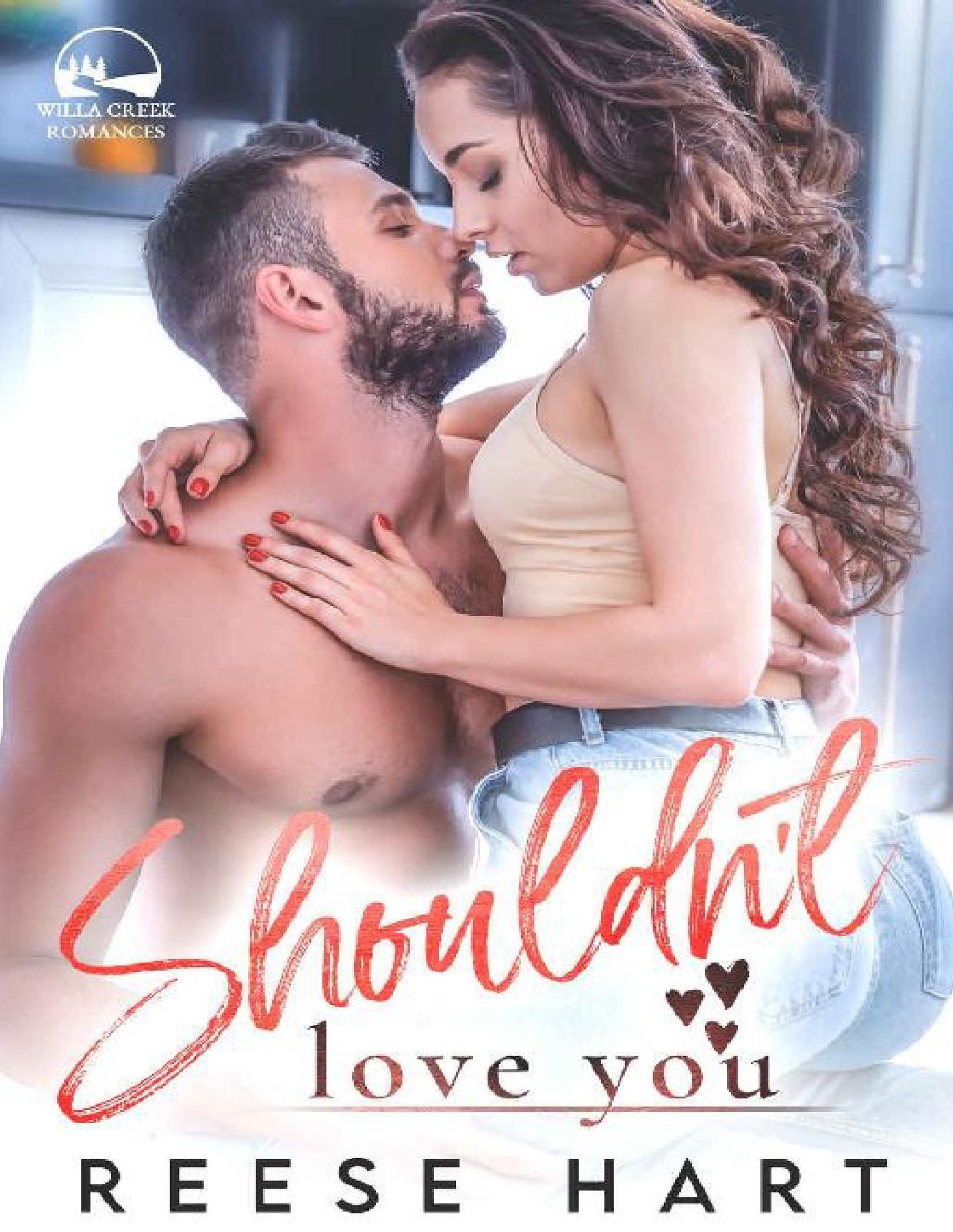




WILLA CREEK
ROMANCES



Shouldn't
love you

REESE HART

SHOULDN'T LOVE YOU

WILLA CREEK ROMANCES

REESE HART



CONTENTS

About the Book

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Epilogue

Finding You Again

Finding You Again

Finding You Again

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are fictitious or have been used fictitiously, and are not to be construed as real in any way. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales, or organizations is entirely coincidental.

On a more personal note, don't copy or pirate my book. I worked hard on this and I love what I do. Respect an author.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Dana is perfect.

I want to love her in public.

And do ungodly things to her in private.

Just one problem.

She's my best friend's little sister.

He's been protecting her all her life.

It's a job he takes seriously, and I get it.

She's soft. Sweet. Beautiful.

I want her. No, I need her.

Because what I feel for Dana is overpowering.

Imposing.

And merciless.

Her brother's made things clear.

He's told me everything he has is mine.

Everything except Dana.

But what he says doesn't matter.

Because Dana, she's meant to be mine.

Not just for a week or a month.

This is a forever type of love.

—For Emely,

Thank you for being such a great friend.

CHAPTER ONE



The sun was shining perfectly over Shaver's Pond as Laura, and I leaned back on the picnic blanket, trying to soak up the warmth on this overcast day. This was my favorite spot in all of Willa Creek, and I stole an hour or two here as often as I could just to decompress and spend some time thinking.

"You're telling me there's no one in Willa Creek you're interested in?" Laura asked, holding out a bag of chocolate chip cookies towards me. I took one as I rolled my eyes at her.

"You mean the same people I've known since high school?" I asked.

"Come on, Dana," Laura said, bumping her shoulder into mine. "You can't keep living like a nun! It's not good for you."

"Tell that to Randy," I said under my breath, though I instantly regretted it.

"What?" Laura asked, her eyes going wide. "What does that mean?"

"Never mind," I said. I picked up the Nikon D5 camera that hung around my neck and tried to frame up a shot across the pond, hoping Laura would drop the conversation.

"What does Randy have to do with who you are crushing on?" Laura asked.

I knew she would only keep pressing me. Laura worked at Old Town Flower Shop, but she might as well have been paid to dig up dirt on every resident of Willa Creek. She certainly had a way of opening people up and unraveling all of their secrets. Or at least pressing until they couldn't keep quiet anymore.

With a sigh, I brought the camera down from my face and turned towards her.

"You know how he is," I said, imagining my brother back at the newspaper office right about now, checking his watch and wondering where I was.

"I know how he used to be," Laura said. "But that was high school. You can't tell me he's still controlling your love life."

"As you so kindly reminded me, I don't have a love life," I told her, forcing a smile. This conversation was getting a bit too painful, and I wanted to move on.

"Dana, you are twenty-four years old."

"And?" I asked.

"Which means you're an adult. You don't need your big brother to tell you whether or not you can go on a date. Is that what's stopping you?"

"It's complicated," I said, thinking of the house I shared with my brother and my

father. "You know how protective he is. Ever since my mom passed."

"But that was almost twenty years ago," Laura said.

"I know. But then the accident—it was like it gave him another reason to watch out for me. He's trying to do what's best."

"By being your jailer? Come on, Dana. It's not cool. You have to see that."

I shrugged. My relationship with Randy was complicated. Sometimes I wondered if his controlling behavior, his obsession with where I was at every minute, and even his comments about what I was wearing, had gone too far. But another part of me said that he had been looking out for me since he was nine years old. He was just overprotective.

"Okay, I wasn't going to bring this up," Laura said, "But I am starting to wonder if Randy's creepy obsession with you is starting to branch out to others. Me, particularly."

"Oh no," I said, dreading what Laura was about to tell me. "He was at the flower shop again?"

"Twice this morning!" Laura said. "And it's not because he likes flowers."

"But you told him you are not interested," I said, feeling embarrassed for Randy and his hopeless attempts to take Laura on a date.

"I've told him many times. That's what I mean, Dana. It's getting creepy. It's like in-between going to the bank and getting coffee, he just forgets every interaction he and I have ever had!"

"God, I'm sorry," I said, imagining just how Randy would lean against the counter and try to take Laura's hand. "Do you want me to say something to him?"

"Definitely not," Laura laughed. "You and your brother have bigger issues to deal with. Let's focus on getting you laid!"

I felt my whole face go red at Laura's words, but thankfully she was distracted by another cookie. She offered me one, but I refused, hiding my face by starting to pack up my lunch things. It would be time to head back to The Willa Creek Journal soon, the newspaper my father owned where Randy and I worked.

"One battle at a time," I said, finding my composure again. "Maybe if I get Randy to agree that I'm ready to open the dance studio, he will start to loosen the reins a little bit."

