet chaotically scribbled out in the most perfectly Evangeline way) itinerary on her clipboard didn't bring a smile to my face.

In less than an hour, we manage to check most of the big needs off of Evangeline's list from her dad, and even manage to find a few extra random cool things to get for the store. Evangeline places an order for 100 starter tool kits with the coming back-to-school season in mind, remembering how the one her dad insisted on her bringing to college freshman year helped her survive through all four years. I manage to talk her into stocking my favorite affordable brand of weed eater and am able to haggle and land her a killer deal with a mulch supplier.

By the early afternoon, we are heading out to the truck to grab carts to load up the handful of miscellaneous stock items we are bringing home today instead of getting bulk shipped directly to Jacks. After getting everything in the truck and coming back inside to make one last lap, we realize we've managed to scour the entire place twice over and have gotten more than everything we needed.

"Well, look at us," Evangeline says, coming to a stop at the end of the last aisle. "We got that done way faster than I anticipated."

"What can I say? We make a good team, Jacks," I remark, holding out my fist.

She chuckles, bumping my fist with her own. "We do, don't we, Di Fazio?" She lets out a sigh, looking around us as if some new and amazing product is suddenly about to jump out at her.

"Evangeline, we've looked at everything. Twice. You did your job."

"I know," she sighs. "Just checking one last time. And *we* did *our* job." She nudges at my shoulder. "Thank you again for coming with me. I really

appreciate it.”

“It was nothing.”

“It absolutely was something.”

“It’s not a big deal—”

“Blake,” Evangeline cuts me off. When I raise my brows, she continues. “Can you ever just shut up and accept praise?”

“Probably not,” I reply honestly.

Evangeline lets out a snort. “Well, I’m going to continue to thank you anyways. Really, if you wouldn’t have come with me I definitely would have been stumbling around these aisles until 5 p.m. like I had planned.” I notice her gaze shift to something over my shoulder, and I register music beginning to play in the distance.

“Well, it looks like we have some time to kill then,” I say, holding up my watch displaying that it’s only 2 p.m.

“Yeah, about that. I think I just found an option.” My brows pinch together momentarily in confusion until Evangeline lifts her chin, motioning behind me.

I spin around to see an area of the convention center that was previously closed off with a curtain. There’s a large wooden structure built into the center of the building, a bar lining the back of it and what seems like a dance floor taking up most of its middle. Wooden tables and old-style jukeboxes round the edges. The music from before continues to get louder until I can clearly hear the country sounds of Alan Jackson and Jimmy Buffet’s *It’s Five O’Clock Somewhere* playing through the speakers. I shake my head, a chuckle coming out of me. Only in Alabama would you find a honkey-tonk bar in the middle of a business convention center fully operational in the middle of the day.

Evangeline comes to stand next to me as we watch several people already filing into the bar and dancing about the space. “Who knew affiliates of the hardware industry knew how to party?”

“I did,” Evangeline says, smiling so big that her freckled nose crinkles. She steps in front of me, nodding her head in the bar’s direction. “Shall we join them? Grab a beer before we head back?”

“Sure,” I say, a small grin playing on my face as I follow after her.

Evangeline gains the attention of a younger male bartender the second she reaches the edge of the bar. *Of course she does.* “What can I get for you darlin’?” he asks.

“Hi there! I’ll take whatever IPA you have on draft. And he’ll– *Wait.*” She breaks off, looking from me to the bartender. “Sorry, I–er. Still deciding. Could you give us just a second?”

The bartender looks at both of us like we’re crazy. “Sure thing, darlin’. Just let me know when you’re ready.”

Evangeline spins back around to face me.

“What was that about?” I question.

She takes a few side-steps and, when I don’t immediately get the hint to follow her, she grabs me by my forearm and pulls me to her. Her hand stays wrapped around my wrist, her gaze flicking between the tattooed trees on my arm and my eyes, and I can tell she’s nervous about something. “Evangeline, what is it?”

“I just–” she stammers. “Do you... I mean...are you...?”

I tilt my head, pushing her to continue.

She blows a breath out of her nose, firmly meeting my eyes. “Are you drinking? Do you drink? Still? After...”

My spine steels, my lips pressing into a firm line. Evangeline’s eyes are filled with nothing but concern; I try to look deeper into them, hunting for the hint of judgment, but there’s none to be found. I let out a sigh, placing my hand on top of hers on my wrist. I look from where our hands join back to her expectant face. “Only when I don’t feel like I have to.”

“Do you feel like you have to right now?” she breathes. “Am I making you?”

Not today, I think but don’t vocalize.

“No,” I confirm. “I’m fine.”

“You promise?”

“I promise, Evangeline. Come on.”

I see the bartender eyeing us as we make our way back to him. “I’ll have what the lady’s having,” I let him know.

“Sounds good,” he replies, clearly disappointed to be doing business with me rather than Evangeline.

“Wanna go find us a table?” I ask her. “I’ll grab the drinks.” She quickly nods okay and starts to weave her way through the bar to find us some seats.

“Wanna keep the tab open?” the man asks me. I turn my head to see that Evangeline has found a table and is already sitting down, her head bobbing and shoulders swaying as she watches the people dancing on the dance floor with a huge smile on her face.

“Yeah,” I grin, “better go ahead.”

I take the two large plastic cups of beer from the bartender and make my way over to Evangeline. She barely notices me as I set them and my wallet down and join her at the table. “Oh!” she jumps once she catches me out of the corner of her eye. “Thanks,” she says, picking up the beer and smiling as she takes a sip like it’s Christmas and this is the first gift she’s opening. I don’t recognize the country song currently playing, but Evangeline clearly does, pushing off the bar stool and swaying on her feet, one hand holding her beer and the other snapping along to the melody.

I feel a smile spread wide across my face as I watch her, taking in this rare moment since I’ve been here where she seems exactly like I remember her. Working hard and stressing through the day but playing harder and completely letting loose in the afternoon. I internally pray that she’s allowed the latter half of her personality to shine through over the years we’ve been apart just as much as the former; though I somehow know deep in my chest that my hope is most likely in vain. It doesn’t occur to me how long I must have been staring at her before Evangeline turns to look at me, her smile faltering momentarily.

“What?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I say, shaking my head. “Having fun?”

“So much fun,” she beams, looking back out at the dance floor and taking a drink of her beer. “I couldn’t tell you the last time I went out.”

I feel myself wince. I don’t know what breaks my heart more: the fact that Evangeline just confirmed my fear that she’s let her free spirit diminish more than I already thought or that she considers having a beer in a plastic cup at a one-star makeshift convention center bar to be *going out*.

“I don’t even know the last time I danced,” she adds, shaking her head. As if on cue, the song changes and her eyes go wide, her beer halfway to her lips. I swear, nearly every one of the roughly thirty people crammed into the small bar let out a gasp or cheer as Brooks & Dunn’s *Neon Moon* starts playing, at least half of them immediately dragging a partner with them onto the dance floor. I see Evangeline’s lips pull up at the side, something like longing twinkling deep within her golden brown eyes.

I make a split decision, grabbing her beer from her hands and setting it down on the table along with mine. “What are you doing?” she questions.

“Let’s change that,” I say.

“Change what?”

I step in front of her, holding out my hand. “You not knowing the last time you danced.”

Evangeline’s mouth falls open, her brows pulling together. For about one full second, I think she might argue with me, but then her conflicted expression melts into a smile.

“Really?” she asks.

“No, it was a joke. Go dance by yourself, loser,” I deadpan, my hand still held out to her.

“Shut up,” she laughs, grabbing my hand and yanking me towards the small crowd of people dancing. “I gave you your chance. There’s no way you’re getting out of it now.”

“Yes ma’am,” I nod with a smirk.

I wouldn’t dream of it.

My hand moves to Evangeline’s waist and, once the heat of my palm settles against her hip, I swear I see her shiver. She raises her hands, but seems to hesitate for a moment, unsure of what to do with them. She ultimately rests them both on my shoulders, flashing me a small smile as if waiting for my cue.

“Oh, no,” I say, shaking my head, pulling one of her hands from my shoulder to hold it in mine. She looks from our joined hands to my face, brows raised. “We’re in Alabama, Evangeline. We’re two-stepping.”

Evangeline’s lips part in shock, but she doesn’t get a chance to speak before I take off, leading us around the dance floor. I pause once we reach a corner, dropping my hand from her waist to spin her. She picks up on my cue right away, spinning out and back to me perfectly in sync with the music. “Blake, I had absolutely no idea that you knew how to country two-step,” Evangeline breathes, beaming at me.

I grin back at her as we continue weaving through the dance floor. I don’t meet her eyes. I don’t tell her why I know how to do a partners dance that only people from the South grow up learning. I don’t tell her that I taught myself in my bedroom over a weekend back when we were teenagers just in case the situation would ever arise to dance with her. I don’t tell her a million things I probably should. Or shouldn’t. Instead, I respond with the same line I fed her yesterday. The one that garnered the exact reaction I was secretly hoping for.

“You probably have no idea all the things I’m capable of nowadays.”

Evangeline’s cheeks redden; whether from my comment or from the

physical activity, I guess I'll never know. She lowers her head, not saying anything else. Neither of us do as we waltz around the tiny bar, carrying on to the old country song all about two young lovers that ran wild and free and eventually lost each other.

Their one and only.

I try not to think about the words. Try not to think about how the song is told from the point of view of a man sitting in a country bar with jukeboxes wondering where it all went wrong. I gulp, blinking hard and trying to focus on anything in the room other than the lyrics continuing to play through the jukebox speakers. But all I see is her. She notices me staring and raises her head to meet my eyes. The song comes to an end and I quickly spin her one last time. She's not as graceful in this one, bumping into my chest as she spins back in.

I drop her hand and take a step back, needing a little space for my head to clear. People filter on and off of the dance floor as the next song begins. I don't even hear what the next song is, however, my feet still planted firmly in place as I watch her, *Neon Moon* continually playing on a loop in my mind.

"Should we?" Evangeline pipes up, breaking me from my trance as she gestures back towards our table. I just nod in response, following after her. She blows out a breath as we reach our seats, spinning around to face me. "Thank you. I really needed that. Or, at least, I— I wanted it. I guess," she stammers.

Need and want.

So funny how easily those lines can blur.

When I stay quiet, Evangeline drops her head, letting out a nervous chuckle. My gaze falls, seeing her anxiously twirling the massive diamond ring around on her finger.

I suddenly feel like I've been punched in the gut.

She pauses her fidgeting to take a drink of her beer and my sight hones in on the writing on the side of the dark plastic cup. The name of the hardware show and the date. August 31st. That instantly reminds me that tomorrow is September 1st. And her wedding shower.

And I feel like I've been punched in the gut a second time.

Something tells me Evangeline has picked up on my shift in mood as she shuffles uncomfortably on her feet. "Are you ready to head back?" she asks. When I meet her eyes, I can tell that she's replaying every interaction that just occurred between us over the last half hour, trying to figure out what she

could have done to upset me.

Maybe look back a little further, Evangeline.

Maybe we both should.

A blow a breath out of my nose, trying my best to force a smile to my face. “Yeah, that’s probably best,” I say, picking up our still half full cups of beer and searching the room for a trash can. I spot one in the opposite corner of where we’re standing. “I’m gonna go toss these,” I say, nodding over my shoulder.

“Okay,” Evangeline says. “I’ll go pay the tab.”

“It’s under my name. Just grab my card from my wallet,” I say, motioning to my wallet still sitting on the table.

“But—” she starts to protest.

“Evangeline, I got it, really,” I insist, taking a step in the direction of the trash can.

“But you don’t need to—”

“Evangeline. Shut up and take my card.”

Her and I both stiffen. We have always joked and told each other to shut up, but that one came out much more forcefully than I intended it to. Evangeline doesn’t seem scared or even upset by my outburst, just more so perplexed. Or almost like *she* feels bad. I shake my head, resetting my emotions. “Please,” I plead with her, much more softly this time. “Really, it’s okay. Take my card and pay and I’ll throw these away.”

“Okay,” she breathes, keeping her eyes on me but reaching for my wallet.

I give her a tight lipped grin before I turn away, feeling like a complete asshole as I weave through the crowd for the trash can. How is there only *one* in this entire place? I grab a paper towel from a roll sitting on a table right by the can, using it to push down its overflowing contents so I can fit our cups in. I manage to spill half of one of the cups all over my forearm in the process, cursing under my breath as I grab another paper towel to clean up with.

When I start to return to the table, I don’t see Evangeline there. I glance towards the bar and don’t see her there either. After a moment of scanning, I find her between the two places, her back to me and head looking down at something. I assume she got a text message halfway to the bar and got distracted.

“Hey,” I say, approaching her from behind.

She doesn’t respond, seeming frozen in place.

“Hello?” I repeat.

Evangeline’s straightens, her head slowly turning to look at me. I see her eyes are wide and glassy, her cheeks pink and teeth biting down hard on her bottom lip.

“Evangeline?”

She swallows hard. “...Blake?”

“What’s wrong? What happened?” I say, grabbing her shoulder and turning her towards me. As she faces me, I expect to see her phone in my hand, but it’s nowhere to be found. I get confused when my wallet comes into view first, her clutching it with white knuckles. But realization hits me the second she is fully turned around, my stomach dropping to my feet. Her other hand comes into view. It’s not empty. I see her holding it.

Shit.

My eyes dart between it and her face, hoping it’ll magically disappear into thin air before the next time I look back at it. She has just the edge of it barely pinched between two fingers, like it’s so fragile it’ll break at any moment.

It might honestly.

It’s a decade old.

She slowly twists her hand, her wrist trembling. The colors are faded and the edges are bent from being crammed into my wallet for so long that I nearly forgot about it. The golden brown hues of her hair come into view, the cab of my old truck, me smiling in the background bigger than I ever have in any other photo.

She continues to stare at me, her mouth open but not saying anything. My ears heat the longer her gaze burns into my face. She finally tears her eyes away, looking back at the old Polaroid photo we took in the early hours of the one day in our lives where we would both be seventeen years old.

I can feel my blood pulsing and my eyes burning. I can’t do this right now. Not here. I pluck the picture from Evangeline’s hand, causing her to jump, and shove it back in my wallet.

“Let’s go,” I mutter, not looking back at her as I wordlessly pay the tab and lead the way out of the convention center and to her truck.

NINE YEARS AGO

Annie

I 'd give anything to have you here sooner.

Blake's words echo in my mind as my mom knocks on the Di Fazios's front door. I let my head fall and my eyes shut, taking several deep breaths as I brace myself for what I'm about to face. There's no possible way Blake would have wanted me here sooner if he knew this would be the cost. I know that. But, regardless, the guilt of the thought alone stings just the same.

Kyle Di Fazio is dead.

Our long-time family friend. My dad's best friend since childhood. Blake's father.

It doesn't feel real. I'm not sure it ever will.

My eyes open when I feel a hand squeeze my own. I glance up to my right, meeting Steph's green eyes. She doesn't say anything, but her tight smile sends me everything I need through sister telepathy. I nod at her as I hear footsteps approaching behind the door.

I straighten my knee length black dress, pulling the sleeves down and fidgeting with the chiffon fabric on my shoulders. I'm ready. I need to be. I have to be strong for Blake.

We've barely exchanged three words since I found out the news a week ago. By *we* I really mean *him*. When I found out about Kyle, I sent Blake three different paragraph length text messages all saying that I was sorry and that I was here for him in various ways. When he still hadn't responded a day later, I sent at least two more paragraphs. It's no secret that I'm not good at this kind of thing. Feelings. Emotions. General aspects of life that I don't have control over. When I don't know what to say, I either say nothing or absolutely word-vomit. There's no in-between.

On day three of radio silence from Blake, I nearly had a heart attack when my phone vibrated with a message from him. I swiped on the notification so frantically I was concerned I might scratch the screen. I stared at my phone, brows pulled together, at the two singular words I got in response.

Blake: Thank you.

I didn't need anything else from him, but I so desperately wanted it. I've been so worried about him. I can't possibly imagine what he's feeling or what he's been going through. Losing any member of my family would absolutely destroy me. Considering how especially close Blake and Kyle

have always been, there is no way that Blake can be in a good place right now. Even though I'm not the best person for the job, I want to be there for him any way I can. For him to vent or cry or reminisce or anything else he could possibly need. His short and unfamiliar response caught me off guard, but I know he's been busy making arrangements. I sent back another short reassurance that I was here if he needed anything and have given him space since, knowing I'd be there for him in person in just a few short days.

The front door opens and, even though my parents are blocking my view, I know it's Blake that's answered the door. I see his black dress pants and shoes down below and his brown curls poking over the top of my mom's head.

"Hey," Blake says, his voice sounding not like himself at all.

"Hey kiddo," Dad's voice cracks. When he leans in to hug him, Blake's face comes into view. His eyes are glassy and emotionless, a dazed, out of place smirk on his face.

"Thank you for coming," Blake says robotically, like he's said it a hundred times today. His gaze flicks up, meeting mine, and his usually bright teal eyes have taken on a dull muted tone. A lump forms in my throat as I take note of the purplish circles under his eyes. Blake continues smiling as he hugs my mom. Something about him seems so wrong and disconnected. He seems so casual. He almost seems *happy*. Or at least that's the performance he's putting on. Whatever this is, it's not Blake. God, he must be in so much pain.

Stay strong.

Steph steps forward to quickly hug Blake and tell him she's sorry before following the rest of my family inside, leaving me and Blake alone on the porch. His hands go into his pockets as he stands up straight as a board. I open my mouth to say something. *Anything*. But no words come out. Blake clears his throat, glancing down and back up to me.

"Hey," he finally says, breaking the silence.

"H-hey—" I break off into a sob, tears violently spurting from my eyes. I clutch at my chest and shake my head, trying to push it away.

Way to stay strong.

Blake's lip twitches once before he looks away, blowing a deep breath out through his nose. I wipe under my eyes, sniffing, as Blake steps forward and wraps his arms around me. My chest feels like it's caving in as I try to calm myself down.

Annie, this is Blake's dad's funeral, dammit. You should be comforting him.

I didn't think I was capable of crying any more tears for Kyle Di Fazio, but here I am. Seeing Blake, looking even more like his dad, just like every time I've ever seen him, brought the tidal wave flooding back in full force. *How can he be gone?*

"I'm so sorry, Blake," I say, pulling back to look at his face. His eyes are still unreadable, his lips pressed into a tight line.

"Thanks," he mutters.



THE FUNERAL IS HELD down by the lake.

My family is one of the last to file in. Since my dad is speaking, we have been reserved seats in the front row. We pass by Grammy a few rows back, her watery green eyes extra striking in contrast with her black sweater. She squeezes each of our hands as we pass, Dad leaning down to kiss her cheek.

Once we reach the front, we scoot past Mr. and Mrs. Destino, the elderly couple that has lived next door for the past thirty years and has always been so kind to us every time we've seen them over the years, and make our way to our open seats in the middle of the row. Steph is at the front of our line but, when she sees Blake sitting in the chair directly next to our open seats, she pauses, looking back at me and motioning for me to go ahead of her.

My stomach dips, not sure if I can do this, but when Blake's lifeless gaze meets mine, I know that I have to. I nod at Steph, stepping in front of her to take the seat closest to Blake.

"Hi," I say, sitting down and crossing my legs.

"Hey," he replies with a smile that doesn't remotely reach his eyes.

I look forward as the preacher starts the service, my attention zeroing in on the closed casket behind him. How can Kyle be in there? He had a whole life. A whole family. I'm sure so many dreams and aspirations for the future. Places he wanted to go. Things he wanted to see.

Like Blake growing up...

But now none of it matters. Now he's...just a body. I feel bile rising in my throat just thinking about it. It doesn't make any sense. And it isn't fair.

The preacher starts by giving the general introductions on why we are here and who Kyle was. I'm able to keep myself together because it all seems so formal and impersonal, the exact opposite of who Kyle was.

My emotions go through a rollercoaster but still contain themselves as several other people stand up to speak. Kyle's younger sister, Mrs. Destino, a friend of Kyle's from the bank named Jim; they all get up there, sharing stories of Kyle from over the years and ultimately all end in proclaiming him a hero for what he did. *An incredibly selfless soul gone too soon*, as Mrs. Destino said.

I glance at Blake throughout the speeches, trying and failing to gauge his non-existent reactions. He's as still as a statue aside from his head that is frequently swiveling between his mother next to him, the rest of the crowd, and whoever is speaking. I catch him letting out several light sighs, but otherwise, I have no indication of what he's thinking, and frankly, it's confusing the hell out of me. It's as if he's watching a boring baseball game rather than his father's funeral.

It's now my dad's turn to speak and I know I'm going to break before he even reaches the podium. The first tear spills over just as he turns to face us all. Dad has discarded his suit jacket and has his dress shirt sleeves rolled up to forearms. He runs a hand through his salt and pepper hair before he begins.

"Hey y'all. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Brett Jacks. I am—was Kyle's best friend."

A sob catches in my throat and I let my head hang, my eyes falling shut.
God, this sucks.

I feel a hand on mine and freeze. I open my eyes, looking expectantly to my right at Steph but seeing her completely focused on Dad. I swallow down the lump in my throat and let my gaze fall to my hands in my lap, finding one of Blake's strong hands covering them both. I glance up at him, his spine still steeled and his eyes staring straight forward, not a twinge of emotion on his face.

"I'm not good at this stuff," Dad continues, returning my attention to him, "and Kyle knew that. I'm sure he's giving me shit from the clouds right now." That gets a hushed laugh from the crowd. Dad lets out a deep breath.

"You know, I was thinking about what I should say the entire plane ride here. Thinking about what would do Kyle justice. What funny story I should tell or meaningful life insight I could share but, after hours of wracking my brain, only selfish thoughts kept popping up. The main one being an

epiphany I had. Kyle and I have been friends for nearly forty years. *Best friends* for thirty.”

“I realized that—” Dad pauses, blinking hard a few times and shaking his head. “I realized that I probably don’t have enough years left to have another friend as long as I had Kyle.”

My lips part, tears freely streaming down my face.

“But, you know what?” Dad continues. “That’s okay. Because nobody would live up to him anyways. And he knows that. To a great father, loving husband, and an *incredible* fucking friend— *shit*, sorry for cussing, Emily.” Nearly everyone laughs, Emily the hardest of them all, and there’s not a dry eye in the place.

Blake shifts beside me and I glance up to see him looking blankly at the sky, his lips just barely pulled up at one corner. Okay. *One* dry eye, apparently.

“To Kyle Di Fazio. We’ll never forget you, brother.”



AFTER THE SERVICE, caterers showed up with food for the funeral guests while immediate family and a few select others, including Dad, made their way to the cemetery across town for the burial.

I tried my best to make small talk with Grammy and a few other people I had met at the Di Fazios’s over the years, but my stomach was in too many knots to have any sort of meaningful conversation, much less to eat anything. All I could think about was Blake.

I had to busy myself or I was going to go insane. I started doing the caterer’s jobs, picking up empty plates from guests, washing dishes, taking out trash. Anything that could keep my mind occupied for another second until Blake got back.

An hour came and went and they still hadn’t returned from the cemetery. It seemed that everyone currently at the house and planning to eat had already done so, so I started consolidating the food, leaving enough out for those coming back to the house while packing up the leftovers to store away in the fridge. At this point, the caterers were just standing aside and letting me do my thing. I probably had my *crazy eyes* on as Leah has always called them.

I just shove the last tray of leftover deviled eggs into the fridge when I hear the sound of crunching gravel outside. I close the fridge door, turning to look out the front windows across the house, spotting several vehicles filing into the driveway, including Blake's truck.

A majority of the congregation still left at the house swarms straight for the door as it opens, wanting to speak to and comfort the family. I see my dad come in first. He spots Mom and Steph closest to the door and makes his way over to them, Mom rubbing his shoulder when he reaches her. I stand on my tip-toes, looking over everyone's heads to see several people make their way through the door. Emily comes in about halfway through the pack, still managing to look radiant despite her red cheeks and swollen eyes. A handful of people make a beeline straight for her, not noticing Blake sneaking through the door last.

Air feels like it finally reenters my lungs for the first time since he left. I charge straight for him, but he doesn't even look in my direction as he makes a hard right and slips down the hallway. I nudge through the small crowd of people, placing a hand on Emily's arm and giving her a sympathetic smile as I pass her before following after Blake.

There's only a few rooms down this hallway, so I trust my gut on the one he probably went to and am right on my first guess. I push open the already cracked door of Kyle's home office, seeing Blake standing against the window, something shiny reflecting the sunlight in his hand. When he brings it up to his mouth and throws it back, I realize it's a flask.

Crap.

Blake seems to notice me in his peripheral vision as he glances my way. He barely reacts though, turning his body maybe a quarter of an inch in my direction as he takes another drink from the flask before capping it and slipping it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," Blake responds nonchalantly.

"I, uh, put away most of the food from the caterers," I stammer. "There's still some out if you're hungry, but the rest of the leftovers are split between the inside and outside fridge. They brought some kind of cheesecake bites. I saved a few caramel ones for you."

"Thanks," Blake says, turning to look out the window again.

Frustration bubbles in my chest. "Blake?"

"Hmmm?"

“Please... Please say something.”

Blake turns back to me, eyebrows slightly raised.

“You’ve said no other words besides ‘hey’ and ‘thanks’ to me in the last week and I...I just...I want to be here for you through this. I want to know what you need. What you’re thinking. I just want you to say something. Anything.”

Blake studies me for several seconds, the first solid facial expression I’ve seen from him today crossing his face as his brows pinch together, his lips rolling into his mouth. He slowly removes the flask from his pocket, taking another swig from it without ever breaking my gaze. He screws the lid back on, setting it on the bookshelf next to him.

“You want me to say something?” he repeats.

“Yes,” I whisper.

He takes a step closer. “You want to know what I’m thinking?” he pushes, an edge to his voice, the whiskey on his breath fanning my face.

“Yes,” I breathe, not entirely sure I actually do want to know anymore.

Blake’s tongue darts out, wetting his bottom lip. His eyes have seemed to come back to life all at one, fire burning within the depths of their ocean hue. “I guess I’m just wondering how this fits into your master plan,” he says.

My spine steels. “What?”

“Your master plan,” Blake continues, taking a step closer. My reflex is to step back, but I hold my ground. “The one where you have every step of your life planned out and control what happens and when it happens at every moment along the way. How would you fit *this* into your perfect picture?” Blake growls, motioning his hand around us.

I feel tears burning the backs of my eyes but I don’t let them through. “Blake...” my voice cracks. “It’s okay. I know you’re upset—”

“Upset?” Blake cuts me off.

I shake my head. “Distraught. Devastated. I know how sad you must be—”

“Sad?” Blake interrupts me again, an incredulous look on his face. “Evangeline, I’m not *sad*.”

My brows raise in question. He runs an exasperated hand through his hair before turning his burning gaze back on me.

“I’m *pissed*.”

“Wha...” I stutter. “Pissed?”

“Yes, Evangeline. *Pissed*,” Blake confirms. “I mean, the audacity of these people.”

“What people?”

“Person after person that barely knew my dad standing up there and calling him a *hero*.” The last word comes out with acid in his tone.

A pain pinches deep within my chest. “Blake... Your dad— he *was* a hero. People say he acted without a second thought.”

Blake scoffs, shaking his head as he stares at the floor. “And that’s my point exactly.”

I don’t understand what Blake is saying. I attempt to reach out a comforting hand but he shrugs it off.

“Maybe he *thought* he was a hero. But, I mean, what kind of hero leaves behind his wife?” Blake slurs. I wonder how many of those flasks he’s had today. “He left my *mom* behind, Evangeline... He left me behind. *Without a second thought*.”

My lips part, the tears breaking through my reservoir and clouding my vision.

“And for *what*? A few thousand dollars that definitely would have been covered by the bank’s insurance?”

“There were *people*, Blake,” I whisper.

“Yeah, people,” he huffs. “People clearly more important to him than his own family.” Blake turns his head, picking up a framed photo of him and his parents from the bookshelf.

“You know that’s not true,” I breathe.

“Well, I guess we’ll never know,” he says looking from the picture back to me. “But, either way, screw us, right?”

Before I can respond I’m startled by Blake smashing the frame into the ground.

“Blake!” I cry.

No wonder he’s been acting so strange all day. This is what he was he was keeping bottled in.

And I just unleashed it.

This isn’t him. I know it isn’t. But he’s just lost the closest person to him in the most sudden and traumatic way. I can’t blame him for breaking down. There’s no telling what I would be doing in this situation.

Blake reaches for another picture of him and his dad.

“Blake, *stop!*”

I feel my heart shatter at the same time the picture frame does. Blake is making strangled grunting sounds as he whips around, reaching for anything

else he can break. When he snatches his dad's *Little League Coach of the Year* trophy from Kyle's desk and turns back towards me, I realize the grunts are actually sniffles, and that tears are streaming down his face. Blake raises his arm in the air to smash the trophy.

"Blake!"

I dart forward, reaching up and gripping Blake's raised wrist in both of my hands.

He meets my eyes at the same time Emily and several other houseguests appear in the doorway behind me.

"What is going on?" Emily squeaks.

Blake doesn't answer his mother, his eyes staying locked on me. "Let go," he mutters.

"No."

Blake's eyes burn into mine for several more seconds before I see them gradually soften, his bottom lip quivering.

"Give it to me, Blake," I whisper. "It's okay."

I can hear Emily quietly crying behind me and can feel everyone's gazes on my back, but I don't care. Only Blake and I are in this room right now. Only Blake and I exist right now.

Blake's grip relaxes, releasing the trophy. He has barely let go before he is stumbling backward and sliding to the floor, his shoulders racking with sobs.

My mouth dries and I feel like I'm going to be sick. I feel a gaping hole in my chest for this poor broken boy in front of me. This boy that means so much to me. This boy that is usually so full of light and hope. He doesn't deserve this. Any of this.

I have no idea how I plan to comfort him, but I barely take a step forward before I am being pulled back by my shoulders and Emily is rushing past me. I hear my dad whisper something to me, but it doesn't register.

Everything is a blur around me as I see Emily Di Fazio fall to the floor and throw her arms around her sobbing son and the door to the office is shut in my face.



SIX HUNDRED AND FORTY-SEVEN.

That's how many books of various ages, shapes, and sizes are crammed into the grand bookcase built into the wall of the Di Fazios's game room.

I know because I've counted them all.

Four times.

I let out a sigh, rolling onto my back gingerly so as to not wake Steph, who is fast asleep on the other end of the leather sectional couch.

I guess I'm just wondering how this fits into your master plan.

He left me behind.

Screw us, right?

How would you fit this into your perfect picture?

Well, I guess we'll never know.

Blake's words replay and swirl through my mind like a tornado. At this point I'm pretty sure I'm physically incapable of crying any more. My entire body feels numb. A deep ache within my chest is the only thing reminding me I'm still awake.

Why can we never sleep when that's the only thing we want to do?

I just need to close my eyes. Escape from all of this for a while. I'll talk to Blake in the morning.

I haven't seen or spoken to him since the scene in the office earlier. Post door slamming, all of the houseguests quickly trickled out, leaving my family and a few other of Kyle's close relatives to sit in awkward silence, waiting for what felt like an eternity for Blake and Emily's combined sobs to slowly fade out from the background.

I force my eyelids shut.

Well, I guess we'll never know.

They immediately snap back open.

I can't do this. Can't lay here any longer. I feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin.

I pull the quilt covering me back, slowly easing off of the couch. Steph's quiet snores drown out all noises of squeaking leather and my bare feet padding across the hardwood floor. I feel completely in a daze. I don't even realize where I'm going until I'm standing outside of Blake's bedroom door.