"Again, not something you need his permission for."

A dancer and cheerleader in high school, I had wanted to open my own dance studio for as long as I could remember. I had dreamt about it with my best friend Crissy from the time we were middle schoolers. And after saving everything I earned for the past two years, I had a good amount of money saved. I had even gone so far as to look at a few buildings and tour some rental properties. I was just waiting for the courage to talk to Randy about it.

I looked down at my watch to see the minute hand dangerously hovering over the six. My lunch break was over, and I was still at the pond a good five minutes away.

"I have to run," I said, quickly gathering up my things and shoving them into my bag. With a brief goodbye to Laura, I took off, sprinting along the pond with one hand held tight to the camera bouncing against my chest.

Randy was going to kill me. He would make an example of me in front of the whole

office, and I wasn't up for public humiliation today. I ran the entire way, barely stopping for a breath until I was right outside The Willa Creek Journal. I stopped short and took a deep breath, trying to hide the fact I had been running only seconds before. With as much composure as I could muster, I pushed through the door of the newsroom.

The familiar clack of typing and the murmurs of journalists greeted me. It was a comforting sound, one I had heard since my time as a little girl coming to visit my dad at work. I glanced towards Randy's office, relieved to see he wasn't there waiting for me. I put my head down and headed towards my desk, already pulling off my coat.

With relief, I dropped into my chair, slipping my bag under my desk and immediately throwing my hands to my keyboard. It didn't matter what I was typing. Just giving the illusion of work was important right now, in case Randy glanced out at me.

Thank god I made it back, I thought, finally catching my breath. But I relaxed too soon. All at once, the familiar, authoritative voice of my brother called out across the room.

"Dana. Come in here, please."

CHAPTER TWO



The quaint office of The Willa Creek Journal reminded me of my high school newspaper room. Which is to say, I could hardly believe this small operation could cover the news of a whole town. But, then again, I had forgotten just how small a town could be. When Randy Mitchell, my lacrosse buddy and fraternity brother from college, contacted me about visiting his father's paper, I jumped at the chance to get out of the city. Anything to escape the constant traffic and noise that circled around me.

But I didn't expect that arriving in Willa Creek would feel like stepping into a fairy tale. There were adorable shops with striped awnings and a diner bustling with small-town gossip. I had even seen a teenager stop to help an old lady put groceries in her car. It was enough to make a guy wonder if selling his soul to a big media conglomerate was really worth the large paycheck they gave me. At least I was able to travel occasionally.

"What do you think of it?" Randy asked, standing tall in his office, hands on his hips.

"I love this place," I said, and I was surprised to hear myself say it. The office had clunky desktop computers and open desks all facing one direction that made it look like some secretarial typing class from the 1950s. But there was an energy here. A history to the place that you couldn't buy or ship in from Europe.

"I knew it," Randy said, and he clapped me hard on the shoulder. "When you told me your company was looking for small papers to invest in, I knew The Journal would be perfect. Didn't I tell you?"

"You did," I said, and it was easy to catch Randy's enthusiasm. We had always enjoyed hanging out together and feeding off of each other's energy on the lacrosse field. It felt nice to be working together again. Randy and I had both studied Communications in college. He always knew he wanted to pursue journalism, what with his dad's paper waiting for him to come back to. I took the broader approach to pursue Media Studies, keeping my options open.

"Now we just have to get my dad on board. He is stuck in the past when it comes to this stuff. He feels like if you can't throw a stone and hit the store, then he doesn't want them advertising in his paper," Randy said.

"I deal with a lot of those guys," I assured Randy, placing my shoulder bag on his desk to pull out a folder. "The numbers don't lie. I will show him that working with Capital News not only puts money in his pocket now but for years to come."

"Alright. Alright," Randy laughed, putting up his hands. "I'm not the one you need to convince."

I looked up to see Randy staring out his office door into the newsroom, a frown on his face. He was watching a girl who had just sat down at her desk with such a look of possession I could only assume it was his wife or his girlfriend.

"Something wrong?" I asked, but Randy hardly seemed to hear me. He walked towards his door and stood in the doorway.

"Dana. Come in here, please." Though he said 'please,' this was not a request. It was an order, barked out across the whole newsroom. Even I felt embarrassed for the girl, and I didn't even know her. I stepped back a bit and stared at the ground, not wanting to be a part of some awkward fight with Randy's girlfriend.

But when she entered, I looked up and clean forgot to look back down. She was adorable and gorgeous, all wrapped into one, with long red hair and green eyes that shot a hint of anger in Randy's direction. Her cheeks were flushed as if she had been running, and she had a camera around her neck. Her frame was athletic and compact, and I felt something hot and frantic in my chest that was dropping deeper into my stomach.

"You have to be an example around here." My ears finally started to work again, and I picked up on Randy's chastising. "Everyone already thinks you got the job 'cause of dad."

"Then what do they think of you?" she shot back, her voice so clear and cutting I couldn't help the small laugh that bubbled out of my chest. It was enough to make her notice me, and she looked up, maybe surprised that someone else was in the room. But then her eyes caught mine, and I felt something alight between us. My pull towards her was even stronger with those round, green eyes looking back at me, making my whole body buzz with warmth and something that felt like desire.

"Brent, this is my sister, Dana," Randy said. "Dana, this is Brent."

"Hi," Dana said, simply blinking at me, almost frozen in place. Not that I was any better. I felt tongue-tied, tripping over a simple hello. I didn't dare reach out my hand to shake hers for fear I would fall on my face as I walked over to her.

"I didn't know Randy had a kid sister," I managed, smiling wider than I needed to. She seemed about to respond, but Randy was talking again, barreling over her.

"I need that Homecoming article today," Randy said, his voice louder than it needed to be. I had a sense he was performing a bit for the staff outside his office door. "I should have had it on my desk yesterday."

"You did have it on your desk yesterday," Dana countered, finally breaking my gaze to glare at her brother. "But then you hated what Ashley wrote, so you re-assigned it to me! This morning!"

Randy laughed but took an odd kind of step toward her. It wasn't exactly threatening, and she certainly didn't back down, but something in it felt strange. Like a brother-sister scrap, but sitting on adult shoulders. Strangest of all, I felt the impulse to jump to her side. I barely knew this woman, but I felt linked.

"Now you're complaining about an extra byline?" Randy asked, laughing as if she was acting absurd. "This kid!" He looked at me and jerked a finger at her, shaking his head. I watched her shrink a bit, her head dropping down to stare at her shoes.

"I'm not a kid," she mumbled.

"Okay," Randy said, suddenly the picture of a benevolent tyrant. "Just get it to me when you can, huh?"

A beat of silence hung in the air as Randy regarded her with a patronizing chuckle that only seemed to make her fold further into herself.

"Wow, man," I laughed, desperate to break this tension. Anything to see this beautiful girl smile again. "Nothing like running a business with family, huh?"

Randy's eyes shot sideways at me, an enigmatic expression on his face. Dana's eyes flitted up to mine, then back down to the floor. Then, just like that, the air cleared up, and Randy planted a brotherly slap on my arm.

"You said it, man, not me!" Then he leaned in with a wink. "Welcome to it. Now, I'll go get dad and prep him a bit for the deal. Dana, how about you show Brent around the office."

Friendly as the invitation was, it sounded a lot more like a decree than a request. Still, with that, Randy was off.

Alone in the office, Dana turned to look at me, and I was caught speechless once more.

"Want to look around?" She asked with a slight tilt of her head towards the door. I nodded, afraid to speak.

Yes, I was certain now. This was love at first sight. The only question was, did she feel the same way?

CHAPTER THREE



“And, uh, over here is the coffee. Well, the coffee maker,” I said, barely able to form words as I led the hottest man I had ever seen around the office. I blushed red at my inability to shut my mouth, babbling on and on. Of course, he knows what a coffee maker is, Dana!

“And this is Brian,” I said, quickly veering to our right only to slam my knee right into the hard corner of Brian’s desk. I clenched my teeth together as I felt tears prick the corners of my eyes in pain.

“Are you alright?” Brent asked, and his hand was on my back while I leaned over Brian’s desk. Brian looked up, shocked at the sudden commotion over his work space, but I barely noticed. I was thinking only of Brent. This tall, attractive man with dark green eyes was staring down at me with concern while his strong, warm hand pressed gently into my back. It wasn’t the pain keeping me silent anymore. It was staring at him, wanting nothing more than to kiss him.