I grab hold of the handle, blowing a deep breath out before cautiously easing the door open. My eyes adjust quickly to the moonlit room and I barely startle, surprised but also not surprised at all, when I see Blake wide awake, laying flat on his back in his bed with his arms behind his head,

staring straight up at the ceiling just as I had been for hours before resorting to counting books. He's in a white t-shirt and plaid boxers and has all of his sheets and covers rumpled up at his feet, as if he wasn't able to get comfortable either.

I hesitate in the doorway, fidgeting with my hair and sleep shorts. After a few seconds, I panic, regretting my decision, and start to pull the door closed.

"Hey."

I freeze at the sound of Blake's weak detached greeting.

"Hey," I whisper, inching the door back open.

Blake remains silent, staring at the ceiling.

"Sorry. I- I just-" I sputter.

"Yeah?" Blake asks, turning his head to look at me.

I let out a huff, closing the door behind me and taking a few steps into the room, crossing my arms over my chest as I reach his bedside.

"I was just going to come in here to ask you if you were okay. But then I realized that's a ridiculously stupid question."

Blake's eyes trail up and down my figure as I stand there awkwardly. When they meet my face again, he speaks. "Yeah."

My shoulders perk up. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," he confirms.

I feel relief wash through me and warm my cheeks.

"It is a stupid question."

My face falls.

Oh.

Not 'yeah' as in 'yeah, I'm okay.'

Feeling like a complete idiot, I mumble something along the lines of *sorry* and turn to leave, but Blake stops me, shooting out his hand to grab mine. When I turn back, I see the slightest of smirks pulling at the corner of his lips.

"But I suppose it's the sentiment that counts," he says, sitting up on one elbow.

I fully face him, taking a step closer.

"I'm not okay," Blake states.

My heart instantly sinks in response. Of course he's not okay. I knew that. But hearing it straight from Blake makes my beyond empty tear tank feel like it's about to magically refill. For someone to admit they're not okay, *especially* someone like Blake...they usually have to be *really* not okay. I

scan my brain for anything I can say, anything I can do to help. But nothing comes.

Why am I not better at this?

“But I’d probably be a little bit better if you stayed with me...” My gaze snaps to Blake’s and I see his demeanor soften. “Just for a little while...?” he whispers.

My pulse pounds in my ears, goosebumps prickling my arms and neck. I hate this wall of tension between me and Blake right now. I want to do what I can to help him, but part of me feels like I might just make things worse. I open my mouth to say I think it may not be a good idea, but my real voice decides at the last moment to go against all the voices in my head.

“Okay.”

Blake scoots over, making room. I sit lightly on the bed, laying down flat on my back so that my and Blake’s bodies are parallel to each other, both of us staring at the ceiling.

The silence over the next few minutes becomes deafening, the wall of tension thickening. Both of our eyes are fully open. Blake’s moved one arm to rest behind his head again while both of mine still lay straight and awkwardly at my sides. When I can’t take it any longer, I blurt out the first thing that comes to my mind.

“There’s six hundred and forty-seven books in your game room.”

Blake remains still, not turning to look at me or reacting physically in any other way. “Really?” he mutters after a few seconds.

Why did I say that?

And why am I having to think so damn hard about what to say to Blake Di Fazio?

“Yeah,” I breathe, responding to Blake.

“Hmmm,” he hums. “Good to know.”

“Yeah...”

Regret pricks at my chest for being so demanding of him today. I barely know what to think yet when it comes to Kyle’s death. How could I have expected Blake to be ready to talk about it so soon? And to me of all people. Assuming that I’ve earned that right. I guess I just...wanted it. Another bullet point to add to the list of my control freak nature. Not allowing people to feel on their own terms.

Jesus, Annie.

Just as I fear the painful silence is about to return and I start convincing

myself not to bolt straight out of this room, Blake lets out a heavy sigh. My eyes flick in his direction from flat on my back.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

My eyelids fall shut and I swallow down the welling emotion in my throat before I slowly turn my head to look at him.

Blake’s gaze stays on the ceiling, but I can see the new layer of shine present in his eyes. “For earlier,” he clarifies.

“Don’t be,” I choke out. “It’s my fault for pushing you. It was selfish. It was just eating me up...not knowing what you were feeling. I just wanted you to talk to me.”

“Yeah, well, I guess I didn’t know how to put what I was feeling into words,” Blake says, his voice tight. “So I just showed you instead.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not.” Blake shakes his head. “I just...”

“What?”

Blake stays silent for a moment, emotion etched deeply between his brows. He swallows hard, blinking several times. When he finally responds, it’s barely audible.

“It hurts.”

My throat goes tight, the backs of my eyelids burning.

Dammit.

I open my mouth with no clue how to even begin to respond to that statement. All I want to do is hold him. But I can’t move. And I’m not even sure he’d want me to. I just don’t know.

I don’t know anything.

Blake clears his throat, carrying on and pulling me from my swirl of thoughts. “You know that I’ve never been a person to take life too seriously. I’m not a planner. I just live day by day.”

“...Yeah?” I manage to croak out.

“Well...I guess...” Blake runs a hand down his face. “I guess this was just never a day I planned on living.”

If it was possible, I think my heart just broke for somewhere near the tenth time today. I fight against the oncoming tears as I roll on to my side, facing Blake. “Blake, nobody would have planned for it,” I whisper. “You shouldn’t have had to.”

Blake blows out a long breath. “I don’t think I can do it, Evangeline,” he breathes, finally peeling his eyes from the ceiling and turning his head to

meet my gaze. As he does so, I notice, for the first time since entering the room, a three-quarters empty bottle of whiskey on the bedside table behind him. In the same moment, I catch the faint scent of the liquor still on his breath. I don't get more than two seconds to process it, however, as Blake's next words slap me square in the face and in the heart at the exact same time.

"I can't be all my mom has," he chokes, his blue-green eyes pooling with moisture. "I'm not ready for this."

"Hey," my voice trembles, my hands reflexively shooting out to catch Blake's face as his head starts to fall in the opposite direction, forcing him to look at me. His eyes dart back and forth between mine as I wipe away his few escaping tears from his cheeks with the pads of my thumbs. "You don't have to be. Just take it day by day."

Blake slowly rolls his body in my direction until he is fully facing me. The crease between his brows deepens and I immediately reach up, smoothing it out with my thumb. Blake's lake colored gaze burns into me with more pain and emotion than I think I am capable of comprehending. My hands stay firm on his strong jaw as he begins to shake his head.

"It just feels like nothing makes sense anymore," he says. He pulls his bottom lip into his mouth, stifling a cry trying to work its way out. "Nothing feels real."

My vision blurs, a dull ache working its way through my ribcage. I've never felt so completely and utterly helpless. I'm not sure of much of anything in this moment. *Anything but this.*

"I'm real. I'm here."

Blake's gaze finds mine again, surveying me. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," I nod. "As long as you need me. I'll be here."

Blake lets out a shaky breath. "I need you now."

My own breath hitches in my throat, all of the air seeming to escape my lungs at once.

If the last week of my life has taught me anything, it's that control is an illusion. As much as the thought sickens me and goes against everything I've always believed, life will do what it wants, when it wants, regardless of your plans. It's become apparent that all we have in any given moment is choice. A choice of what we will do right now.

There is absolutely no telling the future and, whether or not that fact threatens my very sanity, I have to take it in stride. Or at least I have to try. I can do that. I can make a choice right now. A choice to be here now and to let

the future do what it may. A choice to be here now. For Blake.

I pull Blake in, his face settling in the crook of my neck, his few straggling tears soaking into my shirt collar. “Okay,” I whisper.

His breath is warm on my neck, sending goosebumps down my spine. The moment I shiver, Blake reaches down, smoothly kicking the comforter at our feet up to his grasp to pull it over us. Though he’s trying his best to hide it, I can hear and feel him still quietly crying. My hand drifts from his cheek to his back, rubbing it in circular motions as an attempt to comfort him.

“Evangeline?”

“Hmm?”

“I might...need you...later on, too.”

A single tear spills down my cheek. I know if I speak that my voice will crack, so I stay silent and nod, insisting on staying strong for Blake right now.

I feel Blake’s arm drape over my waist, enveloping me in warmth. I push my tongue into my cheek as I work up the courage to say something, but my train of thought is cut off by Blake, who suddenly pulls my body completely flush with his. I can feel his heart beating through both of our thin t-shirts, his face nuzzling deeper into my neck as he lets out a heavy sigh.

We stay that way for what feels like several minutes, not speaking, clung to one another, limbs entangled, creating a cocoon for two within Blake’s dark plaid comforter. As the seconds tick by, I feel Blake’s breathing deepen, his body relaxing. My own eyelids finally fall shut and manage to stay closed for the first time tonight. I’m convinced that Blake has long passed out and can feel sleep finally consuming me just as I hear Blake’s barely audible voice.

“But I’ll always want you.”

My lips part at the same time my eyes just barely peel open, blinking hard once, not even fully taking in the dark ceiling of Blake’s bedroom, and, right then, I feel it.

A stutter of my heart. A deep ache in my gut. Like a puzzle piece being clicked into space. I let the feeling overwhelm me as I drift off to sleep, refusing to let my brain take this from me.

A spark.

PRESENT DAY

I bob my knee, chewing on my already very raw bottom lip as I stare out of the passenger side window of my truck. Blake's eyes remain forward, his hands firmly at ten and two on the steering wheel. It wasn't discussed that he would be driving us home from the trade show; he just opened the driver's side door and held out his hand in a motion for the keys once we reached the truck in the parking lot. I didn't have it in me to question or fight him on it.

My fingers fidget repeatedly with the last button on my blue cardigan to the point that I can feel the thread coming loose and the button starting to dangle from the fabric. I move up to the next button, desperately needing something to distract me. I think I'm starting to realize why Blake insisted on driving.

We haven't talked about it. We haven't talked about anything. Not since Blake yanked the only physical evidence of one of my favorite days and memories of my life from my hand. The physical evidence I all but forgot existed.

Clearly he didn't.

I don't know what that could mean. I'm not sure I want to know. I tell myself I'm overthinking it. He's a guy. Guys so rarely bother replacing things like wallets. Maybe he's just had the same one all these years and just shoved that old Polaroid in there shortly after the night we took it and never gave it a second thought. Yes, I'm completely overthinking it.

Like that's ever stopped you before.

I keep replaying his reaction to me finding it over and over. His eyes held a swirl of so many different emotions. Initially, he seemed so confused. Then there was something like shock. Then, if I'm not crazy, he appeared...

embarrassed? Guilty? The final reaction I saw out of him is the one that sticks out the most. And the one I can't shake.

Anger.

He seemed angry. I wouldn't have been surprised if he would have ripped the photo in half after taking it from me. I try to ignore the way my heart itself feels like it's tearing just at the thought of that photo, the one that I always thought I hated up until I saw it still existed forty-five minutes ago, being torn.

I just keep seeing Blake's dark brows pulling together. The darkening of his eyes when the realization hit him. *God, why did I find it?* Why did he even *have* it? Did he really have no idea it was in his wallet? The only reason I was even looking through his wallet in the first place was because *he* insisted I do so. Did he *want* me to find it? His reaction makes even less sense if so.

I steal a sideways glance at Blake. His stoic nature betrays me as it always has, his blank facial expression giving me absolutely nothing as to what he could be thinking. I think back to his face at the bar; the deep crease in his forehead and hard set of his jaw. I'm not sure I've ever seen such a look of indignation on him.

Liar.

Okay, I can think of exactly one other time. I swallow hard. I'm sure that I deserved it.

Both times.

I suddenly realize that we have entered our neighborhood. I also realize that Blake didn't suggest or ask about dropping the supplies we got today off at the store and let out a sigh of relief I didn't even know I was holding in. One less battle to fight today. I secretly know in the back of my mind that these smaller battles I'm putting off will inevitably lead to a war. It's fine. That's a problem for another day.

Tomorrow.

What other day is there?

I shake my head, pushing the thought away. If I just don't think about it, I won't have to deal with it. Everything will be fine. The party will happen. Blake will keep to himself. We'll say goodbye. Blake will leave. I'll marry Remy in a month. Everything will work out exactly the way it's supposed to. Exactly the way I've envisioned it for the last five years.

Yeah. Okay, Annie.

The gravel grinding underneath the tires of the truck as Blake turns into the driveway is the first thing to break the silence in the last half hour. We come to a stop and Blake is out of the truck before the engine is even fully killed. I swallow against the dryness in my throat, easing my own door open and sliding out onto the ground.

I expect Blake to have bolted inside just as quickly as he got out of the vehicle, but am surprised to find him standing at the front of the truck, facing me with one hand resting on the hood. I'm even more surprised, however, when my gaze reaches his face. His posture is no longer rigid and his eyes have softened back to normal. When they meet mine, his lips even pull up in his signature Blake smirk.

"Hey," Blake says.

I have to keep myself from slumping over as a large culmination of stress and tension instantly leave my body.

So, we're good? We're just forgetting it happened?

"Hey," I breathe, my fingers lacing together.

This is good. This is what's best. Let's just forget about it.

"I just realized we didn't stop at the store," Blake nods towards the bed of the truck.

Oh.

"Should we run this stuff by there real quick?"

"No," I shake my head. "That's okay. Remy can bring it tomorrow morning."

Blake rolls his lips into his mouth at the same moment I begin to chew on my bottom one again. "Okay," he says flatly, pushing off the truck and heading for the front door.

My teeth continue to gnaw at my lip the whole way into the house. I noticed Remy's truck wasn't in the driveway when we pulled in. I take out my cell phone and see that I don't have any messages from him. It's only coming up on 4 p.m., and he said it was going to be a late night.

Why did it have to be tonight?

My feet halt and I look up from my phone when I hear the sound of a door cracking open. It's only then that I realize that I practically followed Blake into his room in my distraction. I try to brush it off, quickly shuffling a few steps backwards and slipping my phone into my back pocket as Blake turns to face me in the doorway.

"I think I'm going to take a nap for a while and then go work in the

greenhouse the rest of the night.”

“Okay,” I mutter through my teeth, my lip still stuck between them.

“That okay?” Blake asks.

I nod, crossing my arms and attempting a smile.

Blake starts to turn away and close the door, then pauses. He lets out huff with his back to me then suddenly turns around, taking the necessary steps to close the distance between us. I don’t even have time to react before he grasps the bottom of my face with one hand, pushing his thumb into my chin hard enough that my lower lip pulls out of my teeth.

“Please stop that,” he whispers.

I don’t respond, my lips remaining parted. Blake’s gaze flicks down to them once before he releases his hold on me, turning to walk back into his room. I find the will to speak just as he’s about to close the door for the second time.

“Thank you,” I blurt. “For going with me today.”

“You’re welcome,” Blake replies, his head not raising to look at me.

“And for the dance,” I add. I don’t know why I added it, but it’s what makes Blake’s eyes meet mine again. His jaw flexes, but he doesn’t say anything as he moves to close the door again.

Just let it go, Annie. Just let it go.

“Blake,” I breathe.

The door freezes in its path, the knuckles of Blake’s hand on it white.

“Yes, Evangeline?” he mutters.

I swallow hard, my mouth opening and closing twice. I take a step forward, my spine steeling and arms falling to my sides. “I’m going to ask you a question,” I say.

Because I don’t have to ask permission.

“Ask it, then,” Blake pushes, taking a step out of the room and matching my challenge.

I refuse to break his searing eye contact, tilting my head back to meet it fully. “Why do you still have that photo?” I whisper.

Blake immediately starts shaking his head. “Evangeline, no.”

“Blake, why?” I urge.

“Please, just don’t,” he grits.

“Please, just tell me,” I plead. We’ve come this far. I can’t just let it go.

“No.”

I rear back as Blake finally tears his eyes from mine, still shaking his

head as he starts to walk back into his room.

“Why not?” I push, my arms crossing once again in irritation.

“Because it’s been a long day and I don’t want to talk about it. Just let it go.”

“Blake, I–”

“*Evangeline.*”

“*What?*”

Blake stops, letting out a harsh breath as his hand grips the wooden door and his forehead falls against it. He stays that way for several seconds before he straightens again, turning to look at me with an entirely new fire in his teal eyes. His tongue pushes hard into the side of his cheek as if he’s desperately trying to prevent himself from giving away a secret.

“I’ll tell you what,” Blake rasps, pushing off of the door and walking right up to me. He comes so close so fast that my reaction is to step back, but I stop myself, holding my ground. He stares down at me, his lips rolling together as what looks to be a final attempt at holding his tongue.

He fails.

“You don’t ask me why I still have that photo and I won’t ask you why you still have my t-shirt.”

My jaw drops.

“I–” I sputter.

How? What? Oh my God.

I remain frozen, completely at a loss for words as Blake steps away from me.

How could he know about the shirt? Where even is the shirt right now? The last time I had it was the night I called him. Where did I put it after we hung up the phone? That entire night is honestly a blur in my mind.

Oh my God.

No. This isn’t comparable. It’s a shirt. It’s just stayed in the bottom of my drawers for years. I didn’t even remember I had it until I found it that night. It’s simple. I didn’t *keep* the shirt. I just never got rid of it.

But why?

My eyes begin to burn at my own hypocrisy. My teeth go into my lip to stifle the unexplained tears trying to work their way through.

“I told you to stop that.”

I look up to see Blake in his doorway once more. I immediately release my lip, straightening my posture. He starts to close the door but stops it

halfway.

“And you shouldn’t have to thank me for a dance,” Blake says, his eyes flicking up to mine. He tilts his head to the side, something like sadness crossing his features. “You should always dance.”

The door closes and I’m left in the hallway wondering what the hell just happened.

SEVEN YEARS AGO

“T hough the traditional route of television and print ads might seem like the obvious choice, the most recent statistics are showing that our targeted demographic for this product, males and females between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, are actually consuming over three-quarters of their media through online sources. After carefully running the numbers, I believe the return on investment here would be most valuable if we were to instead utilize content creators on various social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram—”

“Annie, that’s your fourth trip through the revolving door, hun.”

“Huh?” I tear my gaze away from the manila folder holding my notes to see Riya, my favorite fellow intern, shaking her head and laughing at me from outside the building. I look down to see my hand still pushing the revolving door around on what I assume is now my sixth rotation.

“Shit,” I mutter, a light brown strand of hair falling out of my twisted and clipped mess of an updo and into my line of vision. “Sorry, Ri,” I call over my shoulder as I step into the small lobby. “Just a little stressed.”

“You’re *always* stressed,” Riya says as we stroll past the front desk.

I wave and smile at our secretary, Vivian, the bright red backlit letters of Briar & Brooks standing out on the wall behind her. “Am not,” I shoot back at Riya, praying my muscle memory will guide me to my desk as I return my attention to my proposal outline that I’ve spent the last seventy-two hours straight perfecting and will be presenting at our 9:00 a.m. meeting this morning.

“You totally are,” Riya laughs. “And there’s no need. You’re the best intern in this place, Annie. You know you’re going to be kept on. And you’re

going to *kill* this presentation because you literally *always* do. You were made for public speaking.”

College came and went faster than I had ever imagined it would. Though the math related classes nearly killed me, with a ridiculous amount of tutoring and hard work, I managed to push through a graduate with a 3.5 GPA. Even though I was proud of my grade average, it wasn't stellar compared to most business majors; well, most of those that wanted to land a position straight out of school at one of the top marketing firms in the country anyways. Although I didn't ace every class in college, and Riya's praises frequently exceed my worth, she wasn't wrong, however, in saying that I am a talented public speaker. *Bullshitter* was just the term I preferred.

Briar & Brooks, the fourth-highest grossing marketing firm in the United States, had decided to make a last minute appearance at one of our business career fairs at the University of Alabama my final semester before graduating and, although their typical minimum GPA requirement was a 3.8, I somehow managed to wiggle my way into an interview and eventually secured one of the firm's ten summer intern spots at their Montgomery, Alabama branch.

The internship was set to take place from the first day of June until the end of August. At that point, five interns would be chosen for full-time employment at the branch. As ecstatic as I was at the thought of being kept on at all, the number one spot was what I had my sights set on. The best intern of the summer would earn a position as a marketing associate at the Briar & Brooks headquarters in New York City.

New York City.

It was a dream. It was the only option. Though I could never complain about being offered a job in my desired field at an incredible company, being a mere thirty minutes away from Ramer was not what I had in mind for my life post-high school. Not at all what I had planned. In my mind every single day at work over the summer, there was only one full-time position available.

And it was going to be mine.

“Thank you for your positive affirmations, Ri, but I'm not so sure this time,” I tell Riya as we settle into our respective cubicles across from each other. “I mean, who needs a wooden water bottle? Much less a \$50 wooden water bottle?”

“It doesn't matter. If anyone can sell it, you can,” Riya smiles, pointing at me with her purple feather pen before returning it to her notebook. “Find your audience and you find the money. Just like Margaret always says.”

“Well if you find a few thousand rich kids lacking drinkware in the next half hour, let me know,” I say, digging my palms into my sleep deprived eyes.

“Did someone say kids?” A male voice sounds from in front of me. I look up to see Matthew Hollis, another summer intern, leaning against the outer wall of my cubicle. “Talking about our future again, Annie?”

“Hi, Matt. No, Matt. I’m busy.” I hold up the manila folder, waving it at him to show my notes and setting it back down on my desk, trying my hardest to look even busier than I already truly am.

“Well then,” Matthew says, leaning on the wall like some cheesy jock out of a movie, his offensively blue eyes sparkling, “I guess I’ll leave you alone.”

“Great, thanks,” I say, not looking up.

“As soon as you agree to go out with me.”

My head snaps up. “Matt. No. For the third time.” *This week.*

Matthew puts on his best pouty puppy dog face, his blonde brows furrowing. “C’mon, Annie. I promise I won’t bite.”

“Matt, I’m sorry. But I told you,” I groan, exasperated, “I’m just not interested.”

“You have a boyfriend, don’t you?”

My spine steels. “No, Matt. But I do have a proposal presentation in,” I stop to look at my watch dramatically, “twenty-two minutes. So, if you could, please.”

Matthew lets out a heavy sigh, pushing away from my cubicle. “I’ll get you one day, Annie Jacks.”

I shake my head as he walks away, letting my gaze fall back to my outline. I read over it for a few seconds before I can feel eyes burning a hole in the side of my head and turn to see Riya frozen with her head cocked to the side, staring daggers at me.

“What?” I ask.

“*What?*” she hisses. “More like what’s *wrong with you?*”

My brows raise. “What do you mean?”

“How are you going to keep continually rejecting that six feet and two inches of perfect human specimen?”

“Did you say six feet *and* two inches?” I deadpan. “Well no one told me about the other two inches. Hold on, let me run after him and accept right away.”

“I don’t understand you, Annie.” Riya shakes her head. “I mean, hun,

with peace and love, you look like you haven't slept in three days and may have crawled to the office this morning and he's *still* looking at you like you hung the moon." *Okay, not untrue, but still, ouch.* "Just go out with him!"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to."

"Why? What's wrong with him?"

I open my mouth to reply but nothing comes out. I close it again, tilting my head.

There really isn't anything wrong with Matthew Hollis. I mean, he's a bit more All-American-boy-next-door-sunshine-frat-boy-quarterback than the guys I'm typically attracted to, but there's no valid reason on paper at least as to why I shouldn't want to go on a date with him. He's nice. Smart. Outgoing. Looks at me like I hung the moon, *apparently*. I ignore the pinch in my chest and push away at the obvious answer at the forefront of my brain. It's not about who Matthew is.

It's about who he isn't.

"I just don't think it's a good idea," I finally answer Riya.

"I think you think too much," she replies, shrugging her shoulders before turning back to her computer.

I blow out a breath, running my hands over my hair.

Yeah, tell me about it.

I straighten suddenly, grabbing for my bag and digging through it to find my cell phone. I've been so stressed and frantic over the presentation that I haven't even looked at my phone this morning.

1 New Message.

My heart skips a beat as I swipe open the notification. I immediately slump in my chair, with some guilt, however, when I see it's from Leah.

Blake's *good morning* texts haven't been a daily occurrence for well over a year now, but, even with their most frequent timing now being more like once a week, it hasn't stopped me from getting my hopes up.

Every morning.

I haven't seen Blake Di Fazio since the morning after Kyle's funeral, when Steph lightly shook me awake after finding me in his bed, Blake and I still wrapped around each other in the exact same position we had fallen asleep in.

She had told me Mom and Dad were asking for me but that she had

covered for me, saying I was in the bathroom and not feeling well. We had to leave for the airport in twenty minutes. Another visit with Blake that was entirely too short.

I had looked back at him, still fast asleep, his head resting lightly on the pillow and his arm draped on the open portion of the bed I had just been laying on. I raised my hand to wake him up and say goodbye but then stopped. Aside from the dark circles still present under his eyes, this was the first time Blake had actually looked like himself since we'd been here. Not an ounce of pain was present on his face. He actually looked...peaceful.

I couldn't bear to wake him up. I rubbed my hand once over his curly brown hair and, before I realized what I was doing, leaned over to place a light kiss on his temple before crawling out of the bed. I had felt Steph's eyes on me, but she didn't ask any questions, and I didn't offer any answers. I don't think either of us needed to. We were sisters. She knew.

After the funeral, I tried my best to stay in touch with Blake, but things were different. He was hurting and distant and I was busy and hesitant to overstep again. He'd still text me *good morning* most days, but that slowly trickled out. I'd message him often to let him know I was thinking of him and remind him I was here for him. Sometimes he'd reply, sometimes he wouldn't. And from time to time, sometimes more frequently than I was comfortable with, I'd get a very late and most definitely alcohol-induced phone call from Blake. I'd always know it was one of those because he'd always start the phone call the same way. No 'hello'.

Evangeline, I need you.

And I'd be there. Sometimes he'd vent. Sometimes he'd cry. Sometimes we'd sit in silence. It didn't matter. Whatever helped him.

Blake was still working for the landscaping company, which turned out to be the best thing in his life. It occupied his mind and gave him purpose. It brought him joy. The occasional text messages with pictures of projects he was working on absolutely made my day. He was in his element. If only the work days could be longer.

I've missed Blake so much, and I know he's missed me, but we just haven't been able to make visiting one another work. As much as my parents insisted we'd still regularly see Blake and Emily, I knew it would never be the same. Emily and my mom had always been friendly, but Kyle was the glue. His friendship with Dad was what held our families together. Without their weekly phone call and Kyle's constant persistence about making plans, I

knew our family visits were bound to fizzle out. The only other reason for my family to go to Lake Placid was Grammy and, with Steph being so busy with high school and me being so busy with college and my parents being busier than ever with the store, she had made it a point to come and see us in Ramer for the holidays. With all of that considered, it became obvious the only way Blake and I would be seeing each other was if we took it upon ourselves.

Unfortunately, right after Kyle's funeral, college for me got insanely busy and never slowed down. Between classes and tutoring and extracurricular activities and my minimum wage on-campus job and my minimal attempt at a social life, I had absolutely no time (*and, realistically, no money*) to make a trip to Lake Placid. Blake was dealing with the same issues, only different. Although he adored his job, he worked long hours and was putting the work in to climb the ladder. He worked basically every Saturday and even some Sundays. The pay wasn't bad, but not nearly enough for how hard he was working. Blake wasn't stressed about it though. He loved his job and knew what he was signing up for.

Crap work equals crap pay. I'll get there eventually, he had said.

Blake was smart. He had saved nearly every penny he made his first two years and, combined with a courteous loan from Kyle's bank, managed to buy a small house five minutes down the road from Emily. Though it was a great investment, and an adorable little place from the pictures Blake had sent me, it meant he had very little left over money after paying his monthly mortgage and utility bills for travel. Not that he'd even had the time to do so.

So, before we knew it, one year apart verged into nearly three.

Even though we spoke less frequently nowadays, I never thought about Blake any less. That boy had taken up residence in my heart long ago and there was no way a little time apart and strained communication was going to change that. Our time was coming any day now. If I could just get this position in New York, secure a solid salary, and get paid time off— I knew that's all it would take. All the pieces from there would just fall into place.

In the meantime, however, as perfect as he might seem on paper, I simply don't have the time or desire to invest in Matthew Hollis. Or any other guy for that matter.

I let out a sigh, looking back to my phone. The preview for Leah's text notification shows several hearts and the start of a message.

Leah: Hey, rat! It's your...

I move my thumb to open the message, but someone's voice catches my

attention.

“Annie, time to set up for the meeting. Are you ready?” I look up to see Lucy, the manager of our branch’s personal assistant, staring at me nervously with her huge brown eyes. Lucy literally always seemed on the edge of a nervous breakdown, and I couldn’t say I blamed her. Working directly for and under the stone-cold witch that was Margaret Brooks had to take a toll.

I lock my phone, shoving it into the inside pocket of my blazer before Lucy fully makes her way around the wall of my cubicle. Cell phones weren’t forbidden in the office, but being on mine during work hours definitely wouldn’t earn me any extra points in the intern race.

“As ready as I’ll ever be!” I plaster on a grin, scooping up my folder of presentation notes and laptop and following Lucy’s lead toward the conference room.

“Hey!” I turn around at the sound of Riya’s voice. “You’re gonna kill it,” she says, winking at me through the curtain of her black hair. At the same moment, a calendar reminder sounds from Riya’s computer. Her eyes flick down to her screen. “Oh crap,” she mutters, “Annie, I almost forgot—”

“*Ms. Jacks?*”

My heart rate instantly skyrockets at the sound of the familiar shrill voice. “Yes, ma’am?” I whip around, my spine snapping into its best posture as I meet the gaze of Margaret Brooks standing in the doorway of the conference room.

“Plan on joining us today?” My boss and the decider of my fate surveys me over her too small reading glasses that never leave her face.

“Yes, ma’am. Coming right now.” I look back quickly to a tight-lipped Riya, mouthing *sorry* before heading into the meeting room to prepare for the most important presentation of my internship so far.



DESPITE THE FACT that both Margaret and Matthew’s gazes burned a hole in me the entire time, and my phone that I forgot to remove from my blazer pocket vibrated incessantly throughout my entire proposal, I managed to hit every point I had outlined and planned for without a stutter. The presentation ended with a round of applause from all of the executives and

the handful of interns that had decided to sit in, excluding Evelyn Marshall, who, for whatever reason, decided she hated my guts the second we both began our internships. Riya made up for her lack of encouragement by clapping twice as loud as everyone else in the room.

I felt my cheeks redden as I nodded, thanking them. When I looked up again, I could have sworn I caught the ghost of a smile leaving Margaret's face, causing me to break out in my own.

I let out a sigh of relief, allowing myself to truly relax for the first time in a week. Wow.

My proposal was a complete success.

I start to gather my things to leave the room, a dumb grin still playing on my face, when I see Riya approaching from the corner of my eye. "Hey, Ri."

I look up when Riya doesn't reply right away, seeing her chewing on her bottom lip. "Hey Ann, I'm so sorry—"

"Ms. Jacks? A moment?"

Both Riya and I turn our heads at the same time to see Margaret standing at the end of the conference table with her arms crossed, her silver toned ponytail pulled so tight that her eyebrows appear permanently raised and her dark red lips tightly pursed.

I feel my heart sink. *Crap*. My proposal was most definitely not a complete success. I immediately begin wracking my brain, replaying everything I said. Did I get a statistic wrong? Did I misunderstand the assignment? Did I unintentionally say something offensively? Good God, I'd rather shrivel up and die here on the spot rather than hear whatever Margaret Brooks is about to tell me.

"Yes, of course, Ms. Brooks."

Riya gives me a wide eyed look seeming to say *good luck* before turning and leaving the room.

"Please, Ms. Singh," Margaret addresses Riya without removing her gaze from me, "close the door on your way out. Won't you?"

I can visibly see Riya gulp. "Yes, Ms. Brooks." She sends me a tight smile and nods before letting the door fall closed behind her, leaving me alone with Margaret.

Please, just kill me quickly.

Margaret's black heels click against the tile as she makes her way over to me. I feel as if I'm shrinking more with each step she takes. Hopefully I'll just disappear altogether before she reaches me. She motions towards a chair

at the end of the conference table. “Sit.”

I pull the chair out, slowly sinking into it, and wait patiently as Margaret does the same. She folds her hands together, slowly raising her ice cold gray eyes to meet mine.

“Ms. Jacks.”

Just crush my soul already and let me leave.

“I like you.”

Please just put me out of my misery— Wait, what?

“What? I mean, *oh.*” I stammer. “Thank you, Ms. Brooks. I—er...like you, too?”

I mentally smack myself in the forehead with my palm. Please explain how I can manage to flawlessly deliver an hour long presentation in front of a group of twenty people but, one-on-one, I lose the ability to speak.

Jesus, Annie. Get it together.

Apparently possible, Margaret’s eyebrows raise slightly higher. “Of course you do, darling. But really, you’ve got it.”

“*It, ma’am?*”

“Yes. The drive. The vision. Not everybody does, but you certainly do. I can see you going somewhere in this field.” My heart slams painfully against my ribcage. “In this company.”

And I think that my heart just burst from my chest. “I—Wow. Thank you, ma’am. I really appreciate it. Especially coming from you, of course.”

“Of course.” Margaret says, her lips pulling up at the sides. “Well, I’d like to offer you something. If you’re interested.”

A job? I think I nod because Margaret continues.

“New York City.”

Tears threaten to fill my eyes, but I push them down. Oh my God. Not just a job. *The job.*

“Yes,” I say.

Of course, yes. A million times, yes. With a few weeks still left in the internship, I never would have expected them to make decisions this soon. This is crazy.

“There’s a conference. The biggest marketing conference in the country.”

My face falls. *Oh. What?*

“Briar & Brooks attends every year. Several of our top executives, including myself, will be presenting to thousands of attendees. I’d like for you to join us.”

“Oh.” *Me?* Was this her way of giving me the top intern position without officially saying it yet? Either way, this was beyond exciting. *New York freaking City.* I would never turn that down. My heart swells at the thought that I could be moving there in just a few short months. I wonder if this conference is a sort of test run?

“Interns from all twelve of our branches have been chosen to attend.”

Oh?

“I’ve invited Matthew Hollis and Evelyn Marshall to go as well.”

My breath catches in my throat, my forehead suddenly feeling very warm and a wave of nausea rolling through my stomach.

Oh.

“Matthew and Evelyn?” I repeat.

“Yes. I think the three of you show the most potential and could certainly represent the company well if given the chance. Would you say you’re up for it, Ms. Jacks?”

I grip the table for support.

I think the three of you show the most potential.

This isn’t a test run.

It’s a competition.

Matthew may have been pining after me all summer, but that fact wouldn’t stand in the way of his career goals. Matthew is smart. He takes initiative. And he could charm the pants off of just about anyone.

Anyone but you, I can hear Riya saying in my mind.

Evelyn, on the other hand... Yeah. She’d have absolutely zero qualms about going against me. I’m pretty sure she daydreams about opportunities to destroy me on an hourly basis. I don’t feel as threatened by her skillswise as I do Matthew, but she definitely has me beat in the organization and polished image departments.

On top of the two-faced snake department.

Shit.

Those two minutes of semi-normal blood pressure and just above average stress levels were fun while they lasted.

“Ms. Jacks?”

I steel myself, snapping back to reality. I know myself. I know what I’m capable of. This is a huge opportunity. This is my chance. Matthew and Evelyn are good interns... but I’m the best. I know that I am. I can do this.

I think.

“Yes, ma’am. Count me in.”

“Excellent.”

We both rise from our chairs at the same time and make our way out of the conference room.

“Thank you again,” I say to Margaret as we part ways, her heading towards her office and me towards my cubicle. “For the opportunity.”

Margaret nods at me. “I’ll see you in New York on September 1st.”

I freeze, my coffee cup nearly slipping out of my hand. “*September 1st?*” I whisper to myself, as Margaret is already long gone.

September 1st. The date is permanently ingrained into my brain.

The anniversary of Kyle Di Fazio’s death.

I stumble back to my cubicle, realization hitting me.

Kyle. Blake. New York.

Blake.

It’s nearly a five hour drive from where he lives, but it’s still in the same state. His family made the drive before. I quickly glance at my desktop calendar, seeing September 1st is on a Friday this year. It’ll be a weekend.

I can see Blake.

I look over and see that Riya’s isn’t at her desk before leaning against my own. I have to tell Blake. I fish my phone out of my pocket and pause. I have sixteen unread messages. Ones from Leah, Steph, Carmen, Madeline, Grammy (*what the hell?*), but my eyes go straight to one notification in particular.

Blake Di Fazio: 1 New Message

I swipe open the message so fast that I nearly drop my phone. When it pops up, my mouth immediately falls open. I frantically pull up my calendar on my computer, blinking several times as I look between it and my cell phone screen.

Oh my God.

Blake Di Fazio: Happy birthday, Evangeline.

I—*what?* How is it already my birthday? I can’t believe it. I’ve been so stressed and overwhelmed with this presentation and focusing on *that* being on August 1st that I literally forgot my own birthday.

Wait.

A thousand pounds of realization suddenly comes crashing down on me at all once, crushing my lungs and my heart. If today is my birthday...then that means yesterday was...

“*Fuck.*”

“Wow.”

My head snaps up, seeing Evelyn standing directly in front of my cubicle, her hands on her hips and her bleach blonde shoulder-length hair as pin straight as ever. “Classy language, Anna.”

I can feel the pink on my cheeks, none of which has to do with Evelyn. I couldn’t care less what she thinks. “It’s Annie,” I say, fully well knowing that she’s aware what my name is.

“*Hmm...*” Evelyn hums in a condescending tone, squinting her nearly black eyes at me. “Well maybe we watch our tongue a little closer while we’re in New York, shall we? Andie?” She prances away before I have time to respond, but I don’t even slightly have it in me to care at this moment.

I forgot Blake’s birthday.

“Shit,” I whisper this time. I look back to my phone to type a reply to Blake but Riya walks up, cutting me off.

“Annie, hey! Happy birthday! I’m sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. I’m gonna be completely honest and tell you I forgot until my calendar reminded me. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. It happens,” I mutter, zoning out, utterly ashamed and pissed at myself.

“Well, still,” Riya says. When I don’t respond, she waves a hand in my face. “Are you ready to head into the monthly planning meeting?” I notice for the first time she is holding her laptop and notebook.

“Oh, crap,” I sputter, gathering my things. “Yeah, one sec. It’s 10:30 already?”

“Sure is. One of those days?”

“You have no idea.”



THE MOMENT I crawl into my car at 6 p.m. that evening to begin my thirty minute commute home is the first moment I have to breathe the entire day. I don’t take it though, however, immediately dialing Blake’s number the moment my door is closed.

He answers on the third ring. “Hello?” Blake’s husky voice comes

through the line.

“Hey, you.”

“Oh.” I can hear the hesitance in his voice, and it’s like a stab to the gut.
“Evangeline.”

“Blake, I’m so sorry.”

I hear him blow out a breath. “For what?”

“You know for what. For being the worst person alive and forgetting your birthday.”

Blake is silent for a moment before speaking again. “I think the *worst* person might be a bit of an exaggeration.”

“No, it isn’t. Not in the slightest. I’m so incredibly sorry. I suck so much.”

Blake lets out a chuckle that I can’t entirely tell whether or not is forced.
“Nah.”

“I really do though. I suck.”

“Oh, I didn’t say you don’t suck. You definitely suck,” Blake confirms.
“But you just suck a little.”

“It was your birthday and I sucked.”

“Okay, that’s what she said.”

Why does that make me smile? I forgot the boy’s freaking birthday and he still manages to make me smile. *God, I really do suck.*

“Ugh. If it’s any consolation, I also forgot my own birthday.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. I didn’t remember until I saw your text.”

“Well, you’re welcome.” Blake’s trying his best as always to play nice, but I can tell he’s down. I hate the thought that I’ve done this to him.

“Blake, I really am so sorry. It’s absolutely no excuse, but I’ve been so busy. This internship is...intense.”

“Yeah, I can tell...” he trails off. I start to think he’s hung up, until he suddenly speaks again. “Are you happy though? Is it what you wanted?”

I blow out a breath. “It’s getting me to what I want. And that’s what matters.”

“Hmm...” Blake hums, dejected.

I clear my throat. “Speaking of, I have some news. And...possibly a way to make up for the whole forgetting your birthday thing?”

I hear shuffling from the other end of the line, sounding like Blake rolled over on either his bed or his couch. “I’m listening.”

“So... I’m coming to New York.”

“You’re coming to Lake Placid?” Blake asks, his voice raising nearly three octaves.

“Well, no. New York City. My company invited me to attend a conference there. It’s the biggest and most important marketing conference in the country and if things go well at it...I could be hired on full time. Could live in New York City.”

“Oh. Wow. That’s great, Evangeline...” Blake says, sounding confused as to what this has to do with his forgotten birthday.

“The conference is on a Friday,” I continue. “I was thinking that maybe... if you can get off work...you could maybe, uh...meet me? In the city? Afterwards?”

“Oh.”

“Yeah... I thought...we could make a whole weekend out of it? Catch up? It’s been a long time.”

“Entirely too long.” My heart skips a few beats. “Of course, Evangeline. Let’s do it. I’m there. What’s the date?”

I chew at my bottom lip anxiously, not wanting to have to say the words out loud and not completely sure how Blake will react. “It’s...um... September 1st.”

The line goes silent.

“Blake, I know that—”

“Oh,” Blake cuts me off. “I, uh, I’m not sure.”

I blow out a breath, tears burning the backs of my eyes. Another opportunity to see Blake, gone. “I totally understand. If you want to be alone that day, I get it. Don’t worry about it.”

“Evangeline...” Blake hesitates. “That’s the absolute last thing I want. There’s no one else I’d rather be with than you. On any day, but especially that one.” I roll my lips into my mouth, fighting against the moisture in my eyes. “It’s just...I can’t promise you how much fun I’ll be that day. Being with you will make it so much more bearable but...it’s just hard. I wouldn’t want to ruin a trip to your favorite city for you—”

“Hey,” I interrupt him. New York may be my favorite city, but Blake Di Fazio...he might just be my favorite person. There is no way I’m about to let him talk himself out of this for my sake. “Blake, I want to see *you*. In whatever state you are in. It doesn’t matter. And I want to be there for you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Please, Blake. Allow me to make that day *bearable* for you. And maybe the ones following just a hair above bearable. If we’re lucky.” Blake chuckles and this time, without a doubt, I know that this one is sincere. “Are you in or are you out, Di Fazio?”

“I’m in, Jacks. It’s on the calendar.”

I suddenly realize that I am pulling on to my street. I always have a tendency to drive way over the speed limit when I’m talking on the phone while driving.

Not the best multitasker.

My driveway comes into view and excitement hits me when I see both my mom and dad’s vehicles in the driveway. Mom has been gone nearly every other weekend the last few months at trade shows and buyer fairs as her and Dad have been trying to make some upgrades at the hardware store. I’m so glad I get to tell them both about the conference at the same time. They know how hard I’ve worked for this, especially Dad, who’s brought far too many midnight snacks up to my bedroom over this past summer.

“Beautiful. Hey, I just got home. Text you later?”

“Beautiful,” Blake echoes. I start to hang up when I hear his voice again. “I’m... I’m glad. Glad we’re doing this.”

“Me too,” I smile. “See you in a month. I promise to suck less by that time.”

Blake laughs. “Goodnight, Evangeline.”

“Goodnight, Blake.” I end the call as I’m stepping out of the truck, butterflies dancing in my stomach as I make my way to the front door.

Something about making my parents proud has always been one of the things that brings me the most joy in this life. I know that they are always supportive and proud of me no matter what, but I think I’ve always felt some sort of guilt about not wanting to take over the hardware store. They’ve never exactly pressured me to do so, but I know how much it would mean to Dad to see his legacy continued. So, in a way, I guess it makes me feel better to be able to show them that, if I’m not taking over the store, I’m at least finding success in my own path. Something worthwhile for allowing the business to come to an end so quickly. I suppose I shouldn’t take all the blame, however. Steph, with her near valedictorian status and full ride volleyball scholarship to Auburn next year, will most certainly be playing her own part in letting the legacy die. As much as it would pain me to one day see Ramer without Jacks Hardware, good for her.

Good for both of us.

I'm already through the front door before I realize that I was too distracted to use the side door like we normally do. I spot Steph sitting on the couch in the living room, still in her volleyball practice clothes, and my dad's back to me in the doorway. "Hey, guys," I say, making my way forward. "Y'all got a sec—"

I pause when both Dad and Steph's eyes turn to meet mine. They both shift uncomfortably and I become aware for the first time of the odd tension in the room. Mom steps into view and my eyes flick in her direction, seeing her crossed arms and tight expression.

"Um, what's going on?" I question, my eyes bouncing between each of my family members.

"Come sit, Annie," my mom says. "We have something to talk to you about."

PRESENT DAY

“We’ve already talked about this!” I call as I jog towards the front door, answering what has to be the hundredth knock of the morning between all of the vendors stopping by to drop things off for the shower and random family members and friends dropping by to see the new house and say hello on their way into town for the party tonight.

“Off-white and cream look exactly the same to me, Miss Lori Beth! Just choose whichever napkins you prefer! Or just do both! I seriously don’t think anyone will notice!”

I blow a loose strand of hair out of my face as I fling the door open. “Oh—*Oh my God,*” I sputter when I realize that it’s not Lori Beth at the door again to test my last shred of sanity. “Hi!”

“Wow, off-white *and* cream napkins?” Madeline questions, her brows raised.

“What kind of rager exactly did we sign up for here?” Carmen finishes, her lips pulled up in amusement.

I don’t respond to their very valid question, letting out a squeal as I pull both of my former college roommates into a bear hug.

“Missed you, sunshine,” Carmen says.

“I missed you guys, too,” I smile, pulling back from them. “It’s so good to see you.”

“And what about me?” a familiar voice calls from ahead.

I poke my head over Madeline’s shoulder to see Riya making her way up the gravel driveway, her dark hair and deep tan skin glowing in the midday heat. “*Ri!*” I shout, meeting her halfway to wrap her in a hug.

“Thank you guys so much for coming,” I say, looking between my long-

time friends. “It really means a lot.”

“Hey, what are bridesmaids for?” Carmen grins.

“*And sisters!*”

I turn to see Steph stumbling out of a rideshare car, plowing her way up the driveway to meet us, her rolling suitcase flinging gravel the whole way. My eyes instantly begin to water as she throws herself into my arms.

“Y’all’s timing really is impeccable,” I chuckle.

Steph releases her hold on me, her green eyes meeting mine. “I made it to the mansion, bitch,” she whispers, only loud enough for me to hear. I shake my head at her, laughter wracking my body as I hug her one more time.

God, I missed my sister.

“Hey, rat,” Leah calls from the doorway, a sympathetic smile on her face as she balances several boxes of decor in her arms and holds my cell phone out in my direction. “I’m really here for this kumbaya moment, but Lori Beth just called you for the fifth time in the last two minutes and I’m just afraid that if you don’t call her back she’ll just show up and—”

“Gotcha,” I reply, completely in agreement with Leah’s fears as I jog up the porch and take the phone from her hand. “I’ll call her. Thank you.”

“No, thank *you*,” she says with a wink. “Y’all want to follow me inside?” she calls to the girls. “Champagne is popped.”

“My kind of rager exactly,” Madeline claps her hands, making her way inside the house with the rest of my bridesmaids.

I just raise my phone to my ear after dialing Lori Beth’s number when I hear gravel crunching behind me and turn to see her pink Cadillac pulling into the driveway.

“*Shit*,” Leah and I both mutter at the same time.

“Well, you have fun with that,” Leah grins, shutting the door and leaving me alone with a quickly approaching Lori Beth. If she hadn’t been here since 8 a.m. this morning helping with the ridiculous amount of things for the shower that I left until the last minute, I would probably run after her and drag her back to save me.

“Oh, look. You *do* have a cell phone. How lovely to know,” Lori Beth sneers, removing her sunglasses.

“I’m sorry. I just left it inside for two minutes to say hi to my friends and sister—”

“*Well*,” Lori Beth holds her hands up, cutting me off, “while you were busy messing about, I was being informed that the venue doesn’t have off-

white *or* cream napkins in stock. They're forcing us to choose between ivory and alabaster."

"Ala-*what*?" I question, not forgetting to note how she said *us* when referring to *my* wedding shower.

"Oh, forget it. It's already a disaster. I'll demand they dig up the oatmeal ones. I know they're keeping them from us."

"Whatever you want, Miss Lori Beth." Truly, I couldn't care less. Barely before, and especially at this point.

"Right, well. Since you're so unresponsive, I'll just stick around until you're ready to head to the Old Scarlett House. I'm sure there's plenty left to gather around here."

"That seriously won't be necessary—" My words fall on deaf ears as Lori Beth scoots right past me and into the house. I run my hand down my face, exasperated.

"Where is my little Remy Timmy?" she asks.

"Running errands around town." I think I saw him for a total of thirty seconds this morning before he left to do so.

"Oh, what a shame," she frowns. "But so good of him. So hardworking. Always on the run, that boy!"

"Yeah," I mutter. "He sure is."

Lori Beth pauses, her demeanor changing as she stares down the hallway with the door leading to the greenhouse at the end of it. "And where is Mr. Di Fazio this morning?"

I have to downplay the way my spine steels and stifle my urge to gag as I hear her call him that. "I have no idea."

"No?" Lori Beth's head tilts.

I actually haven't seen Blake since our conversation after the trade show. He didn't make an appearance for dinner and didn't otherwise attempt to come find me. I thought I heard loud noises in the greenhouse late last night and early this morning, but I haven't stepped foot out there. I don't know what to say to him after yesterday. I'm not sure that there even is anything *to* say. We reached a stalemate. Maybe it's best we keep it that way. Stay in neutral territory. It's gotten us this far.

I realize Lori Beth is still waiting for a response and shake my head.

"Well he is coming to the shower, isn't he?" she pushes.

"As far as I'm aware," I reply, gritting my teeth as I push past her.

"Well, lovely," Lori Beth says flatly, her tone shifting as soon as the

subject shifts from Blake. “Let’s go ahead and make sense of everything before tonight then, shall we?”

I’d love nothing more.



“ARE YOU READY FOR THIS?” Leah asks, handing me the dress bag as she joins me in my bedroom.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I grin, the bluish-purple fabric coming into view as I unzip the bag.

The past five hours have been an absolute blur between getting last minute things together, answering a million questions, ignoring a million snide remarks from Lori Beth, and attempting to entertain my bridesmaids. Remy slipped in and out at some point, grabbing his suit and pressing a kiss to my cheek, mumbling something about meeting up with his guys early and catching me at the venue later. I didn’t even have the time or energy to question him.

It’s now just before 6 p.m. and the latest possible time I could procrastinate getting myself ready until. The shower starts at 7 p.m. and we need to be there before the guests. *Do we really though?*, I had jokingly asked when Lori Beth had reminded me of that fact for the hundredth time. Leah and Steph laughed. Lori Beth did not.

“Here, let me help you out,” Leah says, turning me to face the standing mirror and picking up my attempt at lacing the strings through the criss-cross loops on the back of the dress. I blow out a deep breath as she does so, staring at my reflection.

“You look great, Annie,” Leah smiles at me over my shoulder. I return her smile, but the sudden knots in my stomach prevent me from saying anything. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay. I think. Just want to get this over with.” I feel Leah’s hands slow down their movements and catch her eyeing me in the mirror. “That’s not what I meant. Just— You know...”

“I’m asking this because I love you.” I already know what she’s going to ask before the words come out of her mouth. “Are you...having second thoughts?”

“No,” I say immediately. Maybe a little too immediately.

“Okay...” Leah replies. “I’m just a little worried how anxious you’ll be for the actual wedding if you’re freaking out this much about the wedding shower.”

“I am *not* freaking out.”

“Whatever you say.”

The door suddenly flies open behind us and I see Lori Beth barrel her way in. “Two *minutes*, ladies. We have *two minutes*—” She skids to a stop at my side, tilting her head and looking from my reflection in the mirror to the real me. “It was tighter than this before, wasn’t it?” she asks, grabbing at the skirt of my dress. “I don’t remember you fitting into it this well.”

Leah’s eyes shoot daggers at Lori Beth before turning back to the mirror, ready to send me a telepathic message of reassurance through eye contact. She can’t, however, because my hands are covering my face and I’m stifling giggles. I spread my fingers out just enough to see Leah’s reflection through the spaces between them. Initially, it looks like she thinks I’ve finally cracked and gone crazy, but then realization hits her, causing her to shake her head and chuckle.

I burst out in laughter, the tension of the day flooding its way out of me.

“What? What is it?” Lori Beth questions, annoyance pinching her brows.

“Oh, nothing,” I chuckle, wiping a tear from my eye. “It’s just—it’s just—” I’m laughing so hard and Leah is looking at me with incredulous affection like only a best friend can. “That’s what—” I can’t finish, feeling like maybe I have finally broken, the insanity setting in.

“That’s what, *what*?” Lori Beth fumes, throwing her hands in the air.

“*That’s what she said.*”

My head snaps up, seeing a figure behind us in the doorway in the reflection of the mirror. Just like that, all of the tension I just relieved myself of settles right back in.

“Oh! Blake!” Lori Beth exclaims, her hand covering her heart. “Sorry, who is *she*?” Blake doesn’t respond, his expression tight and eyes locked on mine in the mirror. “Oh, well, nevermind,” Lori Beth continues. “It’s so lovely of you to join us!”

Blake ignores Lori Beth completely, his eyes raking down my figure in the mirror. I feel the redness already rushing to my face and shift my eyes to his body instead to try to distract myself enough to combat it.

It doesn’t help.

He's wearing a white button up dress shirt, dark slacks, and dress shoes. I realize he must have brought those things with him or jacked my truck last night to go and buy them, because I don't recognize them from Remy's closet, not that there's any way he'd fit into Remy's clothes anyways. His sleeves are cuffed and pushed up just enough that only the bottoms of some of the inked trees on his left forearm poke out. I don't know why, but something about only the tiniest bit of the tattoo being on display and the rest being left to the imagination makes it way more attractive. Something about knowing that I will probably be the only person there tonight that's seen the full thing. I suddenly remember that I still haven't seen the other tattoo sleeve on the upper half of his opposite arm.

Why am I thinking about this right now?

I force my eyes back to Blake's face, registering for the first time that he's not wearing a baseball cap. Obviously it would make sense that he wouldn't wear a hat with this nice of an outfit, but I'm just so used to his signature accessory being a part of him. His brown curls have gotten longer in the two weeks he's been here, the longest one just barely hitting below his left eyebrow.

Blake's gaze is still trained on my dress by the time my eyes make it back to his. Leah finishes tying her final knot and steps to the side, effectively removing any sort of barrier between Blake and me.

"The dress is fabulous, isn't it?" Lori Beth asks Blake, clearly dying for any way to gain his attention and completely ignoring the fact that she definitely hated this dress when I picked it out. "Isn't the color incredible? Just so unique."

Blake swallows hard, putting one hand up on the side of the doorframe and shaking his head. "Like it was made for her."

A wave of nostalgia and something else hits me so hard that it physically hurts my chest. Suddenly, it's 2:30 a.m. and I'm in the cab of an old truck, pouring rain crashing against the windows and nothing but dim headlights illuminating the old backroad we're driving on. A shiver runs through me, both in my flashback and present day, and I look down to see goosebumps prickling my arms. Arms coming out of an oversized t-shirt the very same color as the dress I'm wearing now. I feel a pressure against my side and glance at my shoulder to see a flannel clad arm keeping me in place. I turn my head to see the owner of that arm and the only thing making me feel warmth and protection in this moment. The *person*. Perhaps the only one that

ever truly has—

“Annie.”

I shake my head, the snapping of Leah’s fingers quite literally snapping me out of my trance.

“Please answer her,” Leah begs, nodding towards Lori Beth.

“Sorry, what was the question?” I mumble, hoping my face doesn’t look as warm as it feels.

“I asked if you’re ready to go,” Lori Beth glares. “Well, honestly. It’s not really an ask at this point. We need to move...*darlin’*,” she adds at the last moment, realizing Blake is still in the room.

“Okay, yeah,” I reply, pushing the loose tendrils of my curled hair out of my face. “Let’s go.”

“*Lovely*,” Lori Beth replies, switching out her tight pained looking smile for a bright full one as she spins towards Blake. “And will you be riding over with us?”

Blake’s eyes tear away from me for the first time since entering the room. “Yes ma’am. That’s what I came in here to ask about, actually.”

“Oh, well you can certainly—”

“You can ride with Annie and me in my truck, Blake,” Leah chimes in, cutting off Lori Beth and saving Blake.

“Okay, thanks,” Blake nods. “I’ll meet you guys at the truck?”

“Sounds good,” Leah confirms. Blake looks from her to me as he turns to leave, and I’m not totally sure whether it was a small smile, or frown, or maybe a mixture of both that I catch right before he disappears from view and down the hall. “I’m just going to run to the bathroom before we go. Meet you out there?” Leah asks, touching my shoulder.

I give her a quick nod and she heads out the door. I turn around to grab my purse and start to leave, but Lori Beth is blocking the doorway, her arms crossed and head both tilted and shaking at the same time. Her eyes are darting all over my figure, causing me to look down, expecting a huge stain in the middle of my dress. When I find nothing out of place, I look back to her, my arms out. “What is it?”

“Something just isn’t right. It’s too plain.”

I blow out an exasperated breath. “Well, I think it’s a little late for that.” I am at my literal wit’s end with this woman. *Why does she even care?*

I try to leave but she holds up a hand, stopping me again. “No,” she insists. “It needs something else. Hold on.” Her stiletto heels click across the

hardwood floor of my bedroom as she makes a beeline straight for my vanity. Without even hesitating or asking, she starts frantically ripping open the drawers of it and my old jewelry box sitting on its surface, rifling through everything with zero regard for my belongings.

“Lori Beth, *do you mind?*” I come up behind her. She completely ignores me, continuing to dig deeper in the drawers, quickly looking over random pieces of jewelry and other accessories she finds and discarding them on the tabletop and floor when they don’t meet her liking. *Didn’t she say we needed to leave?* “I mean, seriously, this isn’t necessary—”

“This.”

“What?” I question irritably, stopping in place.

“Not my style,” she says, examining whatever it is she’s holding, “but that’s to be expected, of course. It matches perfectly though. Wear this.”

“I’m really fine to go plain, Lori Beth. I’m wearing hoop earrings. I think we’re covered—” Before I can finish my sentence, Lori Beth is yanking my arm, leaning over it to fasten something onto my wrist. “What even is this—”

“So weird how the flowers match that odd dress color so perfectly. Whatever, it works. Let’s go. No more time to waste.”

“...*Flowers?* What—”

My jaw drops when Lori Beth releases her hold on me and I see what she’s fastened to my wrist. A thin rope like cord that’s color has faded with the years. Resin holding flowers. Baby’s breath. And forget-me-nots.

Blake’s bracelet.

She must have dug to the absolute furthest depths of my jewelry box. I have no idea the last time I even laid eyes on this bracelet. Nausea immediately forms in my stomach along with a lump in my throat. “Lori Beth, I— I can’t wear this—” I start to tug at the bracelet and panic quickly sets in as I realize that Lori Beth has done something like quadruple knotted it onto my wrist. It won’t budge in the mere seconds I have before Lori Beth is once again yanking my arm and pulling me out the door.

“Oh, stop being so stubborn. You’ve already made us late as it is.”

I’ve made us late?!

I feel red patches return to my neck as she all but drags me to Leah’s truck and throws me in the passenger seat. My gaze instantly goes to the mirror of my open sun visor, meeting Blake’s eyes and immediately looking away.

“See you there over there, *darlin’*,” Lori Beth purrs, slamming the door

shut and making her way to her Cadillac.

Leah asks if I'm ready to go and I mumble something that could sound like a confirmation, too busy trying to nonchalantly unknot this bracelet that has somehow permanently secured itself to my body. I eventually give up as the venue comes into view, shoving both of my hands under my thighs and letting out a heavy breath through my nose, trying desperately to ignore the reflection of the blue-green eyes in the rear view mirror burning into my face.

SIX YEARS AGO

I stare out at the dark runway, eyes glazing over as the airport workers move about like ants in neon orange vests down below. I hear Matthew comment something from the row behind me, but my brain doesn't have the capacity to register it at the moment. In all honesty, it hasn't had the capacity to register much of anything over the last month.

I've trained my face to paint on a smile and my body to remain at an upright angle between the strict hours of 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday. This 7 to 11 p.m. Thursday evening flight, scheduled by Briar & Brooks, did not fall into said window.

Evelyn is the first to rise from her seat when the plane docks, which is made evident by the swish of white-blonde hair in my peripheral vision a few rows ahead. I tear my gaze from the plane window, letting my eyes shut while the two passengers blocking me from the aisle stand to gather their things. I'm not at all ready to stand up and am grateful when I feel my cell phone vibrate in my pocket, allowing me an excuse to stay seated for a few more moments. When I finally dig my phone out of my wrinkled blazer and it's still vibrating, I realize I'm receiving a call.

Blake Di Fazio

I take a deep breath, slowly letting it out before answering.

"Evangeline."

"Blake," I respond, attempting a bright tone.

"I got it," he whispers.

I think I actually smile; it fades slightly, however, when I quickly remember that I haven't truly smiled since the last time we spoke on the phone. On my birthday.

“Did you really?”

“Yes, Evangeline. New York City’s newest, biggest, and only garden terrace adjoining hotel suite is mine.”

“How did you get it?”

“Just by checking every hour for the last month. There was a last minute cancellation for tomorrow night right as you boarded your flight.”

“Wow, Blake. That’s great,” I swallow. “Just...it has to be expensive? Are you sure you don’t want to just crash with me? The company is paying for my room.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I fully plan to crash with you the rest of the weekend. This is just for tomorrow.”

“But, still. It’s a lot—”

“Evangeline, I appreciate the concern, but really...I want to do this. Tomorrow’s going to be a rough day. I just...want to surround myself with as many things that will make me happy and divert my attention as much as possible.” Blake lets out a sigh, adding with a whisper, “Other things, you know. Besides...”

Besides me. He’s depending on me.

“Blake...”

“When it comes to this,” he continues, “...the thoughts can drown me if I let them in. I’ve let them every other year but I...I don’t want to do that again. I can’t. If I don’t focus on the present, my mind will wander to the past and I’ll have a really hard time digging myself out. I’m sure this doesn’t make any sense, but...”

More than you think.

“I just need a distraction.”

I completely agree.

“So it’ll be great. After pizza at Angelo’s we can go to the terrace and watch the sunset.”

I need to tell him.

I clear my throat. “That sounds beautiful.”

I can’t tell him yet.

“The pictures online are incredible. I mean, the garden alone is, but the view is insane. You can see every inch of the city. I’m excited for it myself, but...I can’t wait to see your reaction.”

I wasn’t even capable of talking about it until last week, but I can’t tell him yet. Not until after tomorrow.