“Randy’s kid sister,” Brian laughed, sharing a look with Brent. “She’s always been a klutz. I’m Brian. I cover sports.”

“Brent,” he said. He took his hand from my back to shake Brian’s hand, and the spell was broken, giving me a moment to collect myself. “My company’s looking to invest. Seems like a great operation here.”

“Sure is,” Brian said. “With one of the best families in Willa Creek running it.”

“Suck up,” I shot back, glaring at Brian. He had been a friend of Randy’s since high school, and he had turned into a decent reporter. But he was just another person in this office who couldn’t shake the image of me as a little kid.

“Alright, moving on,” I said, and I took off down the aisle, introducing Brent at each desk I passed. When Randy told me to give a tour, I’m sure he didn’t intend for me to force Brent to smile and shake hands with the whole staff, but I was stalling. The more time with Brent standing next to me, stepping up so close that our shoulders almost touched, the better. Sometimes when we walked in silence, me just a step ahead of him, I would swear he was staring at me, and I would feel an excited flutter in my stomach.

“Sorry, it’s not a grand tour,” I said, looking back over my shoulder. “Not too much to see in one room.”

“It’s charming,” Brent said, and he looked even more handsome when he smiled.

"Honestly, this place feels like a fairy tale."

I snorted and was immediately horrified to have done so. He must think I was making fun of him or something.

"Sorry," I said quickly. "I'm not laughing. It's just— I've never heard anyone say that about Willa Creek. It's just some little backward town I've known my whole life."

"I've been in a lot of small towns," Brent said as we stopped to look at the whiteboard filled with ideas for future stories and deadlines underlined in red. "This place feels— special somehow. There's an energy to it. Something unique." When Brent spoke, his eyes lit up, full of excitement and awe. I watched him stare out towards the front of the office, where the windows looked out onto Main Street.

"Wow," I said, taking a moment to stare at him. "It sounds beautiful when you talk about it."

"You don't think it is?" He asked, turning back to me. It was like we were the only two people in the room. I barely heard the click of keyboards or my colleagues talking around me.

"I can't really judge it," I said, giving a small shrug. "I've never left Willa Creek. Well, except for a few school field trips to the next town over. But I think you have to see other things to know when something's beautiful, don't you think?"

His gaze was so piercing, so clear and direct that for a moment, I lost my breath. If I didn't know any better, I would think he was about to kiss me.

"Coming through!" Suddenly Andrew barreled down the aisle of the desks, finished copy in hand. He walked through us, pushing us to either side of the aisle and breaking us out of our reverie. We smiled, each a bit bashful, and I took up the tour again, walking Brent towards the back of the office.

"So, you didn't go away for college?" Brent asked, and I felt the familiar surge of shame that appeared whenever someone asked me about my education beyond high school.

"I wanted to. But Randy thought it was best for me to stay around here. I took some classes at the community college in the town over. Some photography and journalism."

"So, Randy's pretty involved, then?" Brent asked, and I could tell how carefully he was posing the question.

"If you mean controlling, then yes," I said, though I tried to keep my voice down. The last thing I wanted was the whole office knowing my family drama. "He has always been super protective of me." I heard how harsh the words sounded as they came out of my mouth, and I quickly tempered them. "It's okay, though. He's just doing it because he cares, you know?"

"Still," Brent said, looking at me through slightly narrowed eyes, "It seems like you are a bit old for that now. You can certainly make your own decision."

There was something in this statement that sounded like a question. He seemed to be proposing something, but I wasn't quite experienced enough to pick it up.

"Of course," I said, trying to work out what Brent was asking me with his eyes, his expression, his body language. Once again, we were caught in an intense gaze, but this time it felt heated, almost dangerous.

"We should get back," I mumbled, brushing my way past Brent to lead him back up towards Randy's office. My shoulder brushed against his arm, and I couldn't ignore the flush of warmth that raced through me. Brent was still standing where I had left him when I glanced back, smiling slightly as he watched me.

"Alright?" I asked, trying to get him to move. Anything except for this constant staring, this intense— interest. Was that right? Is that what Brent was feeling?

My inexperience in the men's world was certainly not serving me well at the moment, and I felt embarrassed, uncertain how to respond or act around him. Certainly, my instincts were telling me that Brent was attracted to me. And I knew that my own body was flushed and eager just looking at him. But what sort of interest was this? And what sort did I want?

"I'm great," Brent said, finally stepping forward to join me and dropping his mischievous grin for a full smile. He seemed to pull back a bit from whatever silent conversation we had just been having, returning his attention to the full room as we headed back towards Randy's office. Perhaps he remembered he had a job to do.

The handsome Brent Hawkins was all business as he strode into Randy's office and shook my father's hand, introducing himself and his company with impressive confidence.

CHAPTER FOUR



"So pleased to meet you, sir," I said, turning on all my charm as I introduced myself to Randy's father. The man looked older than I expected him to as if he could be Randy and Dana's grandfather instead of their dad. But I suppose years of running a newspaper will age anyone.

"I have to warn you I am still not convinced by this scheme of Randy's," Paul said, sitting back down and gesturing for me to sit across from him. "He may have told you I am pretty old school in my approach to things. It has served me well, and it served my father well."

"I can see that," I said, gesturing back to the newsroom. "I just got an impressive tour."

I caught Dana's eye and was delighted to see her blush and look down at the floor. Who was this girl? Any little glance or show of attention seemed to fluster her. It was adorable. I tried to focus back on Paul, knowing I needed to stay on my game to win this sale.

"You don't have to stick around, Dana," Randy said, glancing at his sister from where he sat on the corner of his desk, arms folded.

"It's alright," Dana said quickly. "I like learning about this. How the business side of things works. If Brent doesn't mind me sticking around, I mean."

"Of course not," I jumped in, but Randy was just as fast, talking over me.

"Learning isn't your job, Dana," Randy shot back. "You have a deadline." It felt uncharacteristically harsh, but I told myself he was just showing off in front of the old man. Playing tough to show his 'leadership skills.'

In any event, Dana's face fell a bit. She glanced at her father, perhaps looking for him to override Randy's orders. Paul looked carefully at his daughter and then glanced sideways at his son.

"Go on, Dana. We want to get that article out tomorrow," Paul said. Dana nodded at her father before allowing her eyes to slide over towards me. She gave me a smile as if this kind of thing happened all the time.

"Nice to meet you, Brent. If you have any more questions about Willa Creek, I am basically an expert."

She turned, and I watched her leave the room, glancing at her long red hair and then

down her body. I couldn't help staring at her hips swaying as she walked back to her desk.

"Let's get moving," Randy said from behind me, and I swear there was a warning buried in his words. I quickly turned back to my conversation with Randy and Paul. It wasn't the time to get Randy upset. No need to cause ripples so soon after arriving in town.

I took out the folder I had prepared for new companies and handed it over to Paul, sending a small smile towards Randy to show him we were still a team on this. It was time to focus. No more charming Randy's sister. It was time to charm Randy and his father instead.

"Let me show you these numbers, Paul. I think you're going to like what you see."

For the next half hour, I walked them through the spreadsheets and charts, all showing evidence that working with Capital News would benefit Paul's paper.

"It's easy," I said, summing up the speech I had, by this time, perfected. "We'll invest in The Willa Creek Journal in exchange for some advertising space. We don't even expect to take up more space than your regular advertisers. Just put our companies in the mix. We want you to preserve your small-town feel. And the money we send your way will allow you to do that. You will have peace of mind, knowing you can continue for years to come."

"Or Randy can continue," I said, improvising a bit. "Leaving you to your well-earned retirement!"

This made Paul laugh, and I knew then that I had him. Within minutes we were signing the paperwork, and I felt the familiar thrill of closing the deal. Headquarters would be happy with me, though I had a passing thought that I might wait a day or two to send the good news to my boss. It wasn't unusual to spend two to three days with prospective partners, and there was an adorable redhead outside this office that I could certainly waste a day or two with.

"Nice job, man," Randy said, pulling a bottle of Jack Daniel's from the bottom drawer of his desk as Paul left to go back to his own office. Randy had two glasses out on the desk, and he poured us each a healthy shot before handing one to me.

"Thanks for inviting me," I said, lifting my glass to him. We drank, both slamming the glasses hard on the desk like we were back in college in one of the many competitions we often found ourselves in.

"Another," Randy said, smiling as he began to pour, but I covered my glass.