I feel tears welling in my eyes. I didn't mean for them to, but it's just a regular occurrence as of late.

"I'm a little afraid you might pass out from happiness though."

Yeah. So much happiness.

"I wouldn't worry about that," I force a chuckle.

I have to be there for him before I let him be there for me. I owe him that much.

"Okay, I was totally waiting for the 'shut up'," Blake says. "You must be tired."

"You have no idea."

Blake's chuckles, eventually fading into a sigh. "Not to be a total dork, Evangeline, but...thank you. For suggesting this. I'm really looking forward to it. And...I'm really happy to not be alone tomorrow."

Same. Alone is definitely when it's the worst.

"Of course, Blake. I-I'm really looking forward to seeing you too. To getting to talk."

"Yeah, it'll be nice," Blake says, a smile in his tone. "Are you still good to meet at Angelo's at six tomorrow night?"

I nod, then realize he can't see me. *God, I'm a mess.* "Yep!" I squeak. "Conference lets out at five so that should give me plenty of time."

"Alright, perfect. Talk to you tomorrow?"

"Yep. Um, good night, Blake."

"See you, Evangeline."

I hang up at the same moment a voice equivalent to the sound of nails on a chalkboard invades my ears.

"Um, Frannie?" I look up, seeing Evelyn poking her head in from the exit door of the plane and then register that I am the last person still onboard. "Are you planning to *attend* this conference or should I just let Margaret know you've resigned?"

"Sorry, coming," I say, sliding into the aisle and grabbing my suitcase from the open carry-on bin.

"Are you sure? Because I'm sure this plane could just head back to Alabama—"

"I said I'm coming, Evelyn," I cut her off, wishing in this moment that looks could actually kill.

"Well, how considerate of you," she patronizes, nodding at me with the snobbiest smirk I've ever seen before turning and leaving me alone on the

plane.

“*Tomorrow is going to be fun,*” I mutter to myself before trudging after her.



TOMORROW WAS NOT, in fact, fun.

Not from the very first moment.

The moment I woke up by my own internal clock just seven minutes before I was supposed to be downstairs to find I had passed out in full clothes and makeup from the night before without setting an alarm or plugging in my phone, leaving me with only 22% battery life for the day.

After barrelling downstairs in a slightly less wrinkled blazer in a different shade from the one I wore on the plane, complimentary hotel lip balm, a flick of mascara, and a smear of eyeshadow, on only one eye, I’m fairly certain, I was greeted by (*perfectly pressed, polished, and on their A-game, of course*) Evelyn and Matthew. Though Evelyn managed to throw some snide remark in my direction about it being lovely of me to join them, I didn’t stop to give either of them the time of day. I may not have been the brightest eyed or bushiest tailed of the three of us, but I was going to be the first one in place at our first conference session.

Though I twisted my ankle twice and nearly snapped a heel in the process, I found the correct room listed on the itinerary we had been given and made my way inside, quickly scanning the rows of tables lining the room for the *Montgomery* sign. I spotted Margaret standing towards the front of the room schmoozing with a few other executives from other branches, Lucy standing behind her like a wide-eyed statue awaiting command. At the same moment I located our branch’s seats, nestled between the Houston and Phoenix tables, Margaret’s gaze flicked to me. I steeled myself instantly, plastering the biggest grin I could manage and waving at her confidently, taking my seat at our currently empty table while I still had her attention. Once Margaret nodded with the faintest of smiles, acknowledging me, I frantically turned my attention to my notes, intending on cramming the two hours I had planned for final preparations into the next five minutes.

This particular meeting wasn’t actually a part of the conference as it was

more of a Briar & Brooks company-wide meeting. A couple of executives were going to speak on company numbers as an introduction and then the interns from each of the twelve branches would take turns presenting on what we have achieved over the summer and what we could see as a vision for the future of Briar & Brooks. Evelyn and Matthew took their seats beside me just a minute or so later, but I zoned them out completely. This presentation had to be perfect.

And, by some stroke of a miracle I'll never be able to explain, *it was*.

Though Evelyn and Matthew were clearly more rehearsed and polished in their sections of the presentation, my contributions far and away received the most visible reactions from the audience. Even though I had felt like a total frazzled mess, several executives made positive comments to me afterwards along the lines of me being *a complete natural* and *pleasantly approachable* in my presenting. Never in my life did I think I would be thankful for a lack of thought and planning.

Following the initial meeting, the three of us ran between various seminars and organized breakout sessions that all blurred together over the next six hours.

That all leads us to now.

My body, seriously lacking in sleep, caffeine, and the overall will to live, feels as if it is going to collapse by the time we make our way into the grand ballroom for the conference's 4 p.m. keynote session. Although I'd love nothing more than to pass out on the carpeted hotel flooring right here, I manage to use whatever stores of energy and adrenaline I have left to robotically make myself look professional and eager.

I have to. This is the final test.

Margaret is the keynote speaker, and we're sitting in the front row.

I let out a light sigh of relief as I settle down into my chair, followed by Matthew and Evelyn who are animatedly chatting away. Though Evelyn might be the worst human I've ever met, and it strongly makes me question Matthew's state of mind for enjoying her company, I'm relieved they are able to act as a distraction for one another; it keeps Evelyn from harassing me and Matthew from making any further advances that I simply can't handle today.

I open my binder, using it as a shield as I check my cell phone for the first time the entire day. I see right away that I have several new messages from Blake. I open up our conversation and scan them quickly, seeing they are all updates of him being on his way here, checking in to his hotel, and, lastly,

wishing me luck. I feel awful not having texted him once today to let him know I'm alive, but there literally has not been one spare minute until now.

Right as I start to type out a message, a notification banner appears at the top of my screen from my photo app— one of the memory reminders my phone sends every day, showing photos that I had taken on that same day in previous years. Because this happens every day, I don't think anything of the notification. I move to swipe it away and continue typing my message but then pause when I see the small photo preview. My breath gets stuck in my lungs as I click the banner, letting my eyes fall closed for a moment before I look at the photo.

When I peel my eyes back open, they instantly start to burn. My top teeth dig into my bottom lip to halt the tears from welling. My heart feels like it's in my throat as I stare down at my phone screen.

Steph is holding my phone in selfie mode, throwing up a peace sign with her tongue out in the forefront of the picture while me and my parents sit on logs on the ground behind her, Mom in Dad's lap and Dad's arm thrown over my shoulder as we huddle towards the fire. This was from an impulsive camping trip we took five years ago, on our last Labor Day weekend as a full family before I left for college. The way I suddenly feel can only be described in exactly the way Blake phrased it less than twenty-four hours ago.

Drowning.

I squeeze my eyes shut and turn my head to the side, blowing out a deep breath to try to get myself under control. I hear the click of high heels and a voice approaching. It's not until I hear my name for the second time that it registers and I look up.

"Sorry, what?" My jaw goes slack when I realize it was Margaret speaking to me.

"Well?" Margaret dramatically throws her arms in the air, looking to me for some sort of answer.

My brows pull together. "I'm sorry, what, ma'am?"

"She was asking where the recorder is and I told her that was your job," Evelyn pipes in, a smug grin on her face.

That most definitely was not my job as this is the first time I am ever hearing of it.

"I—I'm sorry, Ms. Brooks," I sputter. "I don't have a recorder. I didn't know—"

“We must have a transcription of the keynote presentation, Ms. Jacks,” Margaret cuts me off, glaring daggers straight into my face before her gaze falls to my lap. “Well, since you already have your cell phone out, that will have to do.” She turns on her heel to head for the stage.

I glance down to my phone, seeing I only have 9% battery life. “Um, Ms. Brooks,” I call after her, “I’m sorry, but I don’t think—”

Margaret spins on her heel. “Is there a problem Ms. Jacks?”

I shrink back into my seat. “No, ma’am. I’ll record.”

“*Fantastic.*”

I close every application on my phone and turn my brightness down all the way as Margaret reaches the stage, an entirely pleasant and frankly unrecognizable expression suddenly on her face. I watch my battery tick down to 8% and sigh, tapping my foot anxiously as I hit record. I need my phone for maps to get to Angelo’s after the keynote speech ends. And to text Blake to let him know I’m on my way—

Shit.

I never texted Blake.



I’M NOT able to see the time on my phone as I’m recording, but I know Margaret has exceeded her one hour time limit. As applause fills the room, I stop recording and quickly stand to gather my things. Angelo’s isn’t too far from the conference hotel, but I want some time to freshen up in my room before I head that way. I turn to sneak out of the room before Margaret makes it through the crowd of conference attendees waiting to speak to her at the bottom of the stage. I don’t even make it two steps before I feel a hand on my arm. I spin around to see Matthew staring at me with a confused expression on his face.

“Where are you running off to?” he asks.

“I—uh,” I stammer. “I have plans. And we’re done for the day...right?”

Matthew’s brows raise. “You have plans? In New York City?”

“Yes. I’m meeting a friend.”

“Oh,” Matthew says, letting his hand fall away from my arm. “Well, Margaret said she wanted to speak to us after she finished. Can your plans

wait just a few minutes?”

I chew at my bottom lip anxiously. The whole day has gone over so well with Margaret up until right before her speech. I can't drop the disappearing act now when she's already not pleased with me. If I want the New York position, I have to leave her with a good impression. I'm seriously going to be cutting it close, but I can wait a few minutes.

“Yeah, sure. Of course.” I nod and follow Matthew back to where Evelyn is standing. The crowd around Margaret has mostly dissipated, only four people still waiting to talk to her. I tap my foot anxiously over the next few minutes, each second feeling like an hour. My eyes search the room, realizing this place must be too fancy for peasant necessities such as clocks. Not wanting to be caught on it again, I subtly slide my cell phone out of my pocket, unlocking it to read the time. I'm just barely able to read the numbers before the screen goes black and my phone dies.

5:34 p.m.

Shit. I seriously have to go.

“Oh, yes, this is Annie Jacks.” I jump at the sound of Margaret's voice at the same time her hand claps down on my shoulder. “Annie, this is Randall Coralton.”

My hand shoots out to shake the man's. “Hi, Mr. Coralton. Nice to meet you.”

“Great to meet you as well, Ms. Jacks. Were you, er, heading out?” he asks, nodding to my full hands and my bag slung over my shoulder.

“Actually, yes. I have plans with a friend in the city tonight that I'm running a little late for.”

“Oh, what a shame,” Mr. Coralton says, his lips pulling to the side.

“Annie.” My head turns to see Margaret looking at me with the oddest expression, making my brows pull together. I also realize she just addressed me by my first name. Twice. “Mr. Coralton is an alum of the University of Alabama.”

“Oh,” I steel my spine, grinning, “how cool!” *So this is why Margaret wanted to introduce us.* “Small world. Roll Tide!” I start to turn to leave before Margaret's hand stiffens on my shoulder, stopping me.

“He's also the executive director of human resources at our New York City headquarters.”

My stomach instantly dips. *Oh my God.* I swallow, turning to fully face Mr. Coralton again, my eyes darting between him and Margaret. “Well, nice

to meet you,” I repeat, dumbly, not sure what else to say.

“You as well, Ms. Jacks. I’ve heard a lot about you from Margaret.”

You have?

“And, though I’m not one to play favorites,” Mr. Coralton continues, “I’d be lying if I said it didn’t bring me a little extra joy to see my fellow alumni succeed.”

“Oh...” My mouth has gone bone dry. “Well, that’s great.”

“Indeed,” Mr. Coralton says, his brows raised. “I was hoping you and Ms. Brooks might have some time to chat over dinner and drinks this evening, but if you already have plans...”

This can’t be happening right now. “Oh, well, um, I—”

“We’d love to,” Margaret cuts me off.

“But—”

Margaret’s blood red manicured nails dig further into my shoulder. “Just one drink, Annie. *Surely* you have time.”

I swallow hard, moving to reach for my phone to check the time and then remembering that it’s dead.

Dammit.

Blake is waiting on me and I have no way to contact him. But...this is my shot. Judging by the look on Margaret’s face, probably the last and only one I’m going to get. This is my dream job. My dream city. Once I get to Blake and explain, he’ll surely understand. *Won’t he?*

The blue banner above the stage catches my eye, my eyes trailing from the conference name to the date below it. *September 1st.* Today might be my dream, but it’s Blake’s nightmare. I need to be there for him. I *will* be there for him. And we still have to talk. With the way life is going, I need this job more than anything. I blow a subtle breath out of my nose.

Goddammit.

“Yes, one drink would be lovely.”

PRESENT DAY

Blake

I watch her.

I watch her because it's all I've been doing for the past two hours. I watch her because I couldn't care less about anyone else in this absurdly extravagant Victorian-era party mansion. I watch her because it's the easiest thing and the hardest thing in the world to do all at the same time. And it suits the fact that I'm a stubborn bastard and a glutton for pain all at the same time.

God, Evangeline.

She's alone.

Well, actually, she's the furthest thing from it, surrounded by more people than I thought inhabited this entire town. More people than I could ever come up with to come to my own wedding, much less my pre-wedding shower. She seems to know them all in the way that Evangeline simply *knows* everyone. Whether she's known them for five minutes or five years (*or since the age of five*) her comfortable warmth and personable nature seeps out and latches onto every human she encounters, instantly inviting them in. Though I know beneath the surface that her brain is racing like clockwork and her gut is most likely questioning every action and interaction she makes, wondering how she could have done better, a stranger would never know it from the outside. She excels in everything in life, but especially in commanding a room. I know she's had my attention from the moment I first laid eyes on her.

I scan the room, trying to locate her alleged fiancé that I've barely seen say one word to her so far the entire evening. Every time I've seen him he's throwing back drinks with some douchey looking guys I can only assume are predictably his friends or finding himself in conversations with every other woman in this room except for the one that is supposed to be his future wife.

Ungrateful, undeserving piece of shit.

I squeeze the empty disposable plastic drink cup in my hand until it cracks. As I head to the open bar, I realize I need a glass of whiskey desperately. So, when the young pretty bartender bats her eyes at me just like she has been doing all night, I ask her for a Dr. Pepper.

"Sure thing, baby. And what'll that be with?" she smiles.

I brace my hands against the counter of the bar, forcing myself to really look at her for the first time. She really is pretty. Honey blonde hair and

bright blue eyes. She seems sweet enough. I'm sure we could have fun. She tilts her head the longer I look at her, probably starting to question why she flirted with me in the first place. I roll my lips into my mouth, searching the tan skin of her face. I dig deep. I try to find it. But it's not there.

No spark.

She could be fun. She could be sweet. She could probably even make me happy.

But she wouldn't be her.

No one ever has been.

"Just ice. Just Dr. Pepper and ice," I say, finally answering her question.

The bartender says nothing else, just handing me my soda and giving me a smile I know she's probably forcing after watching me stare at her and contemplate my existence in silence for about ten seconds too long.

I make my way back to my spot. Back to the wall I've been leaning against all night, situated behind a pillar that gives me a perfect vantage point but also keeps me almost entirely hidden. It's kept me from Miss Lori Beth at the very least. Evangeline either has no idea I'm here or has done a very good job of looking everywhere but this exact spot.

I glance around the large room, forcing myself to look at anything but her and distract myself from questioning why I'm even here in the first place. I can see through the large white-paned windows that the sun has finally set, the magnolia trees swaying in the evening breeze. I spot Remy in the back corner, beer bottle in hand and talking animatedly with an older man, and notice him swaying nearly as much as the trees.

I make another scan for Evangeline's parents, not having seen them yet. I still don't find them, but assume they must have had to close up the store together like they always used to. Steph and Leah and the rest of Evangeline's friends are spread about the dance floor, all surrounding her as they bounce around to the required song of every social gathering in Alabama: *Sweet Home Alabama* by Lynyrd Skynyrd. A laugh breaks out, immediately catching my attention.

And, just like that, I'm looking at her again.

Evangeline's head is thrown back, her nose scrunched in laughter as she claps her hands. Though she's put on a good show all night, this is the first time I've seen her true, uncensored *Evangeline* smile come out. And it makes my heart feel like it's doing somersaults in my damn chest. All of her friends cheer as she enters the middle of their dance circle, twirling around and

throwing her arms in the air. The silky fabric of her dress swishes and melts around her as she spins, clinging to her in all the right places.

That. Damn. Dress.

I'm not sure what I did in a past life to deserve the cruel punishment that is that dress, but I'll accept it happily. I'm sure I deserved it.

I wonder if she knows. Surely she has to. I can't decide if I want her to know or not. What's worse: her buying a dress in the exact color that she's worn in my dreams for the last ten years on purpose, or it being a complete coincidence and that color meaning nothing to her at all?

I think I have an answer to that question, and it's probably not the right one. Especially considering she's wearing it to a party to celebrate her pending marriage.

To a man that isn't me.

I bite down on the inside of my cheek as the song comes to an end, tossing my cup in the trash can next to me and turning in the direction of the backdoor. I need some air. Whether I'll return after getting said air is still to be determined. I shouldn't be here.

I take one step but stop dead in my tracks, the sound of a very distinct piano melody coming over the speakers. My heart feels like it's in my throat as my head slowly turns of its own volition. The entire dance floor is swaying and cheering.

Everyone but her.

Evangeline stands frozen in place as well, her lips parted and eyes glued to me.

She knew exactly where I was.

I turn to face her as the lyrics of *Don't Stop Believin'* begin. Someone opens the back door and, as the warm evening air washes over me, I'm no longer at this godforsaken party.

I'm on a rooftop in Boston, dancing and singing like an idiot under the stars with my childhood best friend and the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. Her sweet vanilla scent hits me as she spins into me, her smile brighter than half the city lights. Something about this night is different. Something about this night changes us. In this moment, I know without a doubt that I'm willing to take whatever leap of faith this girl is willing to give me, regardless of how little of it I know she tends to have. It doesn't matter. I'll wait until she finds it. I'll always wait.

I'm brought back to reality as a flicker of movement catches my attention.

I glance up to see Evangeline waving at me. When I meet her eyes, her lips slowly spread into a smile. She nods backwards towards the dance floor, motioning for me to come out there.

I shake my head right away. I can't. I'm not much of a dancer to begin with, but much less in public. And even less in this current situation. Evangeline tilts her head in a way of saying *c'mon, really?*

I shake my head again. She straightens, her shoulders slumping. She motions with her hand one last time. I don't move. I'm ready to start making my way outside again, but the next thing she does sends my feet hesitantly in the direction of the dance floor instead. Her face falls into a frown, her teeth going straight into her bottom lip.

I can't have that.

Evangeline's face lights up the second she realizes my intention, her hands clapping. She dances, waving me towards her with both hands. The second verse begins right as I reach her, one of her arms shooting up and pointing into the air. She screams the lyrics louder and louder, her smile growing with each change in volume. I cautiously sway along in front of her, not willing to fully commit. This is all way too much. She has to feel it. Her wild brown eyes keep darting to mine, a mixture of nostalgia and nerves swirling within them.

The stubborn bastard in me begs me to give in while the glutton for pain keeps my body rigid.

I remain this way, there but not fully vulnerable, right up until the guitar solo. The entire dance floor goes wild, people jumping up and down and spinning around like crazy. Evangeline pumps her fist in the air, a light sheen of sweat coating her forehead and collarbone as she leans back and lets the song take over her body. Just before the main chorus begins, her head snaps down, her gaze trained on me.

"C'mon, Di Fazio!" she shouts, shoving at my shoulder.

That does it.

I fall to my knees, shredding the most ridiculous air guitar solo of my career. Evangeline's mixture of whoops and laughter sounds more like music to my ears than the actual song. I let out my own laugh, jumping back to my feet just as the words of the chorus begin, screaming to not stop believing at the top of my lungs like I believe it with every fiber of my being.

Like I want *her* to believe it with every fiber of my being.

Both of our voices sound hoarse by the time the song comes to a close

and both of our clothes are sticking to our bodies. Everybody hollers as the song fades out. My and Evangeline's eyes have been locked on one another's for the last minute straight. As if we're reading each other's minds, our dancing gradually slows at the same time. We've only been stopped completely for a fraction of a second when Evangeline unexpectedly throws herself into my arms.

Her laughter tickles my ear and her same vanilla scent invades my nose. My arms robotically wrap around her back, not bringing her closer, but just holding her there. I'm sure it's only a few seconds, but I allow the time to stretch in my mind and feel like ages before she pulls back. Her smile is huge, but it slowly fades as her brows pull together and I think she realizes what she just did. It's not until she drops back down to her feet that I realize I was holding her up. My hands slide down until they're gripping her arms just about the elbow. Our eyes stay on each other's, our breaths melding together.

For the first time in my life, I'm willing to bet my mind is racing just as fast as Evangeline Jacks's.

I'm not sure I could be more conflicted or perplexed if I tried. I don't think anything could possibly make this situation more confusing or painful. What is she doing? What are we doing?

You're dancing. You're at a party and you're dancing.

That's all.

I'm gonna let her go. I have to let her go. Emotionally, but also physically. I let my hands slide further down her arms. I'm going to do it. I just need a second. She let me go. I can let her go. I thought for a minute there I had a chance, but here we are. She followed through with the wedding shower. The wedding is a month away. It's over. *It's time to walk away.* I instantly think of my dad, and realize I was wrong.

I guess there *was* something that could make this situation more confusing and painful.

My hands approach her wrists and I begin to let go but am distracted as someone calls Evangeline's name from across the room. She rips her gaze away from mine, turning her head to tell them she'll be there in a second.

Suddenly my right hand comes into contact with something smooth and cool to the touch. I glance down and my jaw all but hits the floor. Evangeline starts to walk away, but my hand reflexively clamps around her wrist.

"What?" she questions.

I know she's looking at me, but my eyes are busy. I clench my jaw, heat

burning at my eyes and the back of my neck.

“*Oh*. I–um, Blake, I–”

I glance between every last flower. Every baby’s breath bud and forget-me-not petal I hand placed and sealed in resin on the floor of my shed ten years ago. I do it again, just to be sure my eyes aren’t deceiving me. When I’m ready, I slowly raise my gaze to Evangeline’s.

We both remain silent, neither one of us willing to speak first.

Eventually, Evangeline successfully yanks her arm away, stumbling backwards through the crowd.

And I watch her go.

Again.

SIX YEARS AGO

Annie

I sit in the small stuffy New York City café, across the street from the conference hotel, with a name in a language I can't read and not a single item on the menu I can afford, tapping my foot and downing my second glass of the cheapest wine on the menu, planning my exit at the first available moment.

Though I've been a bundle of nerves and anxiety since the second we walked through the door, I know I've won Mr. Coralton over thus far, effectively answering every one of his questions and schmoozing to the best of my ability. Him and Margaret are talking animatedly about former conference years while I'm trying to calculate how many minutes we've been sitting here based on the number of absurdly small appetizers we've consumed and the amount of times Mr. Coralton has clapped and pointed at either Margaret or me to show his approval of our joking attempts.

It has to be at least 6:30 right now. I'm at least a half hour late.

Blake has been waiting on me for at least thirty minutes.

My chest tightens at that thought and I instantly push back from the table. Margaret and Mr. Coralton's laughter stops abruptly as they both turn to look at me.

"I, uh- I'm so sorry. This has been great, but I really have to get going now." The words tumble out of my mouth.

"Oh, no. So soon?" Mr. Coralton asks.

"Unfortunately, yes. I really appreciate--"

Margaret stops me as I am grabbing my bag from the back of my chair. "Oh, Annie, before you go, please give Mr. Coralton a quick rundown of the Earthly Athletics campaign," Margaret demands, referring to the ridiculous wooden water bottle product I presented a proposal for last month.

I blow a breath out of my nose, exasperated. "Oh, well, the clients were wanting to use the majority of their budget towards traditional television and print ads, but I made the suggestion of going the digital route and it worked out in the end. Thank you so much again--"

I start to stand but Margaret pushes me further, looking from me to Mr. Coralton. "I'm sorry, Randall, but Annie is being modest. With her marketing plan, the product became an instant success. It sold over 50,000 units in the first week. The company ended up signing on for a full year with Briar &

Brooks afterwards.”

“Is that so?” Mr. Coralton questions, his eyebrows raised.

“Yes, well,” I mutter, pushing my chair back even further, “I just know how much time people my age spend on the internet and thought that might be their best bet. I’m very thankful it worked out in the end.”

“This kind of thing doesn’t just happen, Ms. Jacks. *You* made that happen. You should be very proud,” he says.

“Yes, sir. I am, sir—”

“Now, is it true that you completed a digital marketing certification at Alabama along with your degree?” Mr. Coralton asks.

“Yes, sir,” I say, puzzled as to how he could possibly know that, but not having the time to care at this moment.

“See, that’s what I’m talking about,” he points at me. “We need more forward thinking, proactive students these days. Your crop is what the future of marketing is made of.”

“Thank you, sir. But I—”

“Annie, you were also the Vice President of the Future Marketers Association in school, weren’t you?” Margaret asks.

“Um,” I sputter, shocked that Margaret still remembers that, “yes, I—”

“Amazing. Absolutely grand,” Mr. Coralton claps. “And, Ms. Jacks, what are your thoughts on—”

“I’m so very sorry Mr. Coralton,” I say, flying to my feet, “but I have to go now— *Crap*.” My jaw unhinges as I realize what I have done.

When standing up abruptly from the table, my bag swung around on my shoulder and slammed straight into Margaret’s wine glass, sending the dark red liquid flinging directly into her lap.

My blood has gone ice cold. The words are caught in my throat. “Ms. Brooks, I—I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“*Goodbye*, Ms. Jacks.” Margaret’s gaze stabs me in the chest.

“It really was an accident. I didn’t—”

“You have somewhere to be, *don’t you?*” Margaret grits out, using her napkin to soak up the wine from her dress. Though the fabric is black and the wine only shows up as a slightly darker wet spot, that doesn’t help me feel any better.

“Yes, ma’am. I do,” I gulp. I turn to the wide-eyed Mr. Coralton. “It was very nice to meet you, sir. Thank you for everything.”

I think my heart falls into my stomach when he just clears his throat and

nods in response.

I'm screwed. So unbelievably screwed.

I trudge out of the restaurant into the quickly darkening streets of New York City, swallowing against the lump in my throat and pushing away the thought that it was all for nothing.

I look up, seeing I'm on 33rd street. Considering my phone is dead, I'm very thankful for my somewhat photographic memory. Angelo's is on 40th street. A girl around my age walks past me.

"Excuse me?" I say, turning to face her.

"Yeah?" she asks, pulling one side of her headphones away from her ear.

"I'm sorry, do you mind telling me the time?"

"Oh," she says, her brows pulling together in confusion. "Sure, it's, uh," she glances down at her phone, "7:14."

7:14?!

"*Oh my God*— I mean, uh. Thank you," I mutter, turning away from the girl and breaking into a run down the sidewalk in the direction of 40th.

Seven blocks of running in heels later, my lungs and feet feel like they are about to break as I pull open the door of Angelo's. I'm panting as I make my way inside, getting looks from the workers behind the counter and the customers filling nearly every table. Considering the place is so small, it only takes a few seconds for me to realize that Blake isn't here. I push back through the door to outside, frantically looking around to see if he's standing anywhere nearby.

"*Shit*," I choke, feeling tears making their way to the surface. I place my hands on top of my head, taking several deep breaths with my eyes closed as I think.

The hotel.

He has to be at his hotel. When I open my eyes, I see a taxi approaching. I don't even hesitate before I sprint forward and rip open the door, climbing inside.

"Whoa, Miss, you okay?" the driver asks, looking back at me in my frazzled state, practically hyperventilating in his backseat.

"*Hotel*," I grunt.

"Uh...Miss. We got a few of those here," the driver deadpans in his thick native New Yorker accent. "I'm gonna need you to be a little more specific."

"Oh, it's the..." *Shit*. I can't remember the name. I wrack my brain, visualizing my and Blake's text messages over the last month and replaying

our phone conversation from yesterday. He definitely didn't say the name yesterday. "I think it starts with a W..."

"Miss, I'm gonna need a name or I'm gonna need you to get out."

"...Westfield?...Windsen? Something like that?" I fist my hand in my hair, desperate to remember.

"Not ringing any bells. Sorry, Miss," the driver says, pointing towards the door.

I sigh heavily, begrudgingly reaching for the handle, before I turn back to the driver in a final attempt. "It has New York City's newest, biggest, and only garden terrace adjoining hotel suite."

"Miss, I told you— Wait," he pauses, my heart rate spiking. "Garden terrace adjoining...I heard something on the radio about...Would it be the Winfeld?"

"Yes!" I shout, making the driver jerk backwards. "Sorry, yes. That's it. Can you take me there?"

"Uh, yeah. Sure thing, Miss," the driver says, turning forward and putting the car in drive. "Cab's cash only though. That okay?"

My heart sinks as he meets my gaze in the rear view mirror. "I don't have cash," I whisper.

The driver sighs, putting the cab back in park. I robotically unhook my seat belt, pushing open the door. I let it fall closed behind me but shove my hand in between it and the car at the last second to stop it before it fully shuts.

"Would you mind telling me what street it's on? The Winfeld?" I ask the driver meekly. Loud thunder crackles throughout the sky suddenly, making me jump.

The driver's lips pull to the side, a look of pity on his face. "54th, doll."

54th.

Fourteen blocks away.

"Thanks," I mutter, shutting the door. Rain starts coming down in sheets the second the driver pulls away, my hair and blazer soaking through in seconds.

You've got to be kidding me.

Tears fall freely from my eyes, blending with the rain drops as I jog through the streets of Manhattan, trying and failing to use my binder as an umbrella. Water sloshes around my ankles, ruining my brand new pair of panty hose. My teeth chatter in the quickly dropping temperature and my swiftly melting mascara clouds my vision. I glance up, making sure I'm

heading in the right direction.

43...44...45.

Nine blocks to go. I can do this.

My heart is in my throat and my feet are covered in blisters by the time the neon sign of the Winfeld comes into view. Every inch of my skin and clothing is soaked, the rain only pounding harder the further into my trek I went. I think I stopped crying at some point, but I'm not entirely sure. I'm running on empty, physically and emotionally, and I'm not sure how much more my body can take. I only pray Blake has the heart to forgive me for being— *the clock above the entrance of the hotel catches my eye, reading 7:57 p.m. – two hours late.*

Two. Hours. Late.

On the worst day of the year for Blake. The one he didn't want to be alone for.

Oh my God, I'm the worst human alive.

I choke against a sob, fanning my face under the overhang of the hotel, wiping as much makeup as I can from under my eyes and attempting to get myself together. I shake my head, blowing out a breath as I push my way through the revolving door.

Once inside, I glance around the lobby expectantly. I don't know why; it's as if I thought Blake was just going to be standing inside, waiting for me to come storming in looking like the complete mess that I am. In the same moment that I realize I have no idea what Blake's room number is, the woman working behind the front desk calls out to me.

“Ma'am? Is there something I can help you with?”

I turn to see her eyeing me, one brow raised in judgment. I can't say I blame her. This is an extremely nice hotel and I quite literally look like something the cat drug in.

“Oh, um, yes,” I say, approaching the counter. A massive flat screen TV built into the wall behind the desk distracts me, flashing between pictures of the hotel's various amenities and advertisements of local attractions. “Sorry,” I say, coming back to reality, “I just— I'm staying here...with my, uh... boyfriend...and I just can't seem to remember which room we're staying in. Could you...tell me which room is booked under the name Blake Di Fazio?”

“I'm sorry, ma'am,” the woman says, shaking her head. “We can't give out that kind of information due to guest confidentiality standards.”

“Oh,” I mutter, my life leaving my body by the second. This day can't

possibly get worse.