"Not for me," I said. As much as hanging with Randy was bringing up memories of my youth, I wasn't a heavy drinker anymore. Certainly not in the middle of the afternoon, still dressed in a suit.

"Suit yourself, man," Randy said, slamming back his second shot before clearing the whiskey and the glasses back to his drawer. "If you don't want to celebrate, I will. The old man never agrees to anything that quickly."

"Guess I have the touch," I laughed. I caught myself glancing out the office door, looking for any sight of Dana. "Your sister's great," I said, sensing that I had to tread carefully. "She seems to really know her stuff about the newspaper business."

"She knows how this tiny operation works. But she wouldn't last a second at any other paper." I didn't think Randy was giving Dana enough credit, but I kept my mouth shut. I wanted to keep him in a good mood for my next question.

"So, uh, is she seeing anyone? We seemed to sort of hit it off."

Randy bristled in a way that completely surprised me. Maybe it wasn't my smoothest line, but he looked at me like I'd slapped him. After a brief beat, he relaxed and forced out a short snort of a laugh.

"Dana's not part of the deal, man." He sat on the edge of the desk and looked at me with a strange expression. I knew the guy really well, and it was clear that he was trying really hard to seem casual. "This isn't like some big city thing where they throw a secretary at you the second you walk through the door."

"Jesus, man," I said, shaking my head with a chuckle. "It's not like that, and you know it. Besides, I was just making conversation."

"Sure you were." There was a nasty little edge to the laughter in his voice, and I figured that two shots of whiskey might have had something to do with it. "Look, the last thing I want is my best friend balls deep in my sister."

"Oh, man." I put my hands up and squeezed my eyes shut at the colorful expression. "Okay, fine. I'm sorry. I surrender. Just stop with that." I thought Randy would be thrilled that I was interested in Dana. Clearly, I was wrong.

"What," he asked, leaning back and spreading his arms. "We used to talk like that all the time back in the day."

"In college, maybe. It's not a great look now."

"Look, Brent. I'm gonna level with you. Lots of guys get big ideas about chasing Dana around, and I've had to chase off some guys with pretty ugly intentions. So, you may just be 'making conversation,' but it's not the kind of conversation I want to have. Know what I'm saying?"

"Looks like I touched a nerve," I said, trying to laugh. When his eyes caught mine again, I was surprised by what I saw there.

"Yeah, man. You kind of did."

CHAPTER FIVE



Awad of paper rattled into the waste bin next to my desk, snapping me out of my reverie. Brian clapped his hands and leaned back in his chair, stretching his fists toward the ceiling.

“He shoots. He scores!”

“Alright,” dad said from over my shoulder. “Love the enthusiasm, but maybe put it in writing, huh?”

Brian nodded with a beleaguered sigh and raised his eyebrows at me. For someone who was so good at his job, he sure had to be cajoled into work. Granted, I needed a bit of cajoling myself. Ever since dad had come out of the office, I’d been stealing glances at the door left just ajar.

Maybe I was hoping to catch a glimpse of Brent. Who am I kidding? Of course, that’s what I was doing. Nothing stacked up on my desk could even compare to the dreamboat suddenly dropped into our midst.

Drumming up copy or going over photo proofs was one thing, but thinking about kissing that guy? Professional passion didn’t stand a chance against the deeper desires swimming around in my stomach. Or lower.

What’s going on with me?

It was like everything Laura and I had been talking about at the pond had knocked something loose. Maybe that was it. All that talk about romance had clearly keyed me up.

I’d never had anything you could call an actual ‘boyfriend’ before. I hadn’t been allowed. Not that my dad would have opposed anything, but Randy was something else again. Pretty well, anybody who might have fit the bill had been chased off.

With zilch in the experience department, a guy like Brent would probably think I was some kind of silly little kid. It was certainly easy to feel that way. The only kisses I’d ever managed were non-starters. Beyond that, one brief little fumble in the sheets was all I had to my name. So, fantasizing about getting the genuine article had me all knotted up.

I shook my head and tried to focus on the task in front of me. It was just girl talk with Laura bleeding into my normal life. I’d walked straight in from that to run into a guy I’d never seen before. That was all shiny newness fooling me into thinking something more was going on.

Even so, I couldn’t keep my eyes off Randy’s door. It was just ajar, and I was trying to

think of any reason to go in. Any stupid little thing I could think of to poke my nose in and spend a second or two in the same room as the newcomer. I caught a glimpse of Brent through the open door, immediately sending a sizzle up my spine. I looked up just in time to catch him passing the doorway.

Nope. He was the real deal. At least, judging by the fluttering between my ribs, he certainly could have been.

"Uh-oh." Brian was leaned hard over his desk, sneakily grinning at the same spot I was. Had he caught me ogling our potential advertising partner? "Now that your pop is out of there, what do you think the chances are those two are getting into that whiskey we're not supposed to know about?"

And that was it. Just the tiny excuse to get close to the door.

"I'll sneak a peek," I said, flashing Brian my best conspiratorial grin. Little did he know my real motives.

"Smart," he said, tapping the side of his nose. "It's less awkward if sis catches him." Getting up from my seat, the thumping in my chest intensified. Even just trying to get another glimpse of Brent felt like I was trying to get away with something monumental. When I got to the filing cabinet next to the door, Randy's voice stopped me in my tracks.

"Dana isn't just some—"

The sound of my name ran like ice into the pit of my stomach. The last thing I expected was to be the focal point of conversation. The idea that Brent might have brought me up was electrifying, but the way Randy was bound to be talking about me almost turned my spine to water.

Still, thinking Brent had brought me up was too tempting an idea to let go of. After all, I'd just been sitting at my desk imagining climbing all over him. The notion that he'd entertained the same idea? My knees shook at it.

"Look, how about we just forget I said anything?" Brent's voice fizzed inside me as I got close, and I pulled open a file drawer and just grabbed whatever was close. If I had actually been researching something from that thing, it would have been the first time. Nobody had opened that filing cabinet in my memory, but at that moment, I was thanking God for its position.

Looking back toward Brian, he gave me a thumbs up and then gestured for me to look inside. I was more than happy to oblige and locked on Brent immediately. He was standing with his hands in his pockets, looking slightly sheepish. Which, weirdly, was every bit as attractive as when he was dripping with confidence.

But I had a ruse to maintain, so I cut my eyes back to Brian and gave him the bullseye sign. He pumped his fist and moseyed back over to his desk. Now that attention was off me, I could just hang and see just what exactly they were saying about me. My heart was pounding so hard, I could feel it in my throat. Which was good because it meant at least something was getting past the lump in the middle of it.

"Do you have any idea how many skeezy pricks I've had to chase away from her? It's like all anybody has wanted to do since she turned sixteen was climb into her panties. Well, guess what? No dice."

Panties? My blood curdled at the sound of the word. Jesus, he was really in it.

"Easy, buddy. I was just making small talk, and here you are laying it all out." Brent laughed easily, and somehow it managed to break whatever roll Randy was on.

"Shit, dude." Randy sounded oddly chastened. "Stress is a killer." He laughed too, but with none of the ease Brent managed.

"It's all good, man." The warmth in his voice suffused in my body, and all I wanted was to hear him keep speaking.

Unable to resist, I stole another quick look into the office. There Brent was, looking only slightly off-center. That wry little smile clung to the corner of his mouth, only reminding me how much I wanted to kiss him until there was nothing left on his lips but the memory of me.

Then, his eyes flicked my way. We caught each other for a second, and it was like an icy explosion went off in my chest. My need to be seen at complete war with the feeling of being totally caught.

Flustered, I broke the moment and looked back toward my desk. Brian was unapologetically watching me, and Andrew was right at his shoulder. I'd been putting on one hell of a show, it seemed. A cascade of shame swallowed me, and I needed to either fall through the floor or get the hell out of there.

Dropping the charade of checking the paper in my hand, I dove for my desk, scooped up my camera and shot out the door.

CHAPTER SIX



"So, I'll see you later?" I asked, glad I'd managed to steer Randy back into less choppy waters. "We can catch up properly over a drink at The Broken Tap."

"Yeah. Yeah, that sounds good," agreed Randy, although he still seemed off. His distraction wasn't my problem, though, even if my innocent question about his sister had been the thing that threw him into a tailspin.

Okay, maybe the question wasn't so innocent. Dana was gorgeous, and I'd have to be dead not to want to slide my hands around that tapered waist. But as far as Randy was concerned, I'd only barely hinted I might want to ask Dana out. It wasn't like I'd stood on his desk and proclaimed I wanted to fuck her.

It was oddly unsettling to see how touchy he was about it. That little bit of darkness I'd never seen in him before.

I stepped outside to get some air and breathed deep. The office had a good and welcoming energy, but all that tension had gotten me wound really tight. I took another long inhale as the breeze on my face helped my shoulders relax.

I hadn't expected the meeting this morning to wind up tricky to navigate, and I definitely hadn't expected to find myself so interested in Randy's sister. Interested didn't even begin to cover it, actually. Smitten by Randy's sister—that was closer to the truth.

I felt like a teenager with a crush, thinking about Dana. My eyes were already hungry for another glimpse of her. I hadn't come close to getting my fill of her sparkling green gaze or her clear voice. I wanted to make her laugh and hear more of her opinions.

It bothered me that I couldn't just enjoy those feelings. Randy's reaction had been so over the top, to the point where I was kind of worried about him. He seemed to have really changed from the guy I used to know. He didn't like it when I said so, but that didn't make it any less true.

I was frustrated by his attitude towards my interest in his sister, sure, but I was also concerned for my friend. Drinking shots in the middle of the day and losing his cool at the idea that his twenty-four-year-old sister could go on a date? That didn't seem like an easy or fun way to live.

To get it all off my mind, I decided to walk down Main Street. The small-town charm tugged at me. I smiled as I walked, taking in the window boxes full of fall flowers, in tones of yellow and orange.

Willa Creek had a sense of unity I'd never come across anywhere else. It wasn't simply the quaint aesthetics of the place but something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Whatever it was, I liked it.

I had lived in a city most of my life, but I always loved nature and the outdoors. Getting away for a hike in the hills was one of my favorite weekend activities. My parents always encouraged that, even if they weren't outdoorsy folks themselves.

My mom always said that if something caught my eye, whether a place or a pastime, I should get to know it better. And my dad always said, pursue the things you're interested in, or you'll be bored all your life.

Well, I was interested in Willa Creek. It was a surprise to me to realize I could actually feel pulled to such a small town. Although, how much of that pull was due to a certain redhead, I couldn't say.

I stopped in front of a striped awning, seeing the sign on top of the door. Willa Creek Diner. Perfect. A cup of diner coffee sounded like just the thing to help clear my mind.

I pushed the door open, smiling at the cheery sound of bells ringing out my arrival. A short woman with a friendly face looked up from behind the counter, eyes lighting up as she took me in.

"Well, hello there," she called. "Welcome to Willa Creek Diner, stranger."

"Thanks." I nodded my head at her and sat down on one of the stools across from her. "Any chance of a good cup of Willa Creek Diner coffee?"

"A hundred percent chance," replied the waitress — Dorothy, according to her name tag. "Although, if you will wait a minute, I'll brew you fresh. That pot's been sitting there for a few hours now."

"I'd appreciate it." I smiled, warmed by the courtesy of a fresh pot. This diner already seemed so different than the impersonal cafes I swung through in the city. "You know, you've got a great town here."

"Most of us like it." The woman grinned at me as she dumped out the old coffee. "And those that don't, well. There's a whole other wide world in which to seek one's fortune. Now, what part of that wide world might you hail from?"

"Not that far." I chuckled. "Only the city. Although, it does feel like another country compared to here."

"I'll bet," said Dorothy. "If you don't mind me asking, what brings you to our little town? New faces are pretty darn rare here."

"I'm good friends with Randy Mitchell," I told her. "He got me a business meeting with his dad at The Willa Creek Journal. Just had that this morning."

"Oh?" Dorothy raised an eyebrow. "And how did The Journal compare to your big city newsrooms?"

"I loved it," I said. "Randy's sister Dana showed me around, and well—" I trailed off, suddenly assailed by the image of Dana looking up at me. "It was nice," I concluded lamely.

"The office was nice? Or are you talking about pretty Dana Mitchell now?" Dorothy laughed when I stared at her. "Don't mind me. Something made me think you'd noticed what a beautiful young woman Dana's grown into, that's all."

"I might have noticed that," I replied cautiously. "Although today's the first time I've ever met Dana. Randy wasn't exactly eager for me to meet his sister, I guess."

Dorothy nodded knowingly and leaned on the counter as the coffee percolator bubbled soothingly.

"Randy and Dana lost their mother at a young age. Oh, twenty years ago now."

"That long?" I was surprised. It'd never really come up at school, and it felt like a pretty thin defense for the way he was carrying on.

"Oh, yeah," Dorothy gave an odd little smile. "Randy's always been protective of his sister, chasing off boyfriends and things like that. At first, it even felt like a bit of a joke. Almost like a game he was playing."

"Some game," I said, looking out the window.

"Ah, well," she shrugged. "Kids playing at how they're supposed to act, I guess. It wasn't until he got back from college that it started to turn. But, after the accident, it all got pretty serious."

"The accident?" I was intrigued. Randy hadn't mentioned anything like that.

"Oh, it's not for me to say." Dorothy winked at me. "But if you want to hear the full story, you could always ask Dana."

I got the distinct impression that this woman fancied herself a bit of a matchmaker, but I didn't mind. Hell, if she was rooting for me to take Dana on a date, then we were definitely on the same side.

"If you ever want to find Dana, you might try looking at Shaver's Pond," continued Dorothy. "That girl is there as often as not."

"Shaver's Pond?"

"Turn right at the town square." Dorothy cocked her head as the coffee timer binged. There was a mischievous grin on her face. "Now, will you be taking your coffee for here or to go?"

"To go," I said, amused by her eagerness on my behalf. "It's a nice day for a walk around a pond, I think."

"That it is," agreed Dorothy, handing me a styrofoam cup. Steam curled off the top.

"Well, thank you." I put some money on the table, enough to cover a hefty tip.

"Oh, it was my pleasure." Dorothy put her hands on her hips, her eyes sparkling. "Good luck, city boy."

CHAPTER SEVEN



My elbows on the worn wood of the bridge, I stared into the water of Shaver's Pond. It reflected the sky above, in turns between bright and gray, as clouds scudded across the sun. Directly below me, my reflection wavered.

I sighed. That wavy and blurry version of my face down on the surface of the pond was a pretty accurate representation of how I felt. I didn't know how I'd be able to face Brent again after Randy's little tirade. Hearing my brother talk about my panties was not an experience I ever wanted to repeat.

It was impossible to stop thinking of the moment Brent caught me eavesdropping. Not only had my brother been talking about me like I was some stupid teenager, but I was also acting like one. Listening at the door while Brian and Andrew laughed at me behind my back.

I groaned, heat rushing into my face yet again. It seemed like every time I got my blushes under control, they came roaring right back within minutes. I was glad for the crisp autumn air, cooling my flushed skin.

There was no reason for me to be all worked up like this, anyway. Brian and Andrew already saw me as Randy's kid sister. Randy had made sure of it. I hadn't really lost anything by looking like an idiot in front of them.

And Brent? Brent was probably already on his way back to the city right now.

I ignored the pang that thought gave me and took a deep breath. Noticing that an acorn lay on the railing a couple feet down from me, I scooted down to it. I picked it up and dropped it into the water.

"One, two, three—" I counted the ripples as they moved out from the tiny splash. This was a trick I'd been doing since high school to get ahold of myself when everything seemed too overwhelming. It hadn't failed me yet, and it didn't fail me now.

Feeling calmer than I had the whole afternoon, I turned to go back to the office. As I looked up, I saw someone walking towards me, and the serenity I'd just captured immediately fled.

It was Brent.

I didn't know whether to run away or stick around. I was just managing to keep the blush off my cheeks for the moment, but how long could that last? I ought to pretend I hadn't seen him and head away quickly as if I had somewhere to be.

Something kept me rooted to the spot, though. Brent knew I had seen him, so if I took off now, he'd know I was too embarrassed to talk to him. I couldn't really make a bigger fool of myself than I had already, in any case.

Besides, if he was about to leave town, I might as well get the chance to say goodbye, away from Randy. And away from nosy old Brian, that patronizing jerk.

"Think this old bridge will hold both of us?" Brent grinned as he got closer, nearing the end of the bridge. "People were a lot smaller several hundred years ago, you know, back when I assume this ancient thing was built."

I smiled at the slightly awkward yet endearing joke. As Brent crossed the weathered wooden boards to join me, I found myself relaxing. Maybe this wouldn't be so stressful, after all. Maybe—it would be nice.