The woman's expression seems to fade into one of almost sympathy, possibly sensing the dread and misery rolling off of me. "Could you call him, perhaps?" she suggests.

"My cell phone died. And I just ran fourteen blocks in the rain." The last part was completely irrelevant to her question and the current situation, but I am willing to take any pity I can get at this point.

"Oh," she says, scanning me with her eyes. "Well, you could use our phone?" she says, holding up the wired front desk phone to me.

My eyes fall shut and I swallow hard. "I don't have his phone number memorized," I whisper.

"Oh," the woman says again, a frown spreading across her face. "Well, I'm sorry, ma'am. There unfortunately isn't anything else I can do for you."

"I understand," I mutter, my eyes peeling open. "Thank you anyway—"

I have to refrain from jumping on the spot. The woman's eyes widen at my abrupt pause, but I'm not looking at her. Behind her, on the TV screen, an advertisement for the Winfeld is on display.

For their brand new garden terrace adjoining suite.

With city views from twenty-five stories up.

Twenty-five. That's what floor Blake's room is on.

"Actually, wow, I can't believe it, but I just remembered!" I babble, pushing away from the counter in the direction of the elevators. My sopping wet bag slides off my shoulder and I catch it just before it hits the ground. "Thank you so much!" I say, pounding on the upwards arrow button with my thumb like my life depends on it.

The woman moves to come from behind the counter, looking suddenly suspicious. "Ma'am, I'm not sure—"

One of the elevators opens in front of me and I dart inside, pressing the button to close the doors as fast as I can even though I see several people approaching the waiting area. "Thank you!" I call again as the doors shut. I fall against the back wall, heaving a sigh as the elevator ascends, my heart rate increasing with each floor it passes. When the number above the door reads 25 and the loud ding sounds, my heart nearly bursts from my chest.

I step out of the elevator, beginning to wander the halls of the twenty-fifth floor in search of Blake's room, soaking the carpet and leaving a wet footprint behind with every step I take. I so desperately wish my cell phone wasn't dead— *for multiple reasons, but at this moment*— so I could look up this

hotel suite to get a better idea of where it might be on the floor.

My mind wanders as I trudge on. Blake's going to hate me. *I hate me.* This is not at all how I intended for this night to go. The regret digs deeper and deeper until I feel like I might collapse. Just as I think I might actually do so, I realize I'm at the dead-end of a hall, a massive window directly in front of me. I step forward, plastering my forehead to the window and close my eyes, breathing deeply.

What the hell am I doing?

When I allow my eyes to open again, something catches my attention out the window to the right. Strings of lights hung from wrought iron poles. Plants. Lots of plants.

Wait.

I step back from the window, looking at the door to my right, realizing that the wall space around it is much larger than the rest of the rooms I've seen in this hall. I suddenly notice a bronze plate on the wall next to the door. I swallow deeply as I move closer to read the plaque.

Garden Terrace Suite.

This is it. Blake's just behind that wall. I feel like I'm gonna be sick. I need Blake. I need him to forgive me. I'm fairly certain I lost my job today. I've lost...so much else recently. I can't lose Blake. I slowly knock on the door, praying Blake is a bigger person than I am. Blake can't hate me.

He won't hate me.

After five long seconds, the door opens. I blink away the tears in my eyes as I drag my gaze from the floor up to Blake's face.

He hates me.

PRESENT DAY

I make my way towards the general direction of where I think I heard the voice calling my name, trying and failing to unpack everything that just happened and cursing Lori Beth for her Boy Scouts level knot tying skills. Though we hadn't spoken a word, I think Blake and I just said more to each other than we have in the last two weeks.

I don't know what came over me.

I had seen him lurking on that same spot on the wall all night. Even though he was almost entirely hidden from view, I could constantly feel the heat of his gaze straight through the pillar he was standing behind. I did everything in my power to ignore it and to be in the moment, but, when that song came on...

It was a reflex the way my body turned and my eyes shot to Blake's.

There are core memories in your life you simply can't forget. All it takes is one small reminder— a sight, a smell, a particular shift in the air— and, suddenly, you're back. It's not the memories or events themselves that stick in our mind, but the feelings those situations brought about. The way your heart raced from nerves or your belly ached so hard from laughing. The lump in your throat or the butterflies in your tummy. A shift in a mindset or an unexpected epiphany. That's what sticks. That's what makes those days and nights ingrain themselves in your brain and refuse to leave.

That night on the rooftop in Boston was a night of carefree dreaming and believing. The world was our oyster and there was nothing but possibilities. No responsibilities. No struggles of adulthood aside from the ones I was already choosing to overthink about while they were still out of my control. Nothing but the city skyline, the warm autumn air, that song...and us. Us

dancing. All I wanted to do in that moment was dance. To remember that feeling. Though I knew it was a selfish request, I could see it in Blake's eyes that he felt it too. Two nights. Two dances. Two times I felt like we were the only people on the planet.

Well, it certainly felt that way until the planet suddenly felt like it was turning in on itself. When he saw it. The thing I'd be successfully hiding from him all night while avoiding him all together. Until I couldn't. The bracelet.

The Polaroid. The t-shirt. The bracelet.

So many physical reminders of core memories I have pushed away for so long. What are the odds I successfully do so for five plus years all for them to make a reappearance in a span of a month? *This month* of all months. *This day of all days.*

The day he lost his dad.

And the day I lost him.

My shoulder slams into someone else's, bringing me back to reality. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry," I say reaching out to grab the arm of the innocent bystander I just ran into. I look up and see a wash of silvery hair and hazel eyes. "Oh, Chuck. Hey."

"Where's the fire at, Annie?" Remy's business partner asks, straightening his jacket.

"Under me, as always," I reply, forcing a chuckle. "Sorry, really. Somebody called my name and I was zoned out trying to find them."

"Well, you are the star of the show tonight," Chuck says, tipping his head. "Prepare for your name to be called a lot more in this town in a month's time."

A month's time. After the wedding, he means. "Ha, right," I mutter.

"Hey, is this old man bothering you?" I glance up, seeing Remy appear over Chuck's shoulder. "Hey, babe," he says, not waiting for my response and kissing my temple, his lips still wet with beer from the bottle he's drinking from.

"And how many of those have you had?" Chuck questions, nodding to Remy's beer bottle.

"What are you, my mother?" Remy replies, arm still hooked around my neck.

"No," Chuck smiles, shaking his head. "But I'm pretty sure I just saw her at the bar."

“Well, there you go,” Remy raises his beer and takes another drink. “Like mother, like son.”

“Well, speaking of the bar,” I pipe up, my face suddenly feeling very hot, “I think it’s about time I head there myself.” I grab Remy’s hand, unraveling myself from his hold and giving his hand a quick squeeze and kissing his cheek before I pull away. Remy and Chuck continue their conversation, not even acknowledging my exit.

I fan myself, feeling overwhelmed. I need some air. I don’t make it five steps, however, before I stop in place.

“Hey, Annie-bell.”

“Dad,” I breathe, my throat feeling tight. My father stands in front of me, suit jacket on top and Wrangler jeans on the bottom. The smile lines and wrinkles around his eyes are newly standing out, but his brown eyes are as soft and warm as ever. I let out a sigh, standing on my tip-toes to wrap my arms around him. “Hey. I’m so glad you could make it.”

“Sorry, I’m late. Had to close up the store.”

“I know,” I say, pulling away. “Don’t worry about it. I wasn’t expecting you until later.”

“Well, you know I strive to exceed expectations.”

“I do,” I smile.

Like father, like daughter.

“I was just about to head to the bar,” I say. “Do you want me to grab you a beer? Or a bourbon?”

I feel a heat against my back and the same time my dad’s eyes shift from my face to over my shoulder. Both of our lips part at the same moment, my dad’s most likely in shock and mine from the realization that I never allowed myself time to plan for this happening.

“*Di Fazio?*” my dad mutters, seemingly frozen in place.

My eyes fall shut, my teeth going into my bottom lip. I blow a deep breath out of my nose, allowing myself to count to three before I turn to the side, removing the barrier between my dad and Blake.

When I look at Blake, all uneasiness or frustration from earlier is absent from his face. His teal eyes are shining and lips are pulled up into a smile. “Brett,” he says, shaking his head as he steps forward to extend his hand to my dad. Dad snaps out of his daze enough to step forward, completely bypassing Blake’s handshake and pulling him into a hug instead.

“Oh my God,” Dad says, pulling back from Blake, his eyes glassy.

“Why– *How?*” he stammers, looking from Blake to me.

My mouth still hangs open, but words are struggling to come out. When you dig yourself into a hole, it becomes harder to dig yourself out the deeper you go. I think I lost track of how deep the hole was going quite a while ago. “Blake is–uh. He’s here because he– I–” I sputter.

“I’m here to fix the greenhouse,” Blake finishes for me, his eyes glued to me and his expression unreadable.

“Greenhouse?” my dad questions. “Annie-bell you haven’t told me anything about this.”

I see confusion pinching both Dad and Blake’s brows, and that only makes my throat tighten further. “Sorry, I–I’ve been busy. I didn’t–”

“There’s been a lot going on,” Blake cuts off my stammering once again, an edge of grit to his voice. “But it’s okay.” It doesn’t sound like it’s okay at all by the way he says it. And it definitely *isn’t* okay. “We’re here now. It’s so– God, it’s great to see you, Brett.”

“Boy, it’s been so long. I haven’t seen you since...since the...”

The funeral.

Dad doesn’t say it. But we both know.

“Yeah,” Blake says, clearing his throat. Blake looks over my dad’s shoulder and then glances from him to me for a moment too long. Panic clawing at my stomach, I interject.

“Dad,” I blurt, my hand shooting out to grab his arm. “I was going to get you something from the bar. How about you just come, though? I’ll give you a tour of the venue on the way.”

“Oh, um, sure, Annie-bell,” Dad replies hesitantly.

“Great!” I say, pulling him my way.

“Where’s Miss Heidi?”

I freeze at Blake’s voice. My eyes flick to my Dad, praying his hard of hearing has worked to our advantage at this moment and that we can just continue on our way.

No such luck.

Dad’s spine has steeled, one brow raising.

“Dad, c’mon. We can catch up later. There’s no line at the bar right now–”

“Miss Heidi?” Dad asks, ignoring me and spinning back to Blake.

I feel razor blades scratching at my throat and my heart falling into my stomach.

“Yeah. Is she still on her way? Did she have to stay to close up the store or something?” Blake asks.

“Dad—” I plead, but it’s barely audible.

“Blake,” Dad says, his head shaking. “Heidi left.”

“Left?” Blake questions.

Dad looks back at me before returning his gaze to Blake. “You didn’t know?”

“Left to where? When was she here?”

“Blake,” Dad sighs, “She left *me*. She...she divorced me.”

My vision is so cloudy that I can barely see the dumbfounded, incredulous wave of expressions making their way across Blake’s face.

“What—”

“Apple Jacks!” Remy appears behind me, cutting Blake off as he claps his hands on my shoulders. “They’re ready for toasts.”

“I— Okay,” I squeak out. Blake eyes stay glued to me as Remy reaches for my hand and pulls me towards the front of the room to stand by Chuck and Lori Beth. The only way I manage not to stumble on the way up there is my gaze staying trained on my feet the whole way. I blow out a deep breath before looking up. When I do, my eyes land straight on Blake, standing completely still no more than fifteen feet from me at the front of the forming crowd, his gaze hard and jaw set but not a hair out of place otherwise, as if he simply teleported across the room.

Remy’s arm goes around me, pulling me to his side, and Chuck clinks a knife against his beer bottle to signal everyone to pay attention. “Hey, everyone,” Chucks calls out. “I don’t want to keep you from the party for too long, but there are just a few things I’d like to say, if that’s okay.”

I peel my eyes from Blake, resting them on Chuck’s face as I begin to chew on my bottom lip. I don’t have any idea what he’s about to say. There’s a strong chance Lori Beth had this little speech included in the itinerary and told me all about it, but, if that’s the case, I must not have been listening.

“I think it’s safe to say that I know Remy better than I know anyone. I’ve watched him grow up and turn into a man and have watched Annie grow up right along next to him. It’s not often that two people with so much shared history find their way into each other’s arms later in life.”

I do everything in my power not to look, but fail, glancing at Blake. His stance widens and his arms cross. His jaw ticks right as I force my eyes away, heat rushing to the back of my neck.

“Remy is an exceptional young man, but a man is only as good as the woman he chooses to share his life with.” Redness blossoms at my cheeks as I give Chuck a tight smile.

“So, if everyone could please raise their glasses, or bottles, or whatever you have,” Chuck chuckles, holding his beer bottle in the air. Remy does the same next to me. My stomach is doing backflips, nausea flooding every part of me. I suddenly spot my dad across the room leaning against a pillar, one hand shoved into the pocket of his jeans. He has an expression I can’t read across his face. His lips are just barely pulled up at the corners, but his eyes hold more sadness than I’ve seen in a long, long time.

“To Annie,” Chuck continues. “And to Jeremiah, my son. You’ve made this family proud. Here’s to the soon-to-be Mr. and Mrs. Van der Michael.”

SIX YEARS AGO

He hates me.

It's written all over his face.

"Blake," I breathe. I hardly recognize the boy before me. He is older. Taller. Stronger. And so much more handsome than I thought imaginable.

And so completely and utterly destroyed.

His blue-green eyes are glassed over, somehow emotionless and full of every emotion at the same time; the outer corners are red and puffy as if he's been crying, bruise colored circles lying beneath them. His jaw is hard and set, his neck strained with tension. He's wearing a white dress shirt, the sleeves cuffed and pushed up to his elbows and the top four buttons unfastened, revealing the tan skin of his chest. He's still in a pair of light wash jeans, but he's only wearing socks on his feet, as if he's in for the night. My heart drops at the realization he had dressed up for me. The pressure in my throat swells, guilt weighing heavily on my chest.

Blake says nothing, practically looking through me as I stand dripping and shivering in the hallway of this four-star hotel. "Can I come in, please?" I whisper.

"Why?" Blake asks, his voice harsh. "Did we have plans or something?"

"Blake, please—"

Blake turns away from me, walking back into the room and letting the door fall shut in my face. I reach out and catch it just before it clicks shut and push my way inside after him. "Blake, I'm so sorry—"

"You're sorry a lot. Anybody ever told you that?" Blake's back is to me, but I see him setting down a bottle, throwing a glass of light brown liquid back as I approach him.

I run my hands down my face. “Please, just let me explain—”

Blake spins around, cutting me off. “You know what? I don’t really want to hear it, Annie.”

I rear back, feeling as if I’ve just been stabbed in the chest. *Annie?* My mouth falls open, tears spilling over.

“Are you serious right now?” Blake asks, his spine stiffening.

I shake my head. “I—”

“You have me drive five hours on the anniversary of my dad’s death,” Blake grits out. “After barely talking to me for the last year. After forgetting my birthday. You have me drive out here. Make plans with me. Give me one ounce of hope that you might...” he pauses, shaking his head. “One ounce of hope that you might feel a *fraction* for me of what I feel for you.”

My jaw drops further, my brows raising. *Wait, what?*

“Then you ghost me all day,” Blake continues. “Leave me sitting at a hole-in-the wall pizza restaurant waiting nearly an hour and a half for you like an absolute freaking idiot—”

“Blake, I didn’t mean to—”

“And *you* have the audacity to cry right now?” Blake fumes, staring at me incredulously.

I drop my head, wiping the tears away from my face and stepping closer to Blake. He instantly takes a step back in response, making my stomach drop.

“Blake, you have every right to be upset. I’ve royally fucked up, okay? I know that. But...I didn’t mean to. You don’t understand. I wanted to be here so bad, but so many things happened. My phone didn’t charge last night, and I didn’t have a single second to look at it today because of the conference, and then it died, and then my boss introduced me to an executive that works here in New York and— Blake, they were gonna give me the job. I couldn’t just leave. I had to go with them. And then I had no way to contact you, and then it started raining and I didn’t have cash for a cab— And this last year, you know things have been crazy with senior year and the internship and—”

I cut off my ramble when Blake’s stare becomes too intense to continue any further. I look at him expectantly, breathing hard and waiting for him to say something. But he doesn’t, so I continue. “Look, Blake. I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. I don’t know another way to say it. I wanted to be here for you so badly. I still do. But I understand if you can’t forgive me. I understand if you hate me—”

“Hate you?” Blake blinks at me, his gaze going ice cold. “*Hate* you?” he repeats, shaking his head. My brows pull together as I stare back at him. “You have no freaking clue, do you?”

“Of what?”

“Just forget it, Evangeline,” Blake says, turning away. “Please...just go.”

A sharp pain shoots through my chest. “Blake, please—” I reach out to touch his shoulder, but he shrugs me off, whipping around to face me.

“I can’t do this with you anymore, Evangeline,” he growls, the scent of whiskey fanning my face.

“Do what?”

“*This.*” Blake motions between the two of us with his finger. “With you. Whatever it is. Or isn’t. I can’t do it anymore. It’s too damn painful.”

“*What?*” I blink.

Blake blows a breath out, looking away for a second before turning back to me. “I can’t sit here waiting for you while you put every single other thing in your life before me. Before us.”

My ears ring, my vision blurring. How could he possibly say that? Every single thing I’ve been doing, been working so hard for, it’s all been to get me to a place where we can be together. Where we can be ready. I wanted a degree and I wanted a job in marketing in New York City, but there’s nothing I want more than Blake. How does he not see that?

Maybe because you’ve never told him.

Oh my God.

Have I never told him?

I want to tell him now, but I’m not sure I’m capable of getting the words out.

“Blake that—that’s not true. All I want—”

“Please, Evangeline,” Blake stops me. “I really just want you to leave.”

“Blake—”

“*Evangeline,*” Blake hisses, glowering at me. “Please, just leave and let me mourn my dad alone like I planned on doing in the first place before you reached out and convinced me to come here.”

“But I want to—”

“Please just leave and go back to your perfect life.” I instantly freeze, Blake pushing on, his tone becoming more frustrated by the second. “Your perfect life with your perfect plan and perfect job and perfect family that obviously doesn’t include me—”

“Stop.” I barely whisper it, my blood having run cold.

“Not all of us have that privilege. Not all of us have a perfect family with two parents to welcome us home and support us and tell us what the hell we’re supposed to do in life—”

“Blake, *stop*,” I grit my teeth, tears spilling over.

He has absolutely no idea.

“I need you to leave,” Blake chokes.

“Blake—”

Blake walks forward, forcing me to stumble backwards towards the door. “Right now, Evangeline.”

“*Why?*” I cry, my back hitting the door.

Blake stops in front of me. “Because, right now, when I look at you...” he swallows hard, pressing his lips together firmly and leaning closer to me. “I see this city. Boston. Ramer. Lake Placid. The baseball fields. My backyard. I see *my dad*.” A single tear falls from each of our eyes at the same moment, and I’m sure I feel my heart shatter in my chest. “And then I remember,” Blake continues, “that today is about him. And then I realize that instead of crying over losing him...I’m crying over losing you.”

All of the air leaves my lungs, my throat and chest aching with a pain I’ve never felt before. I didn’t want this. This day is about Kyle. It was always supposed to be about that. I can’t believe what I’ve done. What I’ve done to this boy that I...that I...

I slowly raise my shaking hands, cupping Blake’s face. He flinches when my skin meets his, standing up straight and making me rise onto my tip-toes to continue stroking his cheeks. “You don’t have to,” I whimper. “Lose me.”

Blake’s eyes meet mine, one of his dark curls hanging in his line of sight. He places his hands over mine, the warmth making me shiver. He leans forward steadily. I feel an ounce of warmth return to my body for the first time in over an hour the moment his lips press against my forehead. My bottom lip trembles as he slowly pulls away, a millimeter at a time, my eyes falling shut. When I open them again, Blake’s gaze is boring into mine. I open my mouth to say something. Anything. But Blake beats me to it.

“I already have,” he whispers, pulling my hands from his face and taking a step back.

It takes everything in me not to slump against the door right there. “But...”

“I’m done, Evangeline. I have to be.”

“But...what about—” my voice is barely audible.

“Please just go,” Blake says with finality, resting both his hands on top of his head and turning away from me.

“*Blake.*”

Blake drops his hands, spinning back to me.

“*What, Evangeline?*”

I swallow my tears, taking a step toward him. I intend to come across as strong, but I can feel my voice cracking before I even have the words out.

“*What about fate?*”

Blake steels himself. “*What?*”

“*Fate. The thing you believe in more than anything.*”

Realization hits Blake, his jaw ticking. “*Yeah, well, I believed in a lot of things.*”

“*What are you saying?*” I shake my head. “*That you don’t believe in fate anymore?*”

“*I’m saying...*” Blake's watery eyes dart back and forth between mine, his lips rolling into his mouth, “*that sometimes fate breaks.*”

My lips part, my eyes falling to the floor. I don’t realize I’m backing up until my hand hits the cold metal of the door handle. I grab on to it, looking back at Blake, his eyes pained but expression and posture unwavering.

“*Yeah,*” I whisper. “*It sure does.*” I turn the handle and walk out of the room, not allowing myself to look back.



I AM COMPLETELY and utterly numb until the moment I stumble back into my own hotel room. The door clicking closed acts as a trigger, my body instantly racking with sobs as I slide to the ground, my face in my hands.

The TV that I never turned off from the evening before humming in the background is the only thing convincing me that I’m not in a nightmare.

Give me one ounce of hope that you might feel a fraction for me of what I feel for you.

It’s too damn painful.

I can’t sit here waiting for you while you put every single other thing in your life before me.

I'm crying over losing you.

Sometimes fate breaks.

I can't breathe. I can't think. I feel like I'm going to be sick. The entire world feels like it's collapsed out from under me.

No, screw that.

My entire world *has* collapsed out from under me. Officially. Everything I thought I had and would have. *Gone.*

In just one month.

My sadness quickly dissolves into anger, my tears streaming hot down my face. Anger at myself for ruining everything and letting Blake down. Anger at Blake for not letting me explain. Anger at life and the world and the selfish, sadistic people that inhabit it.

I rub hard at my temples, forcing myself off the ground and moving to my nightstand to plug my phone in. I should call Blake. Or at least text him. *But would he want that? Do I want that right now? He said he was done with me. Done with us.*

Whatever it is. Or isn't.

Through the absolute utter heartbreak and shame, I still open Blake's contact the second my phone powers on. My finger hovers over the call button, but something makes me hesitate. I stare at it for a long moment, my teeth sinking into my bottom lip. I have to do this. I have to call him. I lower my thumb to the screen—

"Oh, don't worry about it."

My eyes snap up to the television, immediately recognizing a voice from a movie I've watched over a dozen times throughout my life.

"As soon as you step outside that door, you'll start feeling better."

No. Freaking. Way.

"You'll remember you don't believe in any of this fate crap."

My phone falls from my hand, a fresh wave of tears bursting from my eyes.

"You're in control of your own life."

I collapse on to the bed grappling for the TV remote tangled within the sheets.

"Remember?"

I shut the TV off, *The Matrix* fading from view.

I'm frozen in place, no part of me moving other than the tears streaming down my face.

I'm in control of my own life. I always knew that.

But so is Blake.

And he made his decision.

I stay in that position, wet clothes and all, staring at the ceiling. I keep my eyes focused on the fan blades spinning in circles, exhausted in every sense of the word but not willing to let myself fall asleep, knowing that, when I wake up tomorrow, nothing will ever be the same again. I fight it for as long as I can.

Eventually, I lose.

PRESENT DAY

The sounds of glasses and bottles clinking around me are drowned out by the whirring in my ears. My body is rigid as I slowly lift my gaze to where Blake stands. His eyes are wide and cold, his lips pressed into a thin line. He raises one arm, his hand rubbing roughly at his chest and the back of his neck.

As I continue to stare at him, lips parted, a waiter walking around with a tray of champagne glasses stops beside Blake, clearly asking him if he'd like one. Blake never even looks at the waiter, his eyes still on mine as his hand shoots straight for one of the glasses. His reach seems to involuntarily freeze halfway, however, his hand balling into a fist and pulling back to drop at his side. He seems to mutter something along the lines of *nevermind*, and the waiter continues on his way. I swallow hard.

He only drinks anymore when he doesn't feel like he has to.

At a sudden pat on my shoulder, I turn to see Remy standing just behind me. He simply raises his beer bottle in the direction of my non-existent one before planting a quick kiss on my forehead and stepping away to cheers with his father and friends before I have time to say or do anything. I tell myself I should follow after him, but can't, my body automatically spinning back around to where Blake is—

Was.

He's gone. The spot where he just stood is vacant, cold absence replacing the blistering heat of his former presence. Something catches my eye and I glance up, seeing the back door leading outside swinging closed.

My feet are moving before I even register the choice to make them do so. The party continues around me, but it's like I'm not even here, existing only

in a bubble of my own confusion and queasiness, the limited contents in my stomach feeling as if they could make a reappearance at any moment. I try to force myself to take a turn and head for the bathroom, but I'm not in control of my body at the moment.

Air.

I need air.

I burst out of the old wooden door and down the porch stairs, not realizing that my walk had turned into a jog until the warm night wind whips across my face. I only make it a few steps out of the building and onto the lawn until my body crumples, my hands going to my knees as I breathe deeply and evenly, trying to get my heart rate under control. Aside from the muffled sounds of the party inside and the buzzing of the cicadas in the trees, the night is entirely silent, my gasps the only thing interrupting the serenity.

I spin back towards the building and begin to raise my head as my bodily functions start to normalize. I close my eyes, letting out one final breathy sigh. When my eyes open, my spine instantly snaps straight and I turn to the side, a figure in the shadows catching my attention for the first time. I take a step forward, seeing Blake sitting on the steps of the back porch leading off the house. His elbows are resting on his knees, fingers laced together. His shoulders are stiff and his gaze is fixed on the ground, his tongue pushing hard against the side of his cheek.

"Blake?" I breathe.

He doesn't respond, not moving a muscle as he remains on the porch before me. I hesitantly approach him

"Blake?"

Nothing.

"*Blake?*" I push, exasperated, as I stand right in front of him.

His eyes snap suddenly to my face, looking coldly up at me through his thick eyelashes and dark curls of hair, but he stays silent. Though his icy glare is pushing me back, I fight against it, taking another step towards him. "Please say something," I whisper.

"What do you want me to say, Evangeline?" he asks flatly.

"Anything. Please," I beg.

He stares at me for several painfully long seconds, his chest rising and falling heavily. Right as I begin to think he won't speak again, his jaw shifts to the side. "Okay," he says. Before I realize what's happening, Blake is up off the porch and storming for me. I don't even have time to open my mouth

to question him before he's bending over, briskly scooping me up, and throwing me over his shoulder.

I let out a grunt as my chest hits against his back. "Agh! What the hell, Blake? Let me down!" I demand, pounding my fists against his lower back. Blake doesn't react to or acknowledge neither my verbal nor my physical complaints, striding around the side of the Old Scarlett House. "Blake, I swear to—Ah!"

He suddenly yanks me down by the hips, plopping my feet onto the ground in front of him. I straighten my disheveled dress and yank out the pieces of grass and leaves that made their way into my hair on the short journey. "Are you insane?" I growl.

"Why am I here?"

I pause my fidgeting, my eyes finding Blake's. He stands just feet from me, his gaze burning into me, the color of his eyes reminding me of a churning lake in a storm. We both seem to swallow at the same time. I blow a breath out of my nose, refusing to shy away. His eyes dart all over my face, his own face giving me no clear indication of what could be going on inside his head, as per usual.

What I would give to have any idea what he's thinking right now...

Blake

I can't think. I can't breathe. How can she expect me to speak?

I walked out of that party with every intention of leaving for good. I would have walked all the way back to Lake Placid right then if I had to. The words are still spinning in my head and grinding in my ears.

I have watched Annie grow up right along next to him.

It's not often that two people with so much shared history find their way into each other's arms later in life.

Here's to the soon-to-be Mr. and Mrs. Van der Michael.

Mr.

And.

Mrs.

Van der Michael.

How did it never occur to me that I didn't know Remy's last name? That I didn't know what *her* new last name would be? Maybe it's because I could never fathom the idea of her being anything other than Evangeline Jacks.

Or Evangeline Di Fazio.

I keep pushing away the image. The image of a young Remy—No, Jeremiah—Van der Michael in Evangeline's yearbook. The way she rolled her eyes and cringed away at the mere sight of him and mention of his name.

And now she's engaged to be married to him.

I curse myself for not putting the pieces together sooner, but know there's no way I could have. No way I would have ever predicted or anticipated this. None of this makes sense. All of the things she said about his family. All the dreams she had for herself and her future.

When that toast was given, I would like to say that I saw red, but I don't think that accurately describes the way I felt. At first, it seemed like anger. For a split second, I thought I could yank every table cloth off of every table in that place, sending every piece of china and silverware handpicked by Lori Beth—Lori Beth Van der Michael, I now unfortunately know—flying and shattering into the hardwood floor. I felt betrayed. Felt like the one person in this world outside of my family that I ever truly trusted and thought I knew had lied to me. That they were never who I thought they were at all. I thought I was feeling rage. But, when I allowed myself to look at her again, *really* look at her, I realized it wasn't anger at all I was feeling. It was grief. Pure

incomprehensible sadness. I wasn't seeing red; I was seeing blue.

The words had played over and over.

Here's to the soon-to-be Mr. and Mrs. Van der Michael.

Those were the words that told me my time here was done and that it was entirely too late. Those were the words that pushed my feet into motion and out of the door. Those were the words that made me leave.

I had just hit the porch when the other words, however, suddenly made a reappearance.

Heidi left.

You didn't know?

She...she divorced me.

Those words. Those words and the look on Evangeline's face as they were uttered. The million questions that arose in my mind at the sound of them. Those were the words that made me stay.

I was going to leave. I had to leave. I still do. And I will. But not until I get answers. Answers as to what the hell happened in the last six years. Answers to the questions that have lived in the tense air between us for the last few weeks. I grind my teeth together as Evangeline's brown eyes search my face. I blink hard, not allowing myself to get lost in them.

"I asked you a question," I grit. Her lips part, but she doesn't answer me, looking as if she doesn't even remember the question. "Why am I here?" I repeat.

Her brows furrow in confusion. "At the party?"

"No, Evangeline. Why am I *here*?"

"Blake..." she whispers, her head shaking and cheeks reddening.

"And don't say just to fix a greenhouse, because we both know that's not true."

Evangeline attempts to steel herself, but doesn't seem to have it fully in her, her shoulders slumping. "Blake, I'm enga—"

"*Engaged*," I finish for her. "I know. To a Van der Mooch." Her lips press into a firm line and the moonlight betrays her as it reflects off of and reveals the small tears welling in the corners of her eyes. "To a member of the exact family you said *you* never wanted to be like."

Evangeline's tongue pushes into her cheek and she looks away.

I take a step closer to her and she crosses her arms, as if shielding herself from me. "What happened to you, Evangeline?" I whisper. "What happened to us?"

Her head snaps in my direction immediately at my second question. “Are you seriously asking me that right now?”

“Yes,” I confirm, my head shaking and throat tightening. “How could you not tell me your parents split up? When did that even happen?”

Evangeline lets her arms fall to her side, an unhumorous chuckle escaping her. “Just over six years ago,” she says. My body stiffens, the mental math instantly clicking in place. “Right before I last saw you.”

“What?” I question, having heard her perfectly fine but not understanding at all.

“Yep,” she nods, quickly swiping a tear from her eye and regaining her defiant posture. “They sat me and Steph down like a business meeting and Mom promptly let us know that she was running off with Ronnie.”

I blink twice, my mouth drying. “Your hardware store manager?”

“The one and only.”