"Are you an expert in historic bridges, then?" I teased back.

"Oh, definitely," replied Brent, with a straight face. "This one is a real find. It should be in a museum, I tell you. In fact, to my well-trained eye, it is possible this wasn't built by people at all. Some features actually suggest it may have been constructed by dinosaurs."

"Is that so?" I raised an eyebrow, stifling a giggle at the idea of a T-rex holding a hammer with one of its tiny arms. I was surprised at this kind of whimsy coming out of a businessman from the city. Surprised and charmed.

"Well, whoever built it, they picked a great spot," said Brent, smiling. His tone changed from flippant to sincere as he gazed at the view across the pond. "It is really beautiful here."

"It's one of my favorite places to be in this town," I told him. "When I first started taking photographs, I shot here all the time. I couldn't even tell you how many rolls of film I used up."

"Really?" Brent looked interested. "Were you taking pictures of this same view over and over again?"

"Oh, no." I swung my arm out in a wide gesture that indicated the curve of the pond's banks in front of us. "There is so much out here to look at. I could spend hours just taking pictures of the tree roots, the way they arch over stones in their path or how little animals build nests beneath them."

"A whole universe we can't see right now, huh?"

"Exactly," I said with satisfaction. "I learned a lot about composition by taking photos on every scale, including the tiny ones. Although—" I laughed. "You wouldn't believe how much mud I tracked in after wandering around at the edge of this pond for an entire afternoon."

"Sounds like a badge of honor," observed Brent. "The way you talk about your photos with such enthusiasm is impressive. It makes me want to see them sometime."

"Oh, they're nothing special." I waved away his words as the telltale warmth of a blush began to creep up my neck. "Nothing like what you'd see in a fancy city museum."

"You know, I've seen my fair share of photography exhibits in city museums, but half the time, they lack any warmth." Brent put his elbows on the railing then, and he leaned forward the same way I was. "They're very artistic but without any heart."

I bit my lip, touched by his words. Here I was, telling him all about something pretty personal, without realizing it. Why was he so easy to talk to?

"Do you like the city, though?" I asked, trying to reorient the conversation so I could learn a little more about him instead of keeping it all about me.

"Yes and no." Brent shrugged. "I grew up in the city, so I'll always be fond of it. And the fast pace of it was energizing for me when I was in my early twenties. More and more, though, I find myself wanting some quiet time in nature. Like this."

I nodded, and we looked out over the water together. A natural and companionable silence fell like we were old friends. It was silly, but I couldn't deny I almost felt like we were already.

"Hey, I wanted to say, I'm sorry you had to overhear your brother telling me off earlier," said Brent, interrupting the quiet. He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "We were in your work environment, and— you shouldn't have to deal with him talking about you so personally when other people could hear."

"Oh." His words took me by surprise. "Thank you."

I hesitated. Now that Brent had brought it up, I had a chance to ask the question I'd had in the back of my mind, and I had been trying to ignore it. Mustering all the courage I could, I steeled myself. The answer might be awkward, but I had to ask.

"I was actually wondering—" I paused, then forged ahead. "What brought all that on, between you and Randy?"

CHAPTER EIGHT



My heart sped up a little at Dana's question. I was thrown by it, even though it made sense for her to ask. Hopefully, her brother didn't warn off single men at any chance he could get, whether or not they'd expressed interest.

Although the way Randy had been acting, I couldn't say it was completely out of the realm of possibility.

In this case, though, he'd had a reason. Now the thing I had to decide was, did I tell Dana exactly what that reason was? It meant confessing how attracted I was to her. Attracted enough that making sure she was single was practically the first thing I thought of once the meeting was over.

I could say Randy had accused me of watching her, which he had. It would be easy enough to say he thought he had caught me eyeing her and blown it out of proportion. I could pass it off as not a big deal, no problem.

But I'd been planning to ask her out anyway. I had my opportunity. Her question opened that door. All I had to say was I'd mentioned to Randy that I was into her. That one little walk around a small office was enough to make me desperate to ask her out.

The trouble was that it might seem crazy to her if I said as much outright. We just met. But— I was sure. I wanted her, and I wanted to get to know her. I'd never had anything remotely resembling that instantaneous reaction I had the moment she walked into Randy's office. I knew deep in my bones that she was the most compelling and beautiful woman I'd ever met. What was the use of lying about that?

What the hell was there to lose, for that matter? The chemistry between us was so strong, I was almost sure Dana felt the same way I did. Our conversation on the bridge had been easy and comfortable, but the air between us was charged. I couldn't be the only one who sensed it.

"Well— I pissed your brother off," I began, sending Dana a sidelong glance. Her cheeks flushed a becoming shade of pink, making me feel a bit more sure of myself. "I told him how gorgeous I think you are and asked if you were seeing anyone."

I paused, remembering exactly what Dana had heard. Recalling how quickly Randy jumped to lecturing me about the physical, I hastened to continue.

"I wanted to take you out and get to know you better," I added quickly. "All that rude stuff Randy was saying— he took it there. I only intended to ask you out on a date."

It occurred to me that telling Dana her brother was the one to get jump right to sex might cause her a different kind of discomfort. It was the truth, though. I didn't want her thinking that I was some sort of smooth operator who only wanted a roll in the hay.

Although, I really, really wouldn't mind a roll in the hay. To be clear.

Bracing myself, I turned to see how Dana had received all that. The pink of her skin had deepened to a full-on blush. I supposed that could mean she was embarrassed, but I didn't think so.

For an instant, her emerald eyes met mine. I couldn't describe the look in them, but her gaze touched something deep inside my chest. I could tell she was feeling a powerful pull towards me too, and it set my pulse to pounding.

"Well, I'm not seeing anyone," she muttered, looking down again.

Relief flooded through me at that small sentence. I'd tried not to dwell on the idea that she had a boyfriend she was keeping secret from Randy, but having it confirmed that there was no other guy felt good.

"And Randy has to start letting me make my own decisions." She straightened at that, a little iron coming into her voice. "He likes to think he runs my life, but he doesn't. No matter what he said to you."

"I assumed as much," I said quietly. "So, I guess— I ought to be asking you on a date, properly now, huh? Instead of reporting that, I mentioned the idea to your brother."

"That— that would be nice." Dana turned her head away and put her hand to her collarbone. The gesture drew my eyes to the lovely line of her throat. Her pale skin beckoned to me, and I wanted to plant a kiss right in the hollow of her neck.

But that was getting ahead of myself.

"Well, Dana Mitchell, would you like to go out with me sometime?" I asked, taking her hand and willing her to look back at me.

She turned slowly, and the first thing I saw was her red lips curved up in a sweet smile.

"I'd love to go on a date with you."

I didn't think Dana could look any more beautiful, but suddenly she did. Her red hair tousled in the wind, its brightness giving the fall foliage all around us a run for its money. Her clear green eyes sparkled.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to hear that," I murmured.

She pushed away from the bridge railing at that, standing in front of me. Still holding her hand, I took a step closer, pulled towards her as if by a magnet.

A new breath of wind swept over us, lifting her hair away from her face. I couldn't help it. I reached out and caught a strand between my fingers. It was silky to the touch, even though I felt like I was holding a piece of glorious fire.

Behind Dana, brushstrokes of white clouds dotted the clear blue sky, and sunlight dappled through the trees' branches. The wind tugged a whirl of broad leaves from their twigs. Yellow and orange and red, they danced in the eddies of the air before landing gently on the water below.

I took another step towards Dana, her hand still soft in mine. Our bodies were now inches away from each other. I could almost feel the heat of her skin. Her scent wound

around me, making me think of clean cotton and the heady perfume of violets at the same time.

Was her heart beating as hard as mine? Did she feel the same electricity that I did?

I couldn't resist finding out. I leaned in, my free hand caressing her cheekbone and then sliding around to the back of her head. Her lips parted slightly, tantalizingly, as she exhaled a small breath.

Unable to deny my yearning a moment longer, I brought my head down to those lips and kissed her.

CHAPTER NINE



It was like he had answered the call echoing inside me.

My lips had been aching for his from the first moment he trotted over to meet me. My heart had been pounding so hard, I almost worried he'd be able to see it through my blouse. I'd been afraid to look down for fear of drawing his attention to my modest breasts.

But as soon as his mouth found mine, all I wanted was to offer him as much of myself as I could. His tongue dipped lightly into my mouth, beckoning mine to meet it. I answered with as much of myself as I could. If he was surprised, he managed it beautifully.

A soft hand cupped the back of my head, subtly pulling me in to meet him. My own hands were not so subtle. I ran them up along his chest, helping myself to the firmness that had arrested my attention the instant I saw him. The magnificent sculpture of his body more than lived up to whatever I had imagined.

For a flashing instant, our lips parted. The want of him surged through me, but before I could protest or fear losing him, he breathed words hot and close to me.

"God, Dana."

With that, he met me again, plundering my mouth with a deep, passionate exploration. A million tiny eruptions broke out across my body. Heedless of decorum, I pressed the whole of myself up against him, no longer anxious about anything. I wanted him to take hold of all of me.

This kiss was a far cry from the ones I'd had before. Next to this, they weren't even kisses.

Spin the bottle at a high school party barely counts as a first kiss. Anything with rules attached doesn't count. Beyond that, there was the timid, rushed kiss from my prom date. All lashing tongue and immediate apology. Afterward, he had gone cold and driven me home in silence.

But here, there was no timidity. There were no rules here. Brent met me with the ferocity of a man and the deference of one who was willing to make an offer rather than demand. No, I was the demanding one.

The cliché is of the sex-crazed boy pawing at the girl, but he kept his hands firmly on my waist while my own savaged him. It was as if I could never touch enough of him to

satisfy myself.

Until that moment, I'd never experienced anything like satisfaction with a man. The only time I'd ever slept with anyone was Brian Outing. The poor guy was just as inexperienced as I had been. Dared by our drunken friends on a football trip, we hadn't even managed to get all of our clothes off. There hadn't been any time before it was over.

But this?

If I could have wished every stitch of clothing into the bottom of Shaver's Pond, I would have. Just the two of us, skin to skin, grappling on that bridge. The whole of me seemed ready to open to him. It was tantalizingly dangerous and startlingly safe all at once.

"Fuck." The breath ran out of me as he slid one of those patient hands up along the line of my ribs. My nipples were already hard, rebelling against the fabric of my bra, hungry for his touch. The skin of my breast burned for him, and when the soft attention of his hand finally found me, I was alive with it.

What began gingerly deepened in response to the effect he had on me. With a smooth press, he pinched my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, sending a dizzying crackle searing through me. I moaned loud enough for it to answer back to us, but I didn't care.

For perhaps the first time in my life, I didn't care if I was found. Let Randy or all the world come crashing up to glare at us— I knew I was safe. And, if not, damn the consequences.

"You like that," he breathed into my hair.

"Yes."

"How about that?" Brent pinched more, and he gave a light pull, tugging my breast almost to its limit. I couldn't answer. Where he had me, there were no words to be found. Instead, I dug my fingers into his back and ground up against him.

I had never been so daring. My legs were on either side of his thigh, and instead of shying away to protect the secret of my sexuality, I was helping myself to him. Letting him feel my heat as I rubbed myself to full excitement. There had been times in my life where I had been wet, but they were nothing compared to this.

For a moment, I worried that I might begin to show through my pants. But, under his precise attention, anything resembling worry was banished. I was safe to let myself go with him. I could feel it.

All at once, he released me. I gasped, and my breast ached for the absence of his hand. But, the promise of so much more quickly stilled that longing.

His palm slid down along the flat of my stomach, chasing away my breath. Sweating anticipation crept over me, and the heat at my core swelled. His fingers were headed to meet the appetite growing inside me, and I pulled away from his leg to welcome him.

When he fretted against the waistband of my pants, a sweet, shocking danger flooded through me. Ahead lay uncharted territory. I'd never experienced satisfaction at anybody's touch, but my own, and even that was rare. But what this moment promised was something new. Entirely uncharted in my experience.

"Is this what you want?" There was a smile in his voice. An almost teasing challenge

that almost made it richer. As if he were on the point of making me beg for it.

"Yes."

"Are you sure?" Again, that wicked lilt. The idea of begging only made it sweeter somehow. Only stoked the raging need roaring inside me.

"Please. God, Brent, please. Touch me."

The words burned my lips. Brent quickly doused the fire by pushing his mouth over mine and sliding his hand down past my waistband. As he did, the delicious pressure of his touch spurred me to kiss him harder.

And then, he found me; down past where I had shaved every day since I was twenty, out of fear of being seen. Now, all I wanted was to be seen. To be explored entirely.

A single, strong finger traced up through my wetness, parting my folds as if he knew the way, and found the very cusp of me. It was electric. Nothing I had ever done to myself could match it. That sweet, unbidden exploration. Surprising me while seeming to answer what I wanted at the same time.

For a bare moment, he prodded gently at me. Testing the limits. Each stroke sent a shiver racing up through my skin, and I found myself clamping my mouth onto his shoulder to stifle my moans.

Then, with a single, deft push, he slid into me. And I was lost to him. It was the single greatest sensation of my life up to that moment.

CHAPTER TEN



“Do you want me to stop?”

It was the last thing in the world I wanted to do, but I couldn't let the fire inside me completely take over. Still, even as I asked, I flicked my thumb lightly at the very tip of Dana's swollen, slippery cleft. A jolt ran through her, and she clutched at my shoulders, breathing huskily at my neck.

“No. God, no.”

“Good.” The word rolled out of me with a confidence bordering on cockiness, but she just whimpered at it. Working gently, I wriggled the end of my finger, exploring her tightness. She writhed and bucked her hips forward to meet me.

Her head was thrown back, and her eyes clenched shut. Those perfect lips were locked open in a gasping, wildly tempting look of abandon. The hardness of my own desire strained at my pants, begging me to cast everything aside and have her right there. But she clenched down around my finger as if begging it never to leave.

She was so tight. As if this moment on the bridge was the furthest she had ever been. The thought drove the demon inside me to make her first time unforgettable. Even if I wasn't going to be satisfied, I was determined she would.

The speed of it all felt insane. We'd met only a few hours earlier, and yet here we were. It would have been tempting to step back and apologize if she weren't clearly so desperately in need of it all. All the shit Randy had said seemed miles away.

“No— no,” she pleaded quietly as I slipped my finger out of her. She pulled at me, alight with what was between us. I ran the flat of my hand against the unbearable smoothness of her and drew it out of her pants.

“It's alright,” I said in that same swaggering tone. “Here.” I presented my thumb to her, hovering it just at her lips. For a moment, she looked at it bewildered, then fire exploded behind them. Just a hint of a wicked grin played at her face, and she took my thumb into her mouth, laving it with her tongue.

God. The things I would let her do.

She sucked at my thumb as if to show me all the promises her mouth might hold. Plucking it away from her intense sucking, I covered her mouth with mine and slid back into her pants. Again, taking a moment to wander over the clean planes of where she had shaved, I tucked gently back up into her.

The effect was like lightning. She sucked a deep breath through her nose and reached up to clamp a hand around the back of my head, digging hungry fingers into my hair. I delved my tongue to answer hers and prepared for the next level.

If she responded like that to some tentative probing, I was ready to see what else lay in store. The instant my freshly dampened thumb brushed over her clit, she seemed to come apart. Her mouth broke from mine, and a choking sound of pure ecstasy cracked into the air. The veins in her neck stood out, and I followed the gorgeous line of it until it disappeared into her shirt.

"Fuck," she gasped. I circled again. Lazily. Firmly. Another grunt of pleasure, and then she seemed to stop breathing entirely. She just kept mouthing 'fuck' over and over again. Unable to contain myself, I ducked down and planted a hot kiss on that dazzling throat.

She pulled at my head with both hands, showing me where she needed my mouth the most. Reaching down with my other hand, I cupped the magnificence of her ass, helping her hips rock forward to meet my fingers. Tracing my way up with hot breaths, I found her ear.

"You want more?"

"Please." Her voice was broken, and she swallowed hard. "Don't stop."

With that, I pressed my finger into her as far as I could reach. At the same time, I pressed a hard, slow circle around her clit. She nearly lifted off the ground and began to shudder. I held her tight and sucked her earlobe as she spasmed around my finger.

All I wanted in the world was to feel that pulsing passion around my cock. To be able to hold her and buck up into her as deeply as I could. Sending her further.

A heavy breath raked into her lungs, and she let out a cry that rang out over the water. A handful of birds lifted from the trees. There was such abandon to it, and in that instant, I didn't care who else heard.

The weight of her orgasm seemed to take her completely by surprise, as if it was happening to her for the first time. I stayed still, keeping my finger softly in place until all the tension in her body went slack again. Only once I was sure she was done with me did I venture to slide out of her.