“I don’t understand—”

“Neither did I,” Evangeline cuts me off, the floodgates of information now open. “I didn’t get an explanation either. Mom just said that sometimes this just *happens*. That her and Dad grew apart. I knew what that really meant. I knew there was nothing mutual about that break-up. They didn’t grow apart, Mom pulled away. I know now, after having time to think back on it, that things between her and Ronnie had to have been going on a lot longer than she let on. I think she wanted to leave for a while, but waiting to do so until she had the excuse of my dad being detached and distant due to the sudden tragedy of losing his best friend somehow made her feel better about herself. That she was somehow able to justify it. Like that doesn’t make the whole situation ten times worse and doesn’t make her ten times more selfish.”

Evangeline takes what I think is her first full breath in the last minute. Once she looks back at me, I notice her eyes look apologetic. I’m sure that is having to do with the last part of her rant. I’m sure she’s regretting saying it, probably thinking that she made my dad’s death about her and that she’s offended me. She hasn’t. My dad’s passing affected everyone. She’s allowed to be hurt. She’s allowed to be angry.

God knows I was.

“I was going to say that I don’t understand how you couldn’t have told me,” I say.

“I was going to,” Evangeline whispers, her head shaking. “But I needed

time to process it all, and I didn't want to tell you over the phone. And once we finally were going to be together again... It was the anniversary of your dad's death, Blake. I knew how much pain you were in already. I didn't want to add my own crap to the load."

I let out an incredulous scoff, running a hand through my hair. "Evangeline, this is your *life*. That's never crap. Especially not to me."

Evangeline's eyes look like they're threatening to water again. Her teeth sink into her bottom lip in response, but she instantly releases it when my gaze flicks down to it. I don't realize how close we were standing until she takes an unsteady step back, letting herself breathe for a moment before speaking again. "I was going to tell you," she insists. "In New York. I knew it would come up eventually. But as I'm sure you remember, that trip and its itinerary didn't exactly go as planned."

I don't have to be reminded. That day is permanently burned into my memory. I've never felt as stupid or humiliated as I did sitting at Angelo's Pizza for an hour and a half, bouquet of baby's breath in hand, on a day I was once dreading but now thrilled over, waiting for the girl of my dreams to never walk through the door. I've never felt as crushed or defeated as I had realizing that I would never be enough for her. I had never felt more confused or conflicted as I had hearing that knock on my hotel room door after several drinks in and opening it to see a soaking wet Evangeline, attempting to explain herself and put my heart right back on the leash she'd unknowingly had it on for about fifteen years at that point. No, I'd never been more confused or conflicted than in that moment...

Except for maybe when her voice came through my phone line for the first time in six years a few weeks ago.

I swallow hard. "You should have told me."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry, Blake," Evangeline mutters. "I was young and I was stupid and I was a little busy having the rug of everything I knew in life being ripped out from under me."

Yeah, I know the feeling. Except Evangeline knew it. She could see what I was going through and didn't let me go through it alone.

She turns away from me, lacing her fingers together and raising her arms to rest them above her head. Conflict swims in my chest. I feel frustration at Evangeline for not telling me, irritation with myself for acting so rashly, regret for assuming her life was perfect and throwing that in her face, anger at the both of us for letting miscommunication keep us from one another for the

last six years, longing for a chance to do it all over again, and resentment at the fact that I know that will never be possible.

I watch Evangeline's hair blowing in the wind and the steady rise and fall of her shoulders as she breathes. So many pieces of a puzzle I didn't even know existed until tonight have clicked into place, but there's one that's still staring me square in the face. The one that still makes absolutely no sense for so many reasons. There's a million things I could say in regards to what we just discussed, but, selfishly or not, I need to know this. I won't last another minute if I don't.

"Evangeline?" I breathe.

She pauses, turning slightly to look over her shoulder at me.

"Why are you marrying this guy?"

Evangeline drops her arms, spinning slowly to face me, an exasperated look on her face. "Seriously, Blake?"

"Yes, seriously."

Her mouth opens like she's about to retort, but she pauses, as if the words are caught in her throat. I take the opportunity to take a step closer to her.

"You had so many dreams. You wanted a career that you were passionate about. One that was always changing and put you in front of new people. One where you commanded the attention you damn well know you deserve." The eye contact she had been avoiding with me falters, her gaze shifting to mine, her face unreadable. "You wanted to work hard and play harder," I continue. "You wanted a life of adventure and dancing under the city lights. You wanted out of this town. You wanted to see the world."

I stop then, refusing to speak until she says something. Seconds pass by before she shifts uncomfortably, her jaw set but eyes watering.

"Yeah, well, sometimes things change, Blake."

She might have had me there for a second if it were still a few weeks ago, but now, I don't believe that for a second. "Do they?" I question.

"Obviously," she responds, an edge of ice to her voice.

I shake my head, exasperated by whatever it is she's keeping from me. "I don't understand, Evangeline. You so badly wanted out of this town and away from all the same people you grew up with and went to school with. But, instead, you're marrying the one you hated most and settling down here for good?"

"You don't even know him," she falters.

"But I know *you*," I insist. "And this isn't you."

Evangeline rears back, looking up at me with a fire in her eyes I have yet to see. “You don’t get to say that to me. You have no idea what’s happened in the last six years. You don’t have any idea who *I* am anymore.”

I know that’s not true, but, even though it hurts like hell, I don’t fight her on it. She’s finally talking to me. So I let her.

“Things were so rough after my parents split. Mom left the week after Steph and I found out, taking Ronnie with her. Suddenly, my dad had a store to run all on his own. Mom left him with nothing and took half of their money in the process. He didn’t know any of the business side of things; that was always Mom’s job. He knew the tools and he knew how to help the people. They had been a team for twenty-five years and now he was suddenly left to fend for himself at the same time he was nursing a newly shattered heart. He needed help.”

I swallow hard, not understanding how anything of this could have happened. Not understanding how a world exists where I wouldn’t have known this. Where Evangeline wouldn’t have come to me. There’s no way I could have gone through something like that without her. I want to admire her strength for it, but a voice in the back of my head keeps screaming that it’s just a reminder that I’ll most likely always need her more than she needs me.

“After New York—” Evangeline breaks off, clearing her throat. “After I completely infuriated and embarrassed my boss by storming out of my meeting with her and the executive from the New York branch that was most likely about to hire me because...because I was over an hour late to see you...”

The back of my neck instantly heats at the memory and her confession. At the explanation she tried to give me that night but I wouldn’t hear because I was exhausted and so damn tired of being hurt. If only I’d know the hurt wouldn’t end when we did, maybe I would have heard her out.

“I didn’t get offered the New York position,” she continues. “I barely got offered a Montgomery position. My boss had wanted to sack me altogether. Said I had the talent but obviously not the commitment or professionalism that it took. That I obviously didn’t *want* it enough. But, my numbers didn’t lie. She knew it would be a mistake to get rid of me. They wanted to keep me on as an extended intern, but with Mom leaving and Dad struggling at the store all on his own...I couldn’t take it. I knew he’d never ask it of me, but he needed my help. So I quit Briar & Brooks to work at Jacks. To help Dad.”

That answers why Evangeline temporarily put her career goals on pause, but she has yet to explain one very important piece of this screwed up picture. As if reading my mind, she addresses it.

“Remy,” she whispers. “He came into Jacks a few months after my parents split up, a month after I started working there full time, trying to convince me to let his family buy our store. Chuck had been round and round with Dad over it throughout the previous few years, but now Remy was working with him and in the mix of it all. I told him initially to screw off, but he was persistent. He knew we were struggling. He somehow knew we were on the edge of going out of business financially. He ended up coming up with an investment offer. A way to pump some money back into the store and help Dad and I with the behind the scenes business aspects. I still told him no, but he wouldn’t give up. He just kept coming into the store. Slowly, we became friends, and then it became more. And we accepted the offer.”

I register my head shaking when Evangeline’s eyes narrow at me. I look away from her, needing a moment to process. I hear what she’s saying, but I also hear what she’s holding back. What she’s not willing to admit.

“I know you may not understand it, but he was there for me when no one else was,” Evangeline says. My gaze snaps back to her.

When no one else was.

“When I needed someone the most,” she continues. “He helped keep the store afloat. He cared for me. He welcomed me into his family.”

I just stare at her, my jaw flexing.

“*What, Blake?*” Evangeline begs, exasperated, throwing her hands in the air. “I mean, you’re the one always telling me to speak my mind. So go ahead. What do you have to say?”

“You ran away.”

Her mouth falls open. “What?”

“You heard me, Evangeline,” I say, dipping my head.

“What did I run away from, Blake? Tell me,” she growls.

“Your *life!* Because it got hard, because you lost one ounce of control, you gave it up all together.” Evangeline flinches, but I carry on. If we’re putting it all on the table, now’s the time. “I understand your dad needed help. I understand your wanting to find a solution. But *this?* Getting with this guy? Falling for his shit? Letting one thing permanently derail your entire life plan you’ve had written for as long as I’ve known you?”

Evangeline’s lips press together, her arms crossing.

“One bad day at work and you give up on the job you’ve always dreamed of and *know* you’re great at *forever*? Your family falls apart, so you just join a new one? One that’s hated *your* family and tried to take away everything they’ve worked for?”

“What should I have done instead?” she fumes, dropping her arms to her side and closing the distance between us. “Just opened up a bottle of whiskey and drowned my sorrows in that every night? Yeah, maybe I should have done *that*.” The harsh truth of her retort pricks at my chest, but I don’t falter, hearing her out. “But you know what, Blake? I never even blamed you for that. I never held it against you, and I still don’t. You were hurting. You lost your dad and I know that was horrible, and I understood. But, even though the two situations are entirely different...I still lost my mom. We haven’t spoken a word to each other since she walked out that door. I—I just—” Her voice cracks, and she swallows against it. “I needed somebody.”

I let out a harsh sigh, my shoulders tightening. “You don’t *need* anybody, Evangeline. But...you could have had me,” I grit, my head shaking. “You already did.”

“Well, obviously not. And do *not* put this on me,” she glowers, shoving her finger in my direction, it poking into my chest from how close we’re standing. “*You’re* the one who put the nail in the coffin. You’re the one that told me to leave. You’re the one that said fate breaks—”

I grab the wrist of her hand that’s poking at me, pulling it to the side so I can take a step closer to her. “I fucked up, okay?” I rasp. “I admit it. I should have heard you out. I should have known something was wrong. I should have asked more questions. I know that and I have regretted it every day since. But don’t act like you did nothing wrong. You should have told me. At any point over the last six years *before* two weeks ago, you should have freaking called me, Evangeline. That’s all it would have taken. You shouldn’t have left me in the dark. You shouldn’t have left your whereabouts and feelings that night to my imagination. But, most importantly, you you shouldn’t have walked away—

“You shouldn’t have *let* me!” Evangeline cries.

“Annie?”

Evangeline jumps back from me, only to realize I’m still holding her by the wrist. I drop her hand, letting it fall and allowing her to fully escape me. She quickly raises her hand to wipe a frustrated tear from the corner and her eye and smooths her hair down before turning back towards the direction of

the voice. We're both breathing hard and clenching our fists at our sides when Steph comes into view.

"Oh, there you are. Dad was looking for you. I think he's ready to head out--"

Steph breaks off suddenly, looking between us and obviously sensing the tension.

"Oh. I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't mean to interrupt--"

"You weren't. It's nothing. I'll go say goodbye to Dad. Thanks, sis," Evangeline says, plastering on a fake smile, attempting to compose herself, and taking off towards the back entrance of the building. She brushes a hand over Steph's shoulder as she passes her, not looking back once as she disappears into the night, leaving me and her sister alone.

One hand goes into my pocket while the other one fists into my hair. "Steph, I--"

"I know." She smiles sadly, looking me over for several seconds before following after Evangeline and leaving me alone to wonder how the hell any of us got here.

FIVE YEARS AGO

Annie

I push open the office door, the cash drawer that seems to get lighter by the day balancing against my hip. I pause in the doorway, turning back to see my dad sitting at the desk, leaning over a stack of paperwork and running a hand down his salt and pepper colored beard.

“You okay, Dad?” I ask him, even though I know it’s a ridiculous question. I know he’s not okay, but asking is both my way of showing that *I know* he’s not okay and my way of reminding him that I’m here for him.

His brown eyes glance up at me. “Yeah, Annie-bell,” he replies. “Just trying to stay afloat.” He opens the desk drawer, refolding the paper he was looking at and tossing it on top of the quickly growing stack of what I know is unpaid bills. He catches me looking at it and gives me a tight smile. “Thank God Steph has a volleyball scholarship is all I gotta say.”

My hands tighten on the cash drawer and I swallow hard. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“You’re doing more than enough by being here, Annie-bell. Thank you for asking though.” I notice the next paper he picks up from the pile in front of him has a large *Final Notice* red stamp across the top of it. He quickly throws it onto the bill stack, face-down. “We’ll figure it out,” he says, not sounding nearly as reassuring as I think he wants to. “We always do.”

“Yeah,” I croak.

Dad’s eyes fall back to the papers and, as much as I want to hover, I know that’s not what he wants. It wouldn’t be what I would want. I let the office door fall shut behind me, making sure it clicks closed as quietly as possible. I blow out a steadying breath, starting to make my way towards the front of the store.

I keep my head forward, avoiding looking at the once beautifully stocked and organized shelves that are now half empty. I know that nearly every bit of the limited stock we do have has a layer of dust on it and that the floor could seriously use a sweep. As much as I’m aware of all of those things, there’s just simply not enough time in the day when there’s only two of us here to run the place. And, with there not even being enough money currently to buy more stock, there most certainly isn’t left over money right now to hire someone else to help out.

I make it to the register at the front, double checking the very sad amount

of cash in the drawer before placing it inside and shutting it. My teeth chew at my bottom lip as I pull my phone out of my green apron pocket to check, even though I already know.

No new messages.

It's been six months, but I still check.

I grab a bottle of glass cleaner and a handful of paper towels from under the counter and walk to the front door, flipping the sign to *Open* before I walk outside. I spray down the front door and only spend a few seconds wiping it down before I hear the roar of a truck pulling into the parking lot behind me. A grin breaks across my face, hope and excitement stirring in me. Between the state the store has been in the last few months and the quickly spreading small town gossip of my mom's scandalous affair, the customers have been few and far between lately.

I turn around and my smile instantly falls when I see who is stepping out of the truck, his boots hitting the ground and turning straight in my direction. A wave of nausea rolls through me as he approaches, running one hand through his dirty blonde hair and lowering his aviator sunglasses with the other.

"Well, hey there, Annie," he drawls.

I throw the door open and walk back inside with barely a glance in his direction. "We're closed."

"No you're not," his muffled voice comes through the glass as his brow furrows.

I maintain eye contact with him as I flip the sign over to *Closed* and walk away. I barely round the corner of the register, however, when I hear the bell sound behind me. *Dammit*. I should have locked the door.

"C'mon, just give me a moment of your time."

"Sorry," I reply, not an ounce of apology in my tone. "My time is only allotted for people with souls."

He lets out a snort. "You're funny."

"I'm aware."

He leans against the counter, fully removing his sunglasses and looking me up and down.

I cross my arms, irritation heating my neck. "What do you want, Jeremiah?"

Remy's face twists like he just ate something very sour. "Why are you calling me that?"

“It suits you so much better.” I say that simply because I know he hates that name and it’ll piss him off.

“Nobody calls me that.”

“Well, maybe someone should.” I rub a hand against my chest, my heart having done something weird and painful whenever I said that.

“Okay, well, *Annabelle*—”

Not my name.

He wouldn’t know that though. Basically no one does. No one calls me Evangeline.

No one but—

“I’m here because I have a proposition for you,” Remy finishes.

I make it obvious I don’t care to listen to his proposition, bending over to pull a bowl and spoon out from under the counter along with my box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch. I turn around to grab a carton of milk from the mini fridge.

“Did you hear me?” Remy questions.

I pour the milk over my cereal and take a large spoonful in my mouth. “Unfortunately,” I mumble between chews.

Remy blows a breath out his nose. “Look, Annie, I know you’re not my biggest fan—”

“I’m not your *entire family*’s biggest fan,” I scoff.

“Yeah, well, I might be able to change that for you.”

“Highly doubtful.”

Remy’s lips press together, his eyes surveying me for a moment before he speaks again. “We’d like to buy the store.”

I nearly choke on my cereal.

“Are you kidding me right now?” I sputter. “How many times have we been over this?”

“I think we should go over it again.”

I drop my bowl onto the counter with a loud clang, shoving my finger in Remy’s direction. “You’re not going to *Van der Mooch* Jacks out from under us. This is *our* store. *Our* legacy.”

His gaze drifts away from my face, looking around at the disheveled displays and dusty shelves. “Yeah, some legacy.”

I rear back. “Screw you, Remy.” I try to turn and run away from the counter and back to the sad, but safe, confines of my dad’s office, but Remy grabs my wrist, halting me.

“Hey,” Remy says, his voice softer now. “I only say that because I know what it can be.”

“Yeah, and so do I,” I grit, yanking my wrist from his clutch. “And we don’t need you to do it.”

“Annie,” Remy whispers, shaking his head. “We both know that, within a few months, there might not be a store left for you to do anything with.”

My cheeks heat and my eyes begin to burn, forcing me to look away from him. Remy reaches out for me again, but I cross my arms, stepping just out of his reach.

“Let’s make sure that doesn’t happen,” he says.

I turn my gaze slowly back to him. “By you buying the store from us?” I question. “*Taking* it from us? What exactly does that do for us? Me and my dad would rather watch the store go under as Jacks Hardware than *ever* see it become *Van der Michael* Hardware.”

Remy grinds his jaw. “There’s other options we can discuss,” he says. “Investment options. The name doesn’t *have* to change.” I raise a brow and he shrugs. “There’s a real opportunity here.”

“An opportunity,” I repeat, a humorless laugh escaping me. “That’s all you people care about. Another dollar sign. Another trophy to add to your stolen collection.”

Remy raises a brow. “A stolen collection’s still a collection.”

My arms fall to my sides. “You’re incredible,” I mutter, shaking my head. “Thank you.”

“It wasn’t a compliment. Now, please, get out of our store.” I turn back to the cash register, trying my best to look busy. I shuffle loose papers and various clutter around, telling myself I’m searching for the audacity of this man.

“Annie,” Remy’s voice comes again.

I let out a groan, looking up at the ceiling. “What, Jeremiah?”

“I can walk out of this store, but I’m just going to keep coming back.”

I steel myself, turning to look at him. “Why?”

“Because I don’t take no for an answer.” When I flinch at his response, Remy’s demeanor softens. He takes a step closer to the counter, his eyes glued to mine. “And I always get what I want,” he adds, making my stomach dip. “I hope you’ll be smart and let me help you. Let me help your family.”

My family.

Now, why did he have to say that?

I immediately think of Dad. I think of him losing the store. His life's work and the only ounce of normalcy he has left after Mom left and shattered everything we knew of it. I think of Steph. Though she does have a volleyball scholarship, it doesn't cover everything. She's living her dream. She's finally achieved something she's worked so hard for. If the store goes, it *all* could go. Just because my plans haven't worked out the way I intended doesn't mean that Steph and Dad have to lose their dreams. No, they *can't*. I won't let it happen. We could never and *would never* sell the store, but there's no sense in passing up on an offer that could save our ship. Maybe I should just swallow my damn pride for once and hear the Van der Michaels out. I don't have to like them to work with them. To let them save Dad and Steph's dreams.

"You know, you're cute. You shouldn't have to be so sad all the time. You don't deserve it."

My jaw slackens, Remy's off-hand comment bringing me back to reality.
What the hell?

"You have no idea what I deserve," I mutter, but Remy doesn't hear me, plucking a piece of cereal from my bowl and popping it in his mouth. I reflexively pull the bowl back from him, making him chuckle.

"Hmm," he hums. "You should try Apple Jacks next time."

I raise my brows at him. "Apple Jacks?"

"Yep. Jacks are my favorite. They just taste so sweet."

I take in his insinuation and begin to scoff, but it comes out as a strangled laugh. "You're disgusting."

"I'm a lot of things, Annie Jacks. But, most of all, I'm persistent," he smirks. "I'll tell you what, I'll bring you some Apple Jacks when I stop by tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes ma'am," Remy confirms, stepping away from the counter. "Shall we say noon?"

"We shall *not*, Jeremiah."

"I'll see you then, Annabelle," Remy says, turning towards the door.

I don't know why I say it.

"That's not my name."

Remy freezes, turning back to me. "What?"

"Annabelle. That's not my real name. It's Evangeline."

"Huh," Remy grunts, his face twisting. "Too long and complicated."

I swallow down the mixture of emotions rising in my throat. “I can’t say I disagree.”

He nods. “Well, I’ll see you...” he trails off, his eyes drifting down to my cereal bowl and a smile coming to his face. “*Apple Jacks.*”

“Absolutely not. We’re not doing that,” I shake my head in disapproval, fighting off the stupid grin that the even stupider nickname inevitably brought to my face.

“Goodbye, Apple Jacks,” Remy insists, making his exit.

“Goodbye, Remy. I’ll be watching the door hit you on your way out.”

Remy pokes his head back inside the door just before it closes, a self-satisfied expression on his face. “As long as you’re watching,” he smiles, raising his brows, before disappearing.

I immediately turn around once the door closes, slumping down behind the counter. I shove my hands into my hair as I hear the rumble of Remy’s truck pulling out of the parking lot and wait for the customers I know probably won’t be coming. Not until something changes.

I always get what I want.

As much as I never thought I could give two shits about what Remy Van der Michael wants in life...we unfortunately seem to want the same thing. I want the store to succeed. He wants to make that happen. That’s *definitely* all he wants...

Right?

It doesn’t matter, because that’s all he’ll ever get out of me.

I don’t take no for an answer.

I shake my head. My fingers suddenly feel itchy, and I pull my cell phone from my apron, unlocking it.

No new messages.

I let out a sigh, pressing the lock button. When the screen goes black, I’m left only with my reflection in the glass. I really look at myself for the first time in a while, taking in my dull complexion and tired, sunken under eyes.

You shouldn’t have to be so sad all the time. You don’t deserve it.

I’d never even given myself time in the last six months to stop and think about the way I was feeling. Never allowed myself to sum up the constant pain in my chest and swirl of my brain and heaviness of my eyes to being something as simple as sadness. I especially didn’t ever stop to think if I deserved to feel this way. It’s just how things were; it was just the hand I had been dealt. Life was one unfair bitch, and who was I to question her? But, I

couldn't help but think, *did anybody truly deserve to be sad all the time?*

I try with everything in me for the rest of the morning to not think about how Remy, in his own way, might just be right.

About it all.

PRESENT DAY

I grab my heels from the floorboards before hopping out of Leah's truck, giving her a small smile and wave as the door falls shut. I didn't tell her what happened at the wedding shower, but she knows something is up. *Of course*. Thankfully, she decided to spare me after only the third time she begged me for details and I declined to share, promising her that I was just tired and that it'd been a long day.

As awful as it sounds, I'm so thankful to her and the other bridesmaids for deciding against having a post-party sleepover over at the house. Steph headed back to her hotel near the airport at the same time my dad left, needing to fly back to Texas first thing in the morning to coach a game, and Riya, Carmen, and Madeline all opted to stay a little closer by at the local bed and breakfast; Leah obviously just planned to just go to her own home. Though I initially tried to talk them all out of staying anywhere other than with me, I'm very happy now to have lost the battle. I love them all to death, but I couldn't handle any more tonight.

I raise my hands above my head to shield myself from the light sprinkles of rain that are now turning to a heavy downpour as Leah pulls out of the driveway and I begin to make my way towards the house.

Remy had wanted to go out after the shower, but I just didn't have the energy in me to join him. Not that he'd even technically invited me. Regardless, he didn't seem that let down that I opted to catch a ride home with Leah instead, happy to have a night out with the boys. The back of my mind tells me that I should probably have more thoughts about the situation, but the front of my mind is simply too full to let that thought in right now.

As I approach the front door, something pulls my attention to the gate

leading to the backyard. I slow my pace, turning my head in its direction. The rain picks up even more and I start to turn to go back to the front door, but stop, something continuing to draw me to the gate. I tip-toe up to it, pressing my ear flat against the tall dark wood. I don't hear any obvious noise coming from the yard or greenhouse, but my curiosity still gets the better of me. I pull back, moving to unlatch the gate and notice that one of the hinges is broken.

That's weird.

I push the gate open slowly and skip quietly across the short distance of the yard needed to enter the cover of the greenhouse. I set my heels down when I get inside, shaking out the wetness of my hair and pushing it out of my face. Once I do so, my mouth falls open. I haven't been inside the greenhouse in days and had no idea the amount of work Blake had managed to do in that time. Though it's still missing the plants, the place is an absolute work of art.

Rain plinks off the glass ceiling tiles as I make my way further inside, admiring the details. I stare at the beautifully polished tile floor under my feet as I stroll between a row of beautiful handmade potting tables, slowing down to run a finger along one.

I freeze, suddenly hearing the latch of a door behind me. I don't turn around, my gaze staying on the table and my back to the presence that just entered the greenhouse. I also don't say anything, two sets of breathing being the only sound filling the space.

"Evangeline," Blake says, finally breaking the silence, his tone indiscernible.

"Hi," I reply flatly, not meeting his eyes and continuing to trace the table.

I hear the door fall shut and feel him move further into the room. "Hi," he says, echoing me.

I don't know exactly what conversation Blake is intending to have here, but I know I probably won't like it. So, I start my own. "The greenhouse looks great."

"Thanks," he replies quickly, impatience lacing his voice. "Where's Remy?"

I pause, letting out the lightest sigh I can manage. "Out," I say, continuing to move through the row, my gaze downcast.

"Evangeline?"

My spine steels as I realize he's much closer now. "Yes?"

"Can you please look at me?"

“Why?” I ask, my fingernails digging into the wood of the table.

“Because I want to talk to you.”

“We *are* talking.”

“No, we’re evading.”

My lips press together. After several seconds without a response from me, Blake speaks again.

“Evangeline, please.”

I close my eyes, letting out a much deeper sigh this time, before slowly turning to face Blake for the first time. He stands about six feet from me, his hands shoved into the pockets of his slacks. The sleeves of his dress shirt are pushed up to his elbows and the front is now unbuttoned, showing his white tank top underneath. His mouth is twisted to the side and his eyes are full of so many conflicting emotions. I swallow against the lump in my throat, waiting for him to unleash, but what he says next, and the pure and utter softness of it, completely catches me off guard.

“I’m sorry about your parents,” Blake says. “About your mom.”

I blink several times, my mouth drying. “It’s okay.”

“No. It’s not.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Lots of people’s parents get divorced.”

“Well, not a lot of people are you.”

I stare at him, my lips falling open and closing again several times as my brain tries to process my many combatting thoughts.

“Please use your words,” Blake says.

My arms fall to my sides. “I feel ridiculous accepting your pity,” I blurt. “For even comparing the loss of my mom to the loss of your dad. It’s not comparable.”

“Evangeline,” Blake says, taking a small step forward. “Just because I may have been in a full body cast at some point doesn’t mean your newly broken arm doesn’t hurt.”

My head tilts, taking in his metaphor.

“Never feel ashamed or unvalidated in the way you feel,” he continues. “You’re allowed to feel. You’re allowed to hurt. It’s what makes us all human at the end of the day.”

I feel my bottom lip start to quiver, and bite down on it to stop it. I look down at my feet, blowing out a breath, before I meet Blake’s eyes again. “I–I’m sorry,” I stutter. “For not telling you.”

Blake’s eyes flick calmly several times between mine, and then he asks,

“Why didn’t you?”

“I told you. I wasn’t ready to. Not for weeks after I found out. It all just happened so fast and I needed time to process it and be there for my dad and Steph. It took several days before it even seemed real and then several more before the real pain of it all actually set in. It was all I was thinking about. The last thing I wanted to do was talk about it. I don’t even think I was *capable* of talking about it until around the time I went to New York.”

“Why didn’t you tell me then? In New York?”

My brows pull together. “When would I have done that?”

“Whenever. At any point. Then *or* after.”

My mouth hangs silently open. How could I have told him in New York? We both know what happened that night. Was I supposed to tell him while he was crying angry tears over being left alone on his least favorite day of the year? Left alone by *me*? Or should I have told him as he was practically pushing me out of his hotel room door? No, I shouldn’t have, and I wouldn’t have. I didn’t deserve his sympathy after what I did to him and frankly he seemed to be in no position to give it to me.

“Words, Evangeline.”

Goddammit, Blake. “I wanted to tell you about it, okay?” I cry, throwing my hands in the air. “Among so many other things I wanted to tell you. But you told me to leave, Blake. You said that being with me was painful. You... you told me you were done.” I shrug my shoulders, defeated. “I listened to you.”

Blake’s tongue pushes into the side of his cheek as he looks away from me, blowing a breath out of his nose before facing me again. “You never really did *listen* though, did you?” he asks, taking a step closer. “Evangeline,” he breathes, shaking his head. “I’d fought an uphill battle with you for so long. Our timing was just never right. A lot of it was due to life, but so much of it was just...you pushing me away...you holding back. Whatever the reason was, I still don’t know. But I didn’t lie when I said it was painful.”

He removes his hands from his pockets, one of them raising to rub his chest. My own chest instantly pinches in response.

“I was desperate,” he continues. “I was angry. I needed some space that night to clear my head, but I also knew somewhere deep inside of me that the only way I may ever have you...was to let you go.”

Painful realization washes over me like a tidal wave. *What?*

“So, yes,” Blake says, “I told you to leave. But, somewhere deep down, I

always thought you'd come back. I *had* to believe you would or I never would have said it. And when I said I was done... I know you know damn well that I could never be done. Not with you."

What was moments ago a cold empty sadness sitting within my chest is now an angry fluid heat rushing through my entire body. *How could he not have told me?* How could he have let me go on without knowing *any* of this? I push off the table I've been leaning against, stomping the few steps into the middle of the greenhouse that it takes until I no longer feel like I might spontaneously combust.

"Well, that's just great, Blake," I grit. "For a guy so obsessed with words, you can be seriously crappy at using them." I push my hair back from my face, closing my eyes and rubbing my temples. Several long seconds of silence pass.

"Why does it matter?" he asks coolly.

I open my eyes, turning to face him. "What?"

He takes a step in my direction. "Why does it matter now, Evangeline?"

I shake my head, confused.

"Why am I here?" he asks, walking even closer as he repeats his question from earlier.

Without my heels on, his height towers me. I stand my ground, however, swallowing hard. "What do you want me to say, Blake?"

"The truth," he replies instantly.

"Because I needed someone to fix the greenhouse," I mutter, grinding my teeth.

He takes another step. "And?"

We stand off with one another, the tension thickening the longer I leave his question unanswered. I don't know what he wants from me, and I don't know why he's doing this now. But is there any use in lying? Blake's determined to get something out of me, so I'll give it to him.

"*And*," I grit, "maybe I didn't hate the idea of that somebody being you."

Blake's expression remains unchanged as he stares down at me. His gaze burns into mine for several seconds before his shoulders fall just slightly. "Huh," he says simply, turning away.

I let out a scoff, my neck hurting from the whiplash of this conversation. "Well, are you happy now?" I fume.

Blake turns back, a humorless chuckle escaping him. "*Happy?* Evangeline," he exhales, rubbing a hand through his hair and down his face

before he once more closes the distance between us. “In what world could I ever be happy when you have another man’s ring on your finger?”

I rear back, my jaw unhinging. I raise my left hand to rest on my pounding chest, but Blake’s eyes snapping straight to it (*and my ring*) cause me to drop it. I take a breath, trying desperately to gather my thoughts. “Blake, I... That’s not fair.”

“*What* isn’t fair?”

“You saying that to me right now. I didn’t know that you’d care. It’s been so long, and you never called. I thought by now you would have—”

“What?” Blake questions. “Gotten over you?” He shakes his head as his gaze traces my figure. “Like it’s so easy?”

I go silent once more, my fists clenching at my sides as I look away from him.

“If you don’t use your words, I’m gonna lose my mind.”

I sharply snap my eyes to Blake’s. “I just don’t know what I was thinking when I asked you to come here.”

Blake lets out a shaky breath, stepping closer to me. “Are you sure about that?”

“I didn’t even think you’d answer,” I say, forcing my voice to stay even.

Another step. “I *always* answer.”

I continue to stand my ground. “I didn’t think you’d want to see me.”

“I *always* want to see you.”

Despite the whoosh of air that leaves my lungs at his reply, I continue. “I didn’t think your company would even let you come out here.”

Blake stops then, the corner of his mouth turning downwards. “There is no company, Evangeline.”

“*What?*” I question, sure that I heard him wrong.

“It’s *my* company,” Blake says. “I’ve owned my own for the last four years.”

I’m speechless. Completely and utterly speechless. I don’t understand how I couldn’t have known this, but then it clicks into place.

*Di Fazio
Landscaping & Design*

It’s been painted on his tool trunk this whole time and I never put two and two together. That’s the name of his company. That’s why he was able to

come here so easily and on such short notice. That's why he refused to let me pay for his plane ticket, saying his company would cover it. That's why he's been so flexible about staying as long as he needs to.

He's been the one calling the shots.

Blake owns his own company. His own landscaping design company. One that's well off enough that he can leave it for weeks at a time. And I didn't know it. I feel tears burning at the back of my eyes.

How could I not have known that?

"So, of course I came out here," Blake continues, pulling me from my thoughts. "Because I'd *always* go anywhere for you."

My gaze falls, my tongue pushing into my cheek to suppress the emotion welling in my eyes.

"What's your next excuse?" Blake breathes.

My head shakes, both because I don't have any more excuses and because I still can't speak.

I can feel Blake watching me, his presence looming. "Why are you marrying him?"

"Blake, I've told you," I groan, exasperated.

"You haven't."

"The Van der Michaels are the reason the store made it through my parents' divorce!" I cry. "They're the reason it still exists now. Remy was present during the darkest part of my life. He was there for me—"

"Was he there for you?" Blake asks, taking yet another step closer to me. "Or was he just *there*?"

A dumbfounded scoff leaves my throat, my eyes burning with frustration.

"Why are you marrying him?"

"*Why do you keep asking me that?!*" I fume, throwing my hands in the air.

"*Because*, Evangeline, I've asked you three times now and not one of your reasons has been that you love him."

I straighten, shaking my head. "You're unbelievable," I breathe, turning away from Blake before a single tear manages to roll over. I swipe it away as I walk to the closest table behind me, bracing my arms on its edge and keeping my back to Blake. After several long silent seconds, however, I feel the heat of him behind me.

"What were the other things?" he whispers.

I stay frozen in place. "What?"

“The so many other things you wanted to tell me. In New York. What were they?”

I shake my head, letting it fall as I bite down on my bottom lip. I feel him draw closer still, my back burning.

Blake’s fingertips just brush against the edge of my right shoulder before he sweeps my hair from the side of my face and onto my back, the cool air sending a shiver through me as it hits my neck. The pads of his fingers feel like fire against the ice of my skin as they move back to tuck my shortest strands behind my ear, securing them in place.

“*Evangeline*,” he whispers, his warm breath fanning my cheek, causing me to shudder.

His hand slides gently down my neck to my shoulder, applying the lightest force possible to let me know he wants me to turn around.

I do.

When my eyes open, I’m staring straight into Blake’s chest. I slowly lift my chin, meeting his gaze. His blue-green eyes shine down at me in the moonlight as his jaw tightens. As much as I may want to, I don’t look away, challenging him.

“Look,” Blake says, his hands resting on either of my shoulders. “I let you go once. I let you think that I *wanted* you to go.” His throat bobs, his fingers flexing against my skin. “I won’t make that mistake again. If you walk away from me right now, I need you to know that it’s entirely your choice. That if it were up to me, I wouldn’t spend another day without you by my side.”

The sound of my blood pounding in my ears is deafening, and, in that distraction, I allow a tear to escape. Blake reaches up and gently wipes it away with his thumb. My heart feels like it could tear from my chest at any moment. I focus on my breathing as Blake’s thumb remains lingering on my cheek. He meets my eyes once before he slowly drags his thumb down the side of my face, leaving sparks along every millimeter of its wake, until it reaches the corner of my mouth. He takes a step closer, running his thumb over my bottom lip. A pit forms deep in my stomach, fear, shame, and sheer burning desire all swirling within it. Blake leans closer, electricity firing in the short distance between us.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“I don’t know,” Blake breathes, his gaze flicking from my lips to my eyes. “Do you want me to stop?”

My breaths come out harsh and choppy as panic begins to clench at my chest and fire within my brain. My fight-or-flight kicks in and, before I even realize what I'm doing, I'm pushing away from the table, ducking under Blake's arm, and storming for the door. I don't look back as I fly across the threshold of the house, slamming the door behind me.

I have every intention of running straight for my bedroom, but my knees collapse out from under me, forcing me to lean back against the door. I stay there for several seconds, trying and failing to catch my breath.

What the hell was that?

I don't know what has me angrier. The fact that Blake just said those things to me or the fact that I even gave him the opportunity. Or the fact that we could have given each other the opportunity years ago.

I run my hands down my face.

It doesn't matter. Not anymore. This is my life. I'm going to marry Remy. My dad is going to keep the store. I'm going to live in this big beautiful house and stop feeling so damn sorry for myself. Blake will go home—

My heart stutters in my chest.

Blake will go home, I continue to tell myself. He'll go home to his company and to his life that he's worked so hard for. The life he deserves.

My back straightens against the door, a memory hitting me like a ton of bricks.

You shouldn't have to be so sad all the time. You don't deserve it.

Blake deserves happiness. I know that. But...*why don't I?*

I don't give myself a moment more to think about it before I turn around and fling the door open. My feet skid to a stop before they even start, however, when I find the person I'm looking for standing directly in the doorway, his arms raised and braced on either side of the wooden frame.

Blake's head slowly lifts, his longest brown curls falling in his line of sight. Our chests are both rising and falling rapidly and our eyes are blazing pools of teal and brown. My gaze happens to drift to the left and, when I catch sight of something I never expected to see, exposed from between the edge of his tank top and the opening of his dress shirt, I dart forward, grabbing onto Blake's right bicep. He keeps his hand on the doorframe as I twist the upper part of his arm to get a better look. My vision blurs as my lips part.

"You didn't cover it?" I whisper, running my pointer finger over the small plant sprout tattoo I picked out for Blake ten years ago, the only thing

interrupting the intricate tattoo sleeve of flowers and foliage covering the entire upper part of his arm, a solid inch of empty space left around the tiny solitary tattoo to keep it entirely untouched.

“Are you seriously asking me that?” Blake questions, his voice cracking.

I peel my eyes from the tattoo I thought was long gone to look at him. “I just assumed,” I say, motioning towards the sleeve of tattoos wrapping his bicep.

Blake shakes his head, a sad smirk pulling at his lips. “You’re a part of me, Evangeline. You always have been and always will be. You’re etched into my fucking soul. You may as well stay etched into my skin.”

Something clicks. It’s like a piece of the puzzle of my heart that I forgot existed suddenly attaches itself and makes me feel whole once again. My eyes burn, my throat aches, my fingers twitch, and the next thing I know, I’m fisting the front of Blake’s shirt and yanking him forward to me.

Blake reacts instantly, his hands leaving the door frame and moving to wrap around my waist. I give the final tug he needs to be sure, and Blake’s lips crash down on mine, taking control and drawing me in. He spins us away from the door, removing one hand from my waist just long enough to close it, and then I am walking backwards, going anywhere that Blake will guide me.

We are frantic with hunger, lips, tongues, and teeth clashing, releasing a tension that could only be created out of twenty plus years of history. At some point Blake’s dress shirt slides off his shoulders and hits the tile floor, leaving him clad on top in only a tank top, tattoos, and thick bands of muscle. Our hands are everywhere, grabbing and stroking and simply feeling, desperate for any way to draw us closer to one another. The backs of my legs suddenly hit one of the tables and Blake’s body, having nowhere else to go, becomes flush with mine, pressing against me and allowing me to feel every inch of him. Somehow, it’s still not enough. “*Blake,*” I whimper, barely audible. As if our physical connection has allowed for a mental one, Blake seems to read my mind.

“*Closer,*” he begs against my mouth.

It only takes half a second of me nodding fervently before Blake acts, gripping me behind the knees and shoving me up onto the table. I let out a yelp of surprise, but my body is two steps ahead of me, my thighs reflexively spreading to allow Blake closer and my legs wrapping around his hips.

Blake pulls back just slightly, breaking the kiss—*or whatever you’d call what we’re doing*—for the first time. Blake’s lips are as bee-stung and bruised

as I'm sure mine are, his eyes wild. He stares at me for just a second, shaking his head as his hand moves to smooth down my hair. "So beautiful," he says, just before his head dips down and his lips go to my neck.

I let out a gasp, my eyes falling shut as he trails down, pressing hot kisses to every hollow and dip of my neck and collarbone, sending goosebumps prickling across my skin and shivers down my spine. Blake pulls his mouth away, stopping to run his nose along the blue strap of my dress. I feel his fingers digging into my hips, and it sends a rush of heat straight to my core. "This fucking dress," Blake mutters into my shoulder.

That color was made for you.

The dress is fabulous, isn't it? Isn't the color incredible?

Like it was made for her.

Like it was made for me.

The dress.

My eyes slowly open.

The dress I bought for my wedding shower.

Blake begins to kiss his way back up my neck.

My wedding.

"God, Evangeline, I—"

Remy.

I go completely rigid as reality comes crashing back down. The reality of what I'm doing and what it could mean. Blake picks up on my body language immediately, pulling away.

"What's wrong?" he asks, concern heavy in his tone. When I don't respond, he lightly cups my cheek. "Hey, Evangeline? Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

"No," I shake my head, not able to meet his eyes. "No, I just—"

His posture straightens and he drops his hand from my face. "What?" he asks. But he already knows.

Tears well in my eyes as I slowly look up at him, a mixture of pain and frustration etched into his face. "I can't," I whisper.

Blake suddenly lets go of me completely, stepping back abruptly and causing me to slide off the table.

He's angry. And he has every right, but it's just not this easy. It can't be.

"Blake, I—I just—" I sputter.

"Please, don't," Blake says calmly, turning away from me to pick his shirt up off the floor and slide it back on.

“But—”

Blake puts one hand up, cutting me off. “Please, Evangeline, spare me. Just this once.”

“Blake, please,” I beg. “It’s just— It’s not that simple. This isn’t just about me.”

He slowly turns to look at me, his eyes vacant.

“It’s been *five years*,” I say. “I’m in deep, okay? Remy is my fiancé. I made a promise to him. And if it wasn’t for Remy, Dad would have lost his store. Blake, it’s the only thing he has left—”

“He has you, Evangeline. He has Steph. And your father is a grown man. Do you think he’d let his daughter fight his battles for him for one second if he knew that’s what you’ve been doing all this time? Especially if it meant sacrificing your own happiness and freedom?”

I swallow painfully, my eyes and throat officially out of moisture to give. “I made a promise,” I repeat. “I just... I need to think. I need some time. Please.”

Blake lets out a harsh laugh, sounding nothing like the boy I’ve known nearly my whole life. “Yeah,” he nods. “Well, you do that, Evangeline. *Think* all you want. Take all the time in the world.” In the span of a second, the anger in his eyes melts straight to sad disbelief. “We both know it’ll never be enough.”

And, with that, he walks in the house, slamming the door and leaving me alone in the greenhouse with only the sound of the rain against the glass and the slow and painful breaking of my heart.

PRESENT DAY

Remy talks, but it just sounds like a muffled whir in my ears. I'm not hearing a word he says, but it doesn't matter right now. He's still working to close this deal, to buy out this mom-and-pop BBQ restaurant from the Witters, an elderly couple that has lived in Ramer and owned the place for over twenty-five years. Remy's been working them down for the last two weeks and brought me along today to handle the paperwork and logistics once he closed the deal. Not *if*. *When*.

Because he always gets what he wants.

My fingers thrum against the clipboard I'm holding down at my side. I focus in on the light patter, and can't help but associate the sound with rain.

The sound of rain against a greenhouse roof.

I increase the speed of my finger drumming as my heart rate instantly spikes. Blake and I haven't talked since last night. Remy and I haven't talked either.

I was in bed, passed out from every form of exhaustion to the point that I didn't even notice Remy crawling in with me at the early hours of the morning. We had woken up as far apart from one another as we could possibly get in the large king-sized bed, each of us facing our own wall. When I sat up and saw him lying there, the wave of guilt I had expected to drown me only came as a minor punch to the gut compared to the suffocating hollow sadness I felt. I began to reach for him and opened my mouth, no clue what I was about to say to him, but it didn't matter. Remy's alarm on his cell phone went off loudly, instantly shaking him awake. He hopped straight up and out of bed, his arms stretching high over his head. I took in the shape of him and his messy blonde hair.

He really was handsome.

He had started to head straight for the bathroom, then stopped, turning back to me.

“Apple Jacks,” he muttered, walking back to the bed and crawling over it to press a kiss to the top of my head and wrap his arms around me. I felt stiff and wrong in his arms, but I didn't pull away. He leaned back and looked down at me, a grin pulling at the corner of his mouth. “I'm so happy,” he said.

My heart thudded against my chest. “Really?” I asked, my voice cracking.

“So happy,” Remy confirmed, crawling off the bed and back towards the bathroom. “Today's the day.”

My brows scrunched in confusion.

“The day we get Witters BBQ!”

Oh.

A lump settled in my throat as I realized neither that smile or that happiness had anything to do with me.

“Oh, babe, by the way,” Remy called from the bathroom, “I forgot to tell you.”

“Hmm?”

“I talked to Angela yesterday,” he said, referring to his family's accountant. “She said Jacks Hardware's last quarter was the best we've had financially in the last five years.”

My mouth went dry.

The best we've had.

“That's great, babe,” I croaked. But he didn't hear me, the bathroom door closing before I had a chance to respond.

A loud cling sounds, pulling me from my flashback of this morning. I glance down, realizing it was my ring hitting the metal of the clipboard that made the sound. I lift my hand, staring down at the absurdly large diamond, taking in every rainbow sparkling within every facet. The gem seems to reflect the scene in the window directly behind me; the blue of the sky and the green of the tree leaves. That combination swirling together reminds me of a very particular set of eyes and I drop my hand immediately, no longer able to look at the ring as nausea resettles in my stomach.

When I look up again, both Remy and the Witters are staring at me expectantly. “Sorry, what?” I ask, pushing a loose strand of hair behind my

ear.

“I said, time to celebrate,” Remy says, a subtle edge of grit to his tone as he nods towards my tote bag on my shoulder.

“Oh! Yes, absolutely,” I sputter, pulling the bottle of champagne from my bag.

“Well, it seems you already knew what our answer would be,” Mr. Witters says, raising a brow in Remy’s direction.

“No, of course not,” he assures the old man. “But I hoped.”

Lies, I think. He knew he’d win.

He always does.

“I’m just thrilled you made the right choice. You won’t regret this.” Remy looks at me, nodding, as if asking for reassurance. “Right, Annie?”

“Right. Of course,” I mutter.

No regrets whatsoever.

The rest of the morning goes by in a blur. The Witters sign away their business. We drink champagne. Remy talks about remodel plans that I robotically jot down in a notebook. I smile and nod when it feels necessary. I equally yearn to leave this place and dread going home at the same time.

It’s just before noon when we close the front door of the old restaurant, Remy locking it with what are officially his keys. I follow after him to the truck, climbing up in the passenger side. Once both of our doors are closed, Remy holds up his hand to me for a high-five. The smile on his face makes me return the gesture.

“Another one,” he grins.

“Another one for the Van der Michaels,” I nod.

I turn my head to look forward, but Remy’s hand on my arm stops me. “Another one for *us*,” he says.

Us.

Because I’ll be one of them soon. Annie Van der Michael.

Evangeline Van der Michael.

It really sounds so perfect. Like, out of a damn movie *perfect*. Why did so much more about this marriage than my future name seem perfect just a few short weeks ago?

I watch Remy as he drives, both hands on the steering wheel and his hazel eyes glued to the road. His lips move silently, surely rehearsing or replaying a phone call or meeting. I know this because he’s done it as long as we’ve been together. I’ve always thought it was cute; it was one of the many aspects of

his work ethic and drive that I have admired since we've been together. I feel my face slowly melt into frown.

Thinking about it now, I try to pinpoint when exactly it was that I traded my own ambition for simply appreciating someone else's.

I watch Remy the entirety of the short few minutes it takes us to drive home. It's not until we enter the driveway that he finally notices, turning my way and gently squeezing my hand. He looks me up and down once before leaning in and kissing my cheek. He pulls away just slightly, nuzzling into my neck. "He leaves tonight, right?"

"Yes," I swallow. "I need to take him to the airport at six."

"I'd be lying if I said I was sad to see him go."

"Yeah," I breathe. "I had a feeling."

"I get he's your old friend, Apple Jacks, but..."

"But what?" I ask, pulling away so that I can look at him.

His brows crease just slightly. "You can do better," he says.

I simply stare at him, not knowing how to respond to that statement, knowing just how untrue it is.

"I'm just saying," Remy continues, "I don't think it's so bad for people to outgrow each other. You know?"

I swallow. "Yeah," I say. "I think that maybe I do."

At that, Remy gives me a tight smile and hops out of the truck. I follow slowly behind him, glancing at my cell phone as we walk through the front door.

Six hours.

Six hours until I take Blake to the airport for his flight. Why does it seem like so much time yet also so little? There's still so much to be said between us but also nothing more to be said at all.

I mean, really, what is there *to* say? What could *he* say? What could *I* say? No words will change what's happened or where we've found ourselves now. No words will make it okay. No words will turn back the clock and calendar and find us where we could have been so many years earlier. No, that's not how life works. Life simply just *happens*. People change. *Fate breaks*—

My feet skid to a stop in the hallway and I freeze momentarily before I backpedal the three steps it takes to stand in front of the half open doorway. I had an eerie feeling when I walked past it. Something about the room just felt off. Wrong.

Empty.

The door creaks as I push it all the way open, stepping inside of the room that is now even cleaner than it was two and a half weeks ago, as if no life had ever occupied it. The bed is made and perfectly smooth, not a wrinkle to be found. There is not one Dr. Pepper can littering any of the surfaces or a single baseball cap or flannel thrown haphazardly across any furniture. There is no open suitcase sitting on the closet floor.

There is no Blake.

Panic twists in my chest as I spin around the room, as if expecting him to magically appear from behind a curtain or under the bed. I exit the room, nearly jogging as I head for the bathroom he's been using. When I reach it, once again, the door is open and the entire room is spotless. There's not a trace left behind. I try to gather my thoughts as I race down the hallway and towards the door leading to the greenhouse. Maybe I missed something. Maybe he just already packed this morning and set his things aside somewhere that I haven't seen yet. He isn't gone.

He can't be gone.

I push open the door to the greenhouse and the air is completely ripped from my lungs. For two reasons, I instantly feel my knees begin to wobble; the first being that Blake isn't here, the second being that the greenhouse has been fully furnished and looks like something that I couldn't have even come up with in my wildest and most whimsical dreams.

I look up at the ceiling, mouth agape, as I step inside and try to take it all in. The sun shines through the glass panels on the ceiling, illuminating the hanging pots evenly spaced along the upper half of the walls, different types of greenery spilling over the sides of each and dangling down. Strands of ivy fill in all of the leftover available space, swooping down from the ceiling and hanging between each of the pots.

My eyes follow the leaves down to the handmade potting tables that line every wall and create a row down the middle of the space. The stain of the wood matches the original wood making up the walls of the greenhouse and the aging of the actual house perfectly, as if they were plucked straight out of time from a century ago. Every plant or flower I could imagine is planted within the variously shaped and sized pots on the tables, bringing so much color and life to the room that it makes my eyes burn with awe. My gaze travels lastly to the tile flooring, perfectly placed and polished and putting the former cobblestone flooring to shame.

I clutch at my chest as I walk down the aisle between the rows of tables, appreciating each and every plant that I know Blake hand picked out. I reach the end of the room and spin around, hoping he'll just be standing in the doorway waiting to talk my ear off about each and every one of these plants he hand picked out.

He's not.

I know I haven't searched every square inch of the house yet, but I know he's gone. I can feel it in the air. This house that has always felt too big suddenly feels bigger than ever before. It's quiet. So very quiet. I don't know when or how he managed to leave, especially considering what he's done in the greenhouse this morning, but he did it.

Blake's gone.

I pace back and forth within the greenhouse, my hands raising to rest on top of my head as my chest constricts. I don't know that I've ever felt this feeling before. There's only one other time that comes close, but that time, I was the one that walked away. The one that left him.

I realize that at some point I stopped pacing, my hand reaching out to grip one of the tables. It's only when I slowly look up that I realize it was the very table I was sitting on last night. I pull my hand away as if I've been burned, the sensation within my chest honestly not feeling far from it.

I rub my hands down my face, trying to think. As my fingers press into my eyelids, the image of Blake swirls behind them. Every aspect of him. From his backwards baseball cap to his crooked grin to the image of Lake Placid inked into the surface of his forearm.

You're etched into my fucking soul. You may as well stay etched into my skin.

I shake my head, pushing away the memory of last night. He's home. Or at least he'll be there soon. It's where he belongs. Just like I belong here. Things are simpler this way.

I pull my hands from my face. The moment I let my eyes open, my heart drops, something catching my attention right in front of me. I lean forward, pushing apart two of the large pots full of greenery in front of me to reveal the much smaller one tucked and hidden in the corner behind them. This pot is so different from the rest, gray and simple with tufts of white sticking out of the top.

Baby's breath.

I start to reach for the pot but stop myself, looking away to blink the

burning from my eyes. When I turn back to it, however, the gesture that I simply thought was sweet and thoughtful turns to hopeless and devastating as the small object nestled within the flower buds comes into view.

My heart feels like it's in my throat as I reach out two very shaky hands, working carefully to remove it from the flowers unscathed. I brush away the final white petals as I free it, staring down at the Polaroid of me and Blake.

I can't do this with you anymore, Evangeline.

Whatever it is. Or isn't. I can't do it anymore.

It's too damn painful.

My teeth dig hard into my bottom lip, my vision blurring.

If you walk away from me right now, I need you to know that it's entirely your choice.

That if it were up to me, I wouldn't spend another day without you by my side.

I can't look at the photo anymore, turning it over and moving to set it down on the table in front of me. My hand suddenly jerks to a stop as I notice a smear of black on the back of the Polaroid.

What the hell?

I slowly raise the picture to my face to inspect the ink I know was not there before.

***E,
Don't stop believing.
Or dreaming.
Goodbye,
B***

My lips part, hot tears welling in my eyes.

"Apple Jacks?"

I hear Remy calling me from inside the house, but I'm unable to move, much less able to speak.

"Chuck just called! He wants us to drop in on Harry's Bakery today. Where are you?"

More movement from inside. Still no movement from me. My blood feels hot in my face and heavy in my heart.

"Dad says he's three months behind on rent now and thinks we can convince him to sell!"

The door to the greenhouse is pushed open from behind me.

“*Really, where are—* Oh, there you are,” Remy breathes, exasperated, when he catches sight of me. “So, what do you think? Can we head that way now?”

I stay silent, my back to him.

“*Annie?* Did you hear me?”

A single warm tear finally spills over, running down my face.

“Can we talk about this?”

“Yeah, Remy,” I swallow. “We can talk.”

PRESENT DAY

Blake

“License and registration, son.”

“Yeah, Bobby, I know the drill,” I reply, holding one hand in front of my eyes to block the light reflecting off of the man’s gold *Lake Placid Police Department* badge while I use the other hand to dig my wallet from the back pocket of my jeans. I register right away that it feels thinner, the Polaroid no longer stuffed inside of it. I shake my head, pushing the thought away, and pull out my driver’s license. Right as I’m handing it and my registration over to the cop, my mom’s head appears over my shoulder.

“Hi there, Bobby!” she grins, waving at him.

“Hello, Miss Emily,” Bobby nods, taking the information from me.

“I’m so sorry about this,” she pouts. “You know how my Blake Bear is.”

“I sure do, ma’am. Been pulling your boy over for speeding for over a decade now.”

“I always tell him to slow down.”

“Maybe one day,” Bobby replies with a tight smile, handing my license and registration back. “I’ll let ya off with a warning this time, boy. Slow it down,” he says, knocking on the hood of my truck with one knuckle before turning and walking back to his police car.

Bobby gives me a warning *every* time.

“Thank you!” my mom calls after him before I get a chance to respond.

I put the truck in drive and pull slowly back onto the road, waiting until Bobby is no longer in my rear-view mirror before I return to my normal speed.

“Mom, I’m 28 years old,” I say. “I think we can stop with the ‘*Blake Bear*’ now.”

Not two seconds later, I’m being whacked in the arm with a bottle of Dr. Pepper.

“Ow! What the hell, Mom?” I groan, rubbing at my arm.

My mom aggressively drops the bottle of Dr. Pepper back in my cup holder before spinning to look at me.

“Number one,” she says, holding up a finger, “Blake Alexander Di Fazio, I birthed you from my own loins, therefore, I will call you whatever I please until the day I leave this earth.”

“Please never say loins again.”

The Dr. Pepper bottle makes a return, smacking me on top of the head this time.

“Ah! Would you *stop that?*”

“And two,” my mom continues, ignoring my protests. “I’m not finished with our conversation from earlier. Where have you been the last two and a half weeks? And what happened wherever you were? Because you’ve been in a piss-poor mood since the moment you got back.”

“I got back last night. And I’ve only seen you in the last twenty minutes.”

She raises the Dr. Pepper bottle again and I flinch away, holding up my hand. She raises one brow at me. “Where were you, Blake?”

“I told you,” I say, finally relaxing once the bottle is back in the cupholder. “I had a job. Out of state.”

“Where?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Why won’t you tell me?”

I glance at her and immediately look away.

Damn that mother’s intuition.

“South,” I reply, trying to sound as casual as possible.

“South,” she echoes me, her voice flat.

“Yes.”

A few seconds of silence go by before she says, “Blake, look at me.”

“I’m driving.”

“Blake.”

“What?” I ask, turning my head in the opposite direction of her to examine the *very* interesting trees on the side of the road.

Suddenly, fingers wrap around my chin and my mom is yanking my face around. My foot slides off the gas in surprise and I jerk the wheel to the side. “*Jesus, Mom!*” I yell, luckily coming to a stop safely on the side of the road. I shove the gear control into park without looking down at it and try to peek around to make sure there were no witnesses to this ridiculous scene, but I can’t, because my chin is still in my mom’s hand. I try to pull away, but her fingers remain firm. I finally resign, letting out a heavy sigh and looking at her.

Her blue eyes search mine for several seconds. As the time ticks by, the crease between her brows gradually flattens out and her expression slowly softens. I see the moment some sort of realization hits her.

“Annie,” she whispers.

“What?” I question, pulling back and freeing myself from her grasp.

“My God, Blake, what is wrong with you?” she asks, her voice strained.

I shake my head, putting the truck back into drive and getting back on the road. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Blake, I haven’t seen that look in your eye since you came home from the city six years ago,” she frowns. “Annie Jacks. You were with her.”

I run a hand over the top of my baseball cap. “No, Mom. I couldn’t possibly be with her.”

I see her head tilt in my peripheral vision and feel her stare burning into the side of my face. She doesn’t believe a word I’m saying. She still doesn’t, a full minute later when we’re pulling into the parking lot of The Olive Pit.

I take the keys out of the ignition and let out a shaky breath. There’s no point in trying to lie. She’s not gonna let it go. How could she?

“I couldn’t possibly be with her,” I repeat, slowly turning to look at my mom. “Because she’s with someone else. For the rest of her life.”

I push open my door, walking around the front of the truck to open my mom’s door for her. She slowly slides out, pushing her purse up further on her shoulder as we make our way into the restaurant.

“I think you’re leaving out a few key details, hon,” she says, a sad smile on her face.

We sit down at our usual table.

“It doesn’t matter,” I mutter.

“Of course it does,” my mom says, reaching out and grabbing one of my hands. “Tell me everything.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Try me.”

I open the menu. I only look at it for approximately three seconds before I close it. I don’t need to look at the menu. I always get the same thing here. And Mom knows that. She’s eyeing me expectantly when I set the menu back down. We have a stare-off for several long seconds. I tell myself I’m not going to say anything. That I don’t need to say anything. None of it matters now. Talking about it won’t change the past or improve the present. I just have to move on. There’s nothing my mother can do to help me with that. The stare-off continues.

I lose.

I sigh, staring down at the table and picking at my fingernail.

“So, there was this greenhouse,” I begin.

My mom's chair squeaks against the wood floor as she moves closer to hear me.

The floodgates open. Over the next ten minutes, I tell her everything.

We are both silent for a few minutes once I finish, the noise from the now arrived lunch rush filling the space. I've managed to destroy my napkin, straw wrapper, four sugar packets, and one and a half breadsticks in the process of recounting the events of the last few weeks, along with some of the events of the last *twenty years* that my mom never knew about.

It turns out Dad never told her about the night of my birthday. The night he caught us in the rain.

Thanks, old man, I think, smiling to myself.

Mom puts her elbows on the table, raising her laced together fingers to rest her chin on them. She looks at me thoughtfully, slowly shaking her head.

"What?" I ask her.

"That girl loves you, Blake."

I bark out a humorless laugh, looking down at my plate and pushing my Caesar salad around aimlessly with my fork. "No, she doesn't."

"She does."

The few tables of people sitting around us are all having very loud conversations. I try to focus on any of them, desperate for a distraction.

"Well, obviously not enough," I finally reply, knowing she's waiting for it. I hear plates clinking in the kitchen behind us and faintly register the ringing of a bell ahead of us. I continue to pick at my salad, trying to zone out to other noises.

Mom shifts in her seat next to me. "I think you're wrong."

The odd tone of her voice makes me look up at her, my brows pulled together. "Why?"

But she's not looking at me. She doesn't respond, just raising her finger to point forwards. I slowly turn my head, following her direction.

My fork drops onto my plate. Fire burns in my throat. Heat rushes to my neck. My stomach twists in knots. I grind my teeth together, blinking hard as I try to convince myself that the scene in front of me is real.

Just a few feet in front of us, standing in the doorway of the restaurant, is Evangeline, face pink, hair tangled, and panting.

PRESENT DAY

Annie

Blake's eyes land on me, and his fork instantly falls to his plate with a loud clatter, the look on his face penetrating and the sudden stiffness of his posture intimidating. My heart feels like it's about to burst out of my chest, but I walk forward anyways.

I stop about ten feet in front of their table, steeling my spine and pushing my hair from my face. I tear my eyes from Blake for the first time to turn towards Emily, her blue eyes wide.

"Hi, Emily," I say, my voice breathy. "It's great to see you."

"Hi, hon," she replies quietly, her mouth curling up at one side.

I give her a tight smile before turning back to Blake again. His lips keep parting and then pressing firmly back together again. He looks like he has a million thoughts and questions swirling in his eyes, but, if so, he doesn't voice any of them. He just stares at me, knuckles white and emotions unreadable.

"Hi, Blake."

Silence.

"You're probably wondering how I'm here."

His throat bobbing once is Blake's only response.

My teeth go into my bottom lip. He's clearly not going to make this easy on me. And I know I have no right for him to. I'm honestly halfway surprised his soda and salad haven't already been dumped over my head. I take a deep breath, flexing my fingers at my side. He may not be speaking, but he's listening. There's also half a restaurant's worth of people turned our way and listening, but it doesn't matter. Now's my chance. The last one I'm sure I'll ever have. Time to use it before I lose it.

"I took a plane," I blurt. "Well, *obviously* I took a plane. But I guess more importantly than *how* I'm here is *why* I'm here. I promise I'll get that, just... please, bear with me." I pause, giving him a chance to respond.

He doesn't.

"That was both the longest and the shortest plane ride of my life," I continue. "I felt like I was in a time warp. The first hour seemed like an entire day and the last three hours felt like thirty seconds. I had no concept of what was happening because, in all honesty, I sat down in my seat and looked out the window the entire time. All four hours. I sat and I stared and I thought.

Yet still, when we landed, I didn't know what I was about to do— *Actually*, that's not true. I knew *exactly* what I was about to do. I just didn't have the faintest idea of *how* I was going to do it. How I *could* do it.”

Blake's expression remains exactly the same while Emily's eyes just continue to grow wider. So many words dance around my brain. I don't know how to pick which of the words to say next, so I just say them all.

“I got a rental car. The first one I could find. It's a purple PT Cruiser. I didn't even know they made those anymore. I'm pretty sure they don't, actually, but anyways,” I babble, shaking my head. “The second they handed me the keys, I just started driving. Without even thinking about where I was going or what I was doing, I found myself pulling into the driveway of your family's house. I guess it was just muscle memory. Or something more than that. I don't know. It didn't even register until I was walking up your driveway, and nearly at your front door, that you don't live there anymore. Because we're adults. And you have your own house. But I wouldn't know that.”

My throat begins to constrict but I swallow against it. No more of that
Use your words.

“I mean, of course I *knew* it,” I continue. “It was somewhere in my memory bank of too short and too rarely occurring long distance phone conversations we had years ago. But I don't *know* it. Because...I haven't been here in a very long time. Too long of a time. Once I realized, however, I started walking back to my purple rental PT Cruiser, fully intending on driving around and searching every *inch* of this godforsaken town for you until your neighbor—*Mrs. Destino*—walked out of her front door. She told me Mr. Destino passed away. I'm so sorry about that—” My voice cracks. I shake my head, continuing. “Along with a million other things.”

“But, after she told me that, she told me that you had gone to visit your mom at the bookstore. And that you were probably taking her to lunch. I then thanked her and turned away, intending then to go to every *restaurant* in this godforsaken town, until she called my name again and told me you'd probably be at The Olive Pit. That you always take your mom to lunch here. Every Monday for nearly the last five years. And that made me smile. But it also made me want to cry because, again, I don't know that. And I *should* know that. I didn't get a chance to do either though, because Mrs. Destino distracted me. She told me good luck. And she told me she was telling me that because she knew I was definitely going to be needing it, based on the

way you nearly drove her mailbox over this morning.”

Blake’s mouth twitches slightly and Emily’s shocked gaze shifts to her son for one moment before returning back to me.

“I apologized on your behalf, don’t worry,” I say. “But she was right. I knew I needed her luck. I still know that.” I roll my lips into my mouth, taking the slightest step forward.

“Because I’m an idiot, Blake,” I whisper. “An absolute freaking idiot that’s been running for so long. Running from my hometown. Running from what my life actually was towards an idea of what I thought I wanted it to be. What I thought it *should* be. Running from my real happiness towards a version of that happiness I made up in my head and thought would somehow be better. Running towards my dreams and then running away from them once they weren’t exactly what I thought they would be. Running from my problems. Running from my insecurities. Running from my fears. Running from life. Running from fate.” Blake’s eyes snap back into focus, centering on my face. “...Running from you.”

“I don’t want to run anymore, Blake,” I breathe, tears clouding my vision as I worry at my bottom lip. “I won’t. I know now. I know that I don’t have control over my life. I know that no matter what I prepare for or hope for, the inevitable will happen. That no amount of planning or overthinking can combat that. And that’s okay. I’m not scared anymore.”

I close my eyes, blowing a deep breath out of my nose before opening them again.

“You asked me why you were in Alabama...”

Blake’s brows pull together. My head shakes, a single tear spilling over. I quickly swipe it away, carrying on.

“It wasn’t just to fix a greenhouse. No, it was because I thought I was done. Everything was all set. Everything in my life was finally okay. Perfectly *okay*. I’d checked all of my pretty little boxes. I had a college education. I had a job. I had a house. I had a semblance of a family. Friends that cared about me. A fiancé that loved me...” I trail off, and Blake’s eyes fall to the floor.

“And then I found your t-shirt.”

Blake visibly stiffens, his jaw clenching.

“And that singular piece of fabric, wadded up at the bottom of a cardboard box, covered in dust and reeking of mildew—” I break off, swallowing hard. “That piece of fabric got more emotion out of me in one

second than I had felt in the last five years.”

Through my cloudy vision, I see Blake slowly lift his head to look at me.

“And I’m pretty sure Remy knew that,” I gulp. “Which is why he wasn’t all that shocked when I ended things between us.” Blake’s gaze flicks down to my bare ring finger, the muscles in his neck tensing. “*Angry?* Yes. *Angry* that this will affect his business life. *Annoyed* that he’ll have to sort that out? Yes. *Aggravated* that this won’t look good for his family? Yes. But not shocked. Not sad. Not *devastated*. Not in the way I was when I came home yesterday and realized you were gone.”

Blake’s hands slide from the table into his lap, his fists clenching.

“I really do love that greenhouse, Blake,” I breathe, “...but not nearly as much as I love you.”

When Blake remains frozen and unresponsive after several seconds, I hang my head and let my eyes fall shut. If I’m losing him, I’m not letting him go without everything I have to give.

“Blake,” I continue, “I know we don’t have control over our lives, but we do still have control over our choices. And, in this moment, in this *life*...I choose *you*. You and every annoyingly perfect thing that comes with you. I love you, Blake Di Fazio. I have loved you with every fucking fiber of my heart and soul for as long as I can remember. I know I don’t deserve you, and you still have your choice too, but—”

My eyes open fully, suddenly registering movement ahead. I look up and stumble back a step when I see that Blake has risen from his chair and is storming straight for me, his eyes wild.

“What are you doing?” I ask, just as Blake reaches me.

“Shut up,” he says, grabbing my face in both of his hands and covering my surprised gasp with the weight of his lips crushing down on mine.

My wide eyes immediately fall closed, my arms wrapping around Blake’s neck to steady myself. Though his charge may have been aggressive, his kiss is so soft, like he’s afraid he might break me.

Blake pulls back gently, just enough to look at me, grazing my nose with his. “I love you too, Evangeline.”

“Really?” I breathe.

He nods slowly, my favorite smile making an appearance. “You used some really good words,” he says.

“Well, it’s about damn time.”

I freeze in place at the sound of a very familiar voice behind me. My

knees shake as I turn around, my vision clouding all over again. I let out a chuckle of disbelief when I see who's standing in the doorway, hands on her hips. "Grammy?"

She shakes her head at me, a grin on her face, as Blake releases me and I jog forward, throwing my arms around her. "What are you doing here?" I ask her in disbelief.

"I live here, Annie. I'm getting take-out," Grammy says. "The better question would be, what are *you* doing here? But I think I can see the answer to that right in front of me." She pulls back, taking my hands in hers and giving me a wink. "Took you kids long enough."

"Yeah..." I chuckle. "It's a long story."

"Those are always the best," she smiles, giving my hands a squeeze before dropping them. "Now, I'll get out of your way. You'll swing by and see me later?"

"Sure," I nod.

"Both of you?" she asks, leaning around me to see Blake.

"Yes, ma'am," Blake grins sheepishly.

Grammy grabs her bag of take-out from the counter and sends us a wave as she walks out the door.

I turn back to Blake, rubbing my palms on my jeans, my stomach filled to the brim with butterflies.

"Hey," he whispers.

"Hey," I whisper back.

He smiles, grabbing me by the waist and pulling me to him. I wrap my arms around his back, settling into his chest. "Do you really mean it?" he asks into my neck. "Because you need to mean it. Because there's no way I'm letting you go now."

"I mean it," I confirm. "And you better mean it too. Because you couldn't get rid of me now if you tried."

Blake laughs, pulling me back from his chest just enough to press a kiss to my lips.

"It's too bad, you know," he says.

"What do you mean?" I ask, my brows furrowing.

"I built you such a kick-ass greenhouse."

Laughter shakes my chest. "You really did."

"This really sucks," he deadpans.

"Yeah, it does."

“Such a waste.”

“Wanna call it off?” I ask.

“Don’t even try it, Jacks,” Blake grins, shaking his head. He starts to lean in again, but the sudden appearance of Emily clearing her throat at our side brings us back to reality. I push Blake away, my cheeks reddening.

“Hi,” she says, lips upturned. “I need to show you something, Blake. Would you two come with me?”

PRESENT DAY

Blake

I turn off my truck, reluctantly detangling Evangeline from around me, kissing her one last time before I open the door of my truck and step out onto the pavement. The time it takes to walk around the front of my truck to the passenger side already feels like too long apart, my fingers itching to touch her again by the time I'm opening the door to let her out. We left her purple rental PT Cruiser back at The Olive Pit. We can get it later. It doesn't matter right now. All that matters is this.

I really do love that greenhouse, Blake...but not nearly as much as I love you.

I love you, Blake Di Fazio.

In this moment, in this life...I choose you.

I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw Evangeline Jacks standing in the doorway of The Olive Pit in Lake Placid in the middle of the day on a Monday. But I didn't need to believe my eyes. Because she told my ears everything they needed to know. Everything they've been dying to know for so long. It was like something clicked into place the moment she uttered the words. Like breath suddenly reentered my lungs after years without. Like life just suddenly made sense again. Whatever the feeling, I'm bottling it up and keeping it to myself forever. Just like her.

The truck door opens, revealing a smiling Evangeline, her brown eyes shining and fixed on me, and my heart damn near bursts all over again. I take her hand, helping her down, and we make our way to the front door of the house. My mom has already let herself in and is waiting for us in the foyer when we walk in, wringing her hands and fidgeting in a way that's very unlike her. I haven't got the faintest clue what it is she needs to show me, but it must be important given her urgency and the way she's acting.

"What is it, Mom?" I ask her.

She smiles tightly, motioning with her head down the hallway. "Just follow me," she says, turning and walking that way.

I start to follow after her but am pulled back by Evangeline, planted in place and her hand still in mine. "I'll wait here," she says. "You go." I nod in agreement and she gives my hand a squeeze before letting it fall, giving me a reassuring smile as I turn away.

I catch my mom just turning the corner at the end of the hall. Though she

hasn't said anything, I just know in my gut what room I'll find her in. I stop in front of the barely cracked door, taking a deep breath before I push it open for the first time in nearly a decade.

My mom stands inside of my dad's office, arms crossed and facing the bookshelves. When I take a few more hesitant steps inside, I see she's looking at an old framed picture of Dad, her, and me. I swallow hard when I see it, tearing my gaze away to look around the rest of the shelves. They've remained entirely the same all these years, just like the rest of the office, aside from the handful of things I may have smashed in a moment of weakness. But we don't need to talk about that.

"He'd be so proud of you, you know?" Mom whispers, bringing my attention back to her.

I let out a sigh, moving to stand next to my mom. "There's no way to know that," I breathe. "But I hope so."

"You don't have to hope," Mom says, turning to me. "I'm sure of it."

"Why?" I question

Mom presses her lips together, blinking hard. "You know how Annie talked about running away? Running from life?"

I nod, my brows pulling together.

"That's the opposite of what your father did," she says, shaking her head. "He sprinted *towards* life. He *owned* life. He took every single minute of it in stride and never missed an opportunity to make the most out of every second of it. He knew what he wanted and he took it. Made it his own."

My tongue goes into the side of my cheek, but I continue to look at her despite the emotion stinging the backs of my eyes. She's right. She couldn't be more right.

"You've grown up to be just like him," she whispers. My spine steels as her face splits into a smile. "You've worked so hard to get to where you are, hon. You're passionate and talented and gracious and so, so strong. You see people for who they truly are and yearn for their success and happiness as much as your own. You take opportunities when they present themselves but know when to remain humble and content. You're wise far beyond your years and know a good thing when you see it. And know when not to let it go." She takes a step closer, resting her hand on my shoulder. "He'd be so proud of you," she repeats.

I shake my head and moisture clouds my vision, forcing me to raise a hand to wipe my eyes. I let out a chuckle. "Is this what you wanted to show

me?” I ask her. “That you can make a grown ass man cry?”

Mom chuckles, swiping at her own tears. “You may be a grown ass man on the outside, but you’re still my boy.” She wraps her arms around me in a hug, adding, “Always my little Blake Bear.”

“Okay, *no*,” I laugh pulling away from her.

Both of our shoulders shake with laughter and eyes well with tears. After a few moments, Mom lets out a sigh. “As fun as the bragging rights may be of making you cry, that’s not what I wanted to show you.”

“Oh,” I respond. “What, then?”

Mom steps away from me, slowly walking behind my dad’s desk and bending down and out of view. When I follow behind her, I see her crouched down in front of dad’s old safe. Dad always said he just kept his ‘*emergency gun*’ in there. Though I questioned how useful a gun you had to run into another room of the house and pry out of a safe with an elaborate code might be in an emergency, I never called him on it.

After several turns of the dial and a code entered on a keypad, Mom has the safe open and is digging around inside of it, the contents not visible. After a few seconds, she pulls something out, examining it behind the door.

“Ah, here we go,” she says, standing up. As she does so, I see she’s holding a simple white envelope in her hands. “Here,” she says, holding it out to me, her hand noticeably shaking.

“What is this?” I ask.

“Just open it.”

I slowly reach for the envelope, seeing its edges torn as I take it from her. “It’s already been opened,” I say.

“Open it anyways.”

I pull my gaze from my mom’s wide blue eyes, letting it fall down to the envelope. I see that it’s addressed to me and has a stamped date of earlier this month. Confused, I take a step forward, peeking around and into the safe, seeing stacks of other envelopes on the top shelf that look exactly like this one.

“Just open it, Blake,” my mom pleads.

I stand back up straight, turning the envelope over and pulling out the single sheet of paper inside. I become even more confused as the paper looks to be some sort of legal document with my name at the top and lots of numbers covering it. I scan the paper once and then do a double take when I see the words *Current Balance*, my mouth falling open.

My name.

With lots of numbers.

Lots of zeros.

Next to my name.

“Mom, wh—what is this?” I croak, my throat dry.

Her lips pull into a smile, her eyes shining. “Your Dad may never have won the jackpot planning the lottery, but he won some. A few correct numbers here, a bonus prize there. Over time, with him playing every single week for over two decades, it all added up.” She taps the edge of the paper I’m white-knuckling in my hands. “He invested every penny of it and never touched it, letting it gain interest and continue to grow.” She drags her finger down the paper, stopping at the current balance, and then pointing to where it says my name. “He invested it all. In your name.”

The air feels like it leaves my lungs all at once and I have to place a hand on the desk for support. I’ve never seen this much money in my life. *Hell*, I never thought I’d see this amount of money throughout the *rest* of my life.

Everyone poked fun at Dad for playing the lottery every week, myself included. *Kyle Di Fazio: financial advisor with a gambling addiction*. It never made sense, but I just learned to accept it. It was one of his many quirks. One of the many ways he *ran towards life*. It never made sense, but it does now. It makes so much sense.

“This—” I stammer. “This is really mine?” I ask, dumbfounded.

“It is,” Mom smiles. “He always said we’d just know when it was the right time to give it to you. I—I wish that he was here to see that it’s the right time for himself,” she snuffles. “But it doesn’t matter. I know he’d agree. You’re ready. You’ve earned it.”

My jaw clenches, looking down at the paper again. I’ve read the number over and over, but it still doesn’t seem real. I don’t think it ever will. I silently curse myself for ever being angry with my father. For ever thinking he was even remotely selfish or cared for anything in the world more than he cared for me and my mom.

“Mom, I can’t. You should take this—”

“I have all I could ever need, Blake,” she cuts me off. “It’s yours. He wanted you to have it. *We* wanted you to have it.”

I swallow against the tightness of my throat, staring once more at the glaring number. “What do I do with it?” I whisper.

“Whatever you want,” Mom says. “Spend it. Save it. Invest it elsewhere.

Let it keep growing. Buy a house with it. Donate it. Travel the world with it. But if you ask me,” she pauses, taking a step forward and folding the paper in my hands so that I’m forced to look at her, “I’d start with building that girl a new greenhouse.”

I roll my lips into my mouth, suppressing a smile. “She really loved that greenhouse,” I nod.

“But not nearly as much as she loves you,” Mom says, winking at me. “Now, go get her,” she says, shooing me. “You two have a lot of time to make up for.”

I chuckle as I follow her orders, heading for the door. I pause when I reach it, however, turning back to face my mom. “Thank you,” I say. “He’d be proud of you too, Mom.”

I let the door fall shut, my smiling and teary-eyed mom fading from view as I head back down the hallway. I fold the paper up, shoving it into my back pocket, smiling the whole way to the foyer. The smile instantly falls, however, when I reach the foyer and find it empty.

No Evangeline to be found.

My heart slams painfully against my chest, my stomach twisting. I start to make a run for the front door when a voice stops me.

“Hey, up here.”

My shoulders instantly relax at the sound of her voice. I drop my head, shaking it with a chuckle, catching my breath. I turn around to see Evangeline at the top of the stairs, poking her head out from around the corner.

“You okay?” she asks me as I reach the top of the steps.

“Yeah, fine,” I say, accepting her outstretched hand and following her to my childhood bedroom, another room that’s remained exactly the same.

She raises one brow at me as we enter, clearly not believing me.

“I, uh, just,” I stammer. “I didn’t see you.”

Realization hits her, and she tilts her head. “You thought you could get rid of me that easily, Di Fazio?”

I stick out my leg backwards, lightly pushing the door with my shoe until it clicks closed. “I don’t know, Jacks. If I’m honest, I’m just still trying to figure out if I’m awake or still dreaming.”

The humor fades from Evangeline’s face as she steps forward, placing her hands on my chest. “You’re awake,” she says. “And I meant what I said about you not being able to get rid of me now even if you tried. I’m not going anywhere, Blake. Never again. I promise.”

I wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her closer. “And I won’t let you. Never again. I promise.”

Evangeline smiles, fisting my shirt and pulling my face down to hers. She kisses me for just a moment before pulling back suddenly, her brow furrowed. “What did your mom have to show you?” she asks.

“I’ll tell you everything,” I say, my lips pulling into a smirk. “But first, we have some catching up to do.” I squat down, scooping her up from behind her thighs. She lets out a surprised laugh, wrapping her legs around my waist as I walk her over to the bed. It squeaks loudly in protest as I toss her on top of it and crawl on top of her.

“This is so sexy,” Evangeline deadpans in response to the noisy bed.

“Shut up,” I tell her, covering my lips with hers.

“Blake, we’re gonna get caught,” she mumbles against my lips.

“Evangeline, we’re nearly thirty years old.”

She chuckles, kissing me once more. “I guess you’re right,” she says. “Fuck it.”

“*Language*, Evangeline,” I mutter into her neck as I drag my mouth down it.

“Shut up,” she pants, knocking my baseball cap off my head and threading her fingers into my hair, sending goosebumps down my spine, “and show me all the things you’re capable of nowadays.”

My fingers dig into her hips, heat rushing through me at the way she threw my earlier words and their intentions right back at me. I drop my head, pressing my lips to the small tattoo on her right inner arm. “Yes, ma’am,” I say, giving her everything she deserves.

Seconds turn to minutes and minutes turn to hours. Clothes hit the floor, heat fills the air, and neither of us know where one of us begins and the other ends. It doesn’t matter anymore. We’re one. Just like we were always meant to be. Like we’ll stay forever.

Eventually, we lay still, our breaths evening and skin cooling. Evangeline lifts her head from my chest, her golden brown eyes meeting mine. “Hi,” she whispers, cheeks flushed and grinning.

She’s never looked more beautiful.

“Hi there,” I reply.

“So.”

“So,” I echo her.

“What now, Di Fazio?” Evangeline asks.

“Whatever we want.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” she replies. She stares at me for several seconds, her eyes searching my face.

“Words,” I whisper. Her brows raise. “I know you know how to use them. You just used plenty—”

I’m cut off by her swatting my chest. “Shut up,” she cries, breaking off into laughter.

“Out with it,” I push.

“I was just thinking—”

“Oh no—”

“I was just *thinking*,” she carries on, ignoring my remarks, “...that...I want *you*.”

My chest warms as a smile comes to my face. “You have me,” I say.

Evangeline bites her bottom lip, containing her own grin. “Then I guess we’ll just figure the rest out.”

I sweep her hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear.

“We’re going to get everything we want in life, Evangeline. I’m sure of it.”

EPILOGUE

SEVEN YEARS LATER

Annie

“C ’mon, Jacks, look alive!”

I turn to look over my shoulder just as I reach the top step of the porch, a smile instantly spreading across my face at the sight behind me.

“Jackson, really. Let’s just make it inside and then you can finish your coloring, dude,” Blake says, holding his hand out. The sunlight glints off of the silver band on his ring finger, and I can’t help but look down at my own. This ring is much smaller than the one I previously wore, and so much more *me*. It’s a modest diamond cushioned in a silver band resembling a twisted vine; nestled within it are leaves made of the most specific shade of aquamarine gemstone. I think back to the night Blake gave it to me. When I whispered through tears how beautiful the stones were. *Like they were made for you*, his response had been.

“But I’m almost done!” Jackson calls back as he approaches Blake, stumbling over his short legs as he tries to shade in his coloring book while walking. I don’t miss the way one of his eyes shuts and his tongue pokes out of the corner of his mouth in concentration.

Like father, like son.

“Jacks, baby, listen to Daddy,” I say, hiding a chuckle, as I knock on the door.

“Hey, I’m *four*! I’m not a baby!” Jackson grumbles, still not taking his eyes off his coloring page.

“Yeah, listen to Mommy and listen to Daddy, *big kid*.” Before Jackson has a chance to respond, Blake scoops him up off the ground and starts tickling him. The mixture of his high-pitched squeals and Blake’s low-belly laugh are like music to my ears. I only tear my gaze away from them when I hear the front door open.

“Well, hey there, rat!” Leah cries, pulling me into a hug. “Ramer has missed you.”

“Believe it or not, I think I’ve missed it a little, too,” I say as we pull back. “Just a little though.”

“Uh huh,” she nods. “Can’t say I blame you.” Her eyes focus behind me as Blake and Jackson approach. “Hey, little Jacks!” she smiles, mussing Jackson’s light brown curls.

“Big Jacks,” Blake corrects her out of the corner of his mouth, shaking his

head as he leans in for Leah to hug both him and Jacks at the same time.

“Oh, right, of course. How could I?” Leah plays along as she leads us into the house.

Blake sets Jacks down and he immediately makes a beeline for the coffee table in the living room, plopping down on his bottom to continue shading in his pirate themed coloring book.

“Hubs is in the garage if you care to join him, Blake,” Leah says. “Or you can sip mimosas with us and talk about glitter.”

“Very tempting offer, but I think I’ll join *hubs*,” Blake chuckles, pressing a kiss to the top of my head before he makes his way to the garage.

Leah has been married for five years and has not called her husband by his real name since the moment they signed the papers; he is exclusively *hubs* now. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, seeing as *rat* has been sticking over Annie for over thirty years now.

“*Glitter? Really?*” I question, shaking my head.

“Hey, anything to get a little alone time with my rat,” Leah winks, pouring champagne into our glasses. “So, how’s work? How’s *life*?”

I let out a heavy sigh, but it ends with a smile. It’s not a sigh of stress or sadness, but one of true bliss and happiness.

After I tracked Blake down in Lake Placid and was finally honest with him (*and myself*), everything else just sorta...fell into place. Emily’s news of the investment fund Kyle left behind for Blake was the last thing either of us could have expected. Though the thought hadn’t even crossed my mind, nor would I have ever asked it of him, Blake was adamant about the first use of the large sum of money left in his name: he wanted to buy Jacks Hardware out from the Van der Michaels. I think my heart nearly burst at that moment. *God, I loved him.* To my surprise, Remy and his family didn’t even put up much of a fight when we made the proposal. It turns out the blow I had made to their pride by the gossip of me leaving Remy a month before our wedding was worth more to them than the value of the store. So, they took the money and ran, and Blake and I became 50/50 partners with my dad. I’ll never forget the look on his face when I told him. *You said we’d figure it out, Dad,* I had told him. *We always do,* he had replied, hugging Blake and me tightly. He held us close as he looked up at the ceiling. *Thanks, brother,* he muttered, just barely audible. *You son of a bitch.*

Though we were partners financially, my dad didn’t truly need us on a daily basis at the store. Blake, however, did still have a business that very

much did need him present back in Lake Placid. Di Fazio Landscaping & Design was just as much his baby as Jacks Hardware was my dad's, and I'd never ask him to give it up. I happily agreed to move to Lake Placid with Blake, promising dad that I would help him out with bookkeeping and any other administrative things I could from afar. Though Blake loved the idea of having me in Lake Placid and knew he never wanted to be apart again, he had one condition: I had to have my own baby as well. My own *dream*. He knew me well enough to know I needed work and passion to thrive, and he wasn't willing to let me give that up. So, I looked into opportunities and, after a late night phone call with Riya, found the most absurdly perfect solution.

Briar & Brooks had an associate marketing consultant position open. Upon reviewing the job description, two lines immediately stuck out to me: *remote work optional* and *occasional travel required*. I nearly screamed when I saw it. It was perfect. I could live in Lake Placid with Blake and work from home while taking the occasional work trip to see all the cities and meet all of the new people that I always dreamed of. I thought it surely must be too good to be true, but I didn't even have to go to the second round of interviews before I got the role. It turns out that some people on the hiring board still remembered my presentation from the conference all those years ago and knew they had to have me.

So, we did it. Blake and I did it all. I worked my job I loved during the day while helping my dad over video call in the evenings as needed. Blake kept up and continued to grow his landscaping business as a household name in Lake Placid, coming home covered in dirt and sweeping me off my feet every single night. I would occasionally take business trips, bringing Blake along with me if it was a weekend or he could take time off (*which was a little easier when you were your own boss*). A few times a year, we would take somewhat grander vacations, Blake determined to show me every city skyline the world had to offer. It was nearly a year to the date after I tracked him down at The Olive Pit that we stood at possibly the most incredible lookout point I'd ever seen, in Sydney, Australia, that Blake got down on one knee, asking me if I'd keep doing this with him forever. It was the easiest yes I'd ever said. The easiest decision I'd ever made. Not a second of thinking required.

In short, life was good.

Though we had more money from Kyle than either of us would ever need, we chose to live modestly. As weird as it may sound, we both loved

working. We both love what we do. There was no sense in spending the money when it wasn't needed. That decision was even more solidified just after our first wedding anniversary, when those two little red lines appeared on that white stick. *You're giving me a baby, Jacks?* Blake had breathed, falling to his knees and wrapping his arms around my waist to pull his belly against his face, kissing it. *Oh my God, we're having a baby, Jacks!* I was in such shock that all I could do was nod and laugh, mumbling *Baby Jacks* over and over like a lunatic. It stuck.

Baby Jacks.

Jackson was the reason we lived modestly. That money was for him. And maybe for his future brother or sister as well. We haven't gotten there yet, though. One step at a time.

I often think about how the moment my life just began to go right was the moment I stopped planning it or thinking about it and just let it happen. The irony attempts to slap me in the face daily, and I let it. I don't care. I'm so happy. *We're so happy.* I couldn't ask for anything more.

"It's really, really good," I finally say, answering Leah's question.

"I'm so happy for you," she says genuinely, smiling and placing her hand on top of mine.

"How about you—"

"*Mommy!*" A sweet squeaky voice cuts me off, causing both Leah and I to turn in its direction. "I'm going outside! Be back in— *Hey! Who are you?*"

The little girl skids to a stop right in front of the coffee table, directly across from Jackson. He looks up at her slowly, his green eyes peering through his curls. "Jacks," he says quickly, before immediately returning to his coloring book.

My feet move before I can stop them, and I'm slowly drifting to stand behind the couch, watching the scene. I vaguely register Blake in my peripheral vision, walking back inside from the garage and heading for the fridge.

"Callie, this is Jackson Di Fazio. Aunt Annie and Uncle Blake's son. Do you remember meeting them all last year?" Leah asks her four-year-old daughter from her same spot in the kitchen.

"No," Callie says, putting her hands on her hips. So sassy.

Like mother, like daughter.

"What are you doing?" Callie asks, taking a step closer to Jacks.

"Coloring," Jacks replies flatly, far too focused on shading in the feathers

on a parrot to give Callie the time of day. This would probably be a good parenting moment, but I seem to be frozen in place.

“What are you coloring?” Callie asks, scrunching her nose as she leans down to look at the page.

“Pirates,” Jacks replies. Finally, he looks up at her. “Do you want one?” he asks, holding up the book and flipping through the pages to show her the options.

“Mmm...No, thanks,” Callie replies.

Jacks shrugs his shoulders in response, flipping back to the page he was on and continuing to color.

“Wanna go outside?” she asks him.

“No. I’m coloring.”

“But we can go hunt for buried treasure! Instead of just coloring pirates, you could be a pirate for real!”

Jacks brows scrunch together as he looks at Callie. “Pirates aren’t real.”

“Sure they are!” Callie says, throwing her hands in the air.

“No, they aren’t,” Jacks insists.

Callie plops down on her knees suddenly, leaning forward towards Jacks. “Yes they *ARRR, Matey!*” she growls, motioning her hand like a hook.

Her and Jacks both stare at each other blankly for several seconds before they both burst out in giggles.

“You’re weird,” Jacks says.

Callie scoffs. “No, *you!*”

My mouth falls open at the same moment a hand claps my shoulder. I flinch, turning to see Blake holding two beers. “Don’t overthink it,” he says, untwisting the cap of one bottle and handing it to me.

“*I’m not!*” I whisper-shout.

“Uh huh,” Blake says, tilting his head at me, his lips pulled into a smirk. “Well, don’t bother. If history’s told us anything, we won’t have any control over it anyways.”

I glance over my shoulder to see Jacks following Callie out the front door, plastic toy treasure chest in tow. I swallow hard, blinking away the odd burning sensation in my eyes and rubbing at the wave of nostalgia swirling in my chest.

“I know,” I breathe, turning back to Blake. “And that’s okay.” I hold out my beer bottle to my husband. “Let’s leave it to fate?”

Blake clinks his bottle to mine, then presses a kiss to my lips.

“To fate.”

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Being a lifelong reader and longtime video creator, Nikki decided to combine the best of both worlds, creating her own book YouTube Channel, “Nikki’s Book Nook”, where she has been able to connect with fellow lovers of books from all over the world.

When Nikki isn’t writing or reading, you can find her snuggling with her two cat children, Draco and Kiwi, dancing and singing ridiculously in private (or just somewhat less ridiculously in public) to Harry Styles, or traveling to literally whatever

destination is offering a flight deal that week.

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