As I did, she turned into a puddle in my arms, melting into pure, glowing perfection. I reached around to hold her, nearly sweeping her up off the ground. As a small flurry of aftershocks hit her, she cooed quietly and nestled into my shirt.

For the first time in my life, I was wholly content. Leaning against that railing, looking out over the pond, all I wanted was to hold her. And not just for the moment. If someone had told me that I could take a snapshot of that moment and stretch into eternity in every direction, I would have taken it.

"Dana," I said, bending low to kiss her neck again. "You are incredible."

She didn't respond. If anything, she seemed to grow tense in my grip. Despite the fact that she didn't actually move a muscle, I could feel her withdraw. As if she'd gone cold all over.

"Are you alright?" I leaned back in an attempt to see her face, but she tucked it further into me. Something told me this was no deepening of a cuddle. She was evading my eyes.

Stepping back more fully, I broke away from her. Every fiber of my body cried out in protest, but I needed to see her. To get to the bottom of this change. A mere moment before, everything between us had been rapturous bliss, and I wasn't ready to surrender that.

But her face was flushed. Was it embarrassment or the rush of the orgasm that was red in her cheeks? Suddenly meek, she reached up to tuck a strand of loose hair behind her ear.

"Are you alright?"

She looked up at me with the eyes of a deer in a field. Startled, wild, and furtive. Then, in an instant, she whirled away from me and ran.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



My feet tore into the turf as I fled the pond. As much as I yearned to stay back there, it all felt too overwhelming. What had I just done?

I'd never climaxed with anyone, and the power of it shook me in a way that I could never have expected. It may sound silly for someone who had just had a man's hand down her pants, but I felt naked. Exposed entirely to his gaze. More than any other person, Brent knew what I was like at my most distilled.

But what did I really know about him?

He was handsome. His eyes were soft and demanding at the same time. Above all else, he was one of my brother's closest friends.

Randy.

Somehow, I was certain he knew already. As if he had been hovering over us, glaring down in godlike disapproval. Having lived so long under his tyrannical gaze, the absurdity of the idea felt like a bonafide truth. I'd just experienced something dazzling and wonderful— and he knew about it.

As I ran back toward Willa, I felt hate for him that was blisteringly fresh. I'd never hated anyone in my life. Still, the fact that he could rob me of something so pure, so revelatory without even being there was madness. It pushed me to run harder, my legs stretching out in long, fierce strides.

When I came to the edge of the road that led back into the town center, I stopped. Pulled up short, as if suddenly pulled by a rope around my waist. Bending over, I braced my hands on my knees and let the cold, sharp air stab into my lungs.

The town spilled out in front of me. House after house, building after building filled with people I had known since I was a girl. Was I really ready to face them? Absurd as it was, I was certain all of them would know. All they had to do was look at me to see the secret written large across my skin.

After all, something life-changing had happened to me. How was it possible that it would be invisible to anyone else?

The only answer was to confess. And there was only one person I could trust with something of this magnitude.

Winding down the main street, I looked into the shops' windows as if waiting to be found out. A modern-day Hester Prynne, but for what? All I had done was let a man touch

me on a bridge. There were no bastard children to earn my letter of shame.

Just act casual, I told myself. Laura will know the right thing to say.

More than anything else, I felt embarrassed to have left Brent back there. What if he had wanted more? Perhaps that was my biggest fear. That he had been ready to have me completely, but I was inadequate to answer. After all, a single, truncated tumble would hardly have prepared me to be a lover for a man like that.

Someone who could render me helpless with a few strokes of his fingers needed more than I could ever offer. That had been enough to make me run. To tear away from him before he saw through my secret. Which, no doubt, he already knew. He had already read me with his hands, and all of my secrets were his.

Rounding the corner, I saw the sign hanging like a beacon over the door. Old Town Flower Shop. The place where I'd taken refuge more times than I could count. Any time Belinda was away and Laura and I could steal a moment, we had poured everything out. Scattered our dreams out like stars, heedlessly across the countertop.

Then, when her aunt came back, the two of us would be the picture of pure innocence. Whatever sordid little tidbits we had shared, safely tucked away again. And, boy, did I have a whopper to lay out today.

But, as I came to the window, I stopped cold.

There, leaning his elbow on the counter, was my brother. He had that wheedling smile he always wore when talking to Laura, and she answered with her usual polite face. For all the times she'd told me she wanted to tell him to buzz off, all she did was smile.

Before I knew it, I was moving again. Briskly. The last thing I wanted was for Randy to see me standing there. Bad enough that I might have caught him pitching woo—he hated it when I came along to break his stride. Worse to have him see me so soon after being flushed with delirious pleasure.

It was one thing to feel as though just anybody might be able to spot it on me—but Randy? He would know for sure.

Still, if he was at the flower shop, it meant I would be able to dodge him at the office. That would do wonders for the deadline waiting like Damocles' dagger over my head. Honestly, work was probably just what I needed to exorcise the lusty devil running loose through my veins.

By the time I got the article submitted, I was completely spent. The day had dragged me from one extreme to the other, and being able to pour the last of my energy into beating the clock was the last straw. When I hit the button to upload the file to our workspace, it was like everything inside me powered down.

Much as I loved to walk, I was tempted to take a cab home. But that would mean walking through the door sooner, and I didn't relish what I was bound to find. Even if I had been at the office, Randy would be waiting to pepper me with questions.

Making my way through the streets, they seemed different without the breathless anxiety I'd carried earlier. Still, I felt sure that Brent would be waiting around every corner. Though my heart lit at the prospect of seeing him, I had no idea what I would do if he were actually there. Any words I might have to greet him dried up in my mouth.

When my doorway came into view, I could hear my bed calling to me. Yet, I was

certain I would lay under the covers, replaying what happened on that bridge over and over again. In spite of myself, I knew I would struggle to recreate his touch. Working until I managed a pale imitation of what Brent Hawkins had subjected me to. The glory of it reduced to what I was able to offer on my own.

On the porch, I heard a burst of dull laughter wafting from inside. Great. Randy and dad would be on the couch, on the point of throwing beer cans at whatever unlucky sports team was drawing their ire.

Pushing the door open, I froze in place.

Randy was there, where he always was when drinking and camaraderie were the orders of the day. But, where dad usually sat, there was a much trimmer figure.

There, sitting beside my brother, looking breathtakingly easy, was the man I'd just imagined touching myself too. And he looked at me as if I was an angel come down to save him.

CHAPTER TWELVE



When Dana came through the door, I had to do everything in my power not to stare. Given the way things got all weird with Randy earlier, the last thing I wanted was to open all that up again. Not that I'd ever been the kind to tiptoe around anything. After years of running rooms, it was a little odd to be deferring to someone else.

I had thought the idea was to head straight out, but when he answered the door with an open beer, who was I to refuse? Besides, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hoping Dana might show up. Given the way she fled the scene of our little tryst, I almost wondered if I'd ever see her again.

"If you haven't seen it, I think it'd be right about your speed." It was the best I could do to keep the conversation rolling. Barely giving Dana a second look.

As much as I wanted to devour her with my eyes. But that might just lead to another rant from Randy, and I didn't look forward to pinning a guy to his own living room rug. That was bound to sour whatever deal we had.

"Hey," Dana said, a little absently.

"Hey," Randy said, keeping just a bit of an eye on me. Had he planned this? To see what I would do when we were all in the same room? It'd be a pretty devious reason to keep us drinking at the house instead of heading on over to the bar. The guy I knew from college would never have pulled that shit, but given what I had seen that afternoon, anything was possible.

"Looks like you two are making an evening of it."

Her voice was guarded. All I wanted was to find a way to get her alone. Not to get my hands on her again — although that was remarkably tempting. No, what I wanted most was to talk about what had happened earlier.

To share an experience like that and be left at sixes and sevens was jarring. If only I could contrive a way to get her alone in the kitchen without setting her brother off, maybe we could clear the air a bit. Because the idea of having a cloud hanging between us was intolerable. She was worth so much more than that.

"We're just getting started," Randy said. "Brent here suggested we go out for a drink, and there's no sense in going to The Tap without pre-gaming a bit." In truth, he'd been looking forward to a light evening, but Randy was already two beers in. I'd been nursing

mine, but he'd evidently turned into something of a champion drinker.

He got unsteadily to his feet and made an odd kind of show of hugging his sister. Maybe it was his way of apologizing for the way he'd carried on at the offices.

All it did was point out to me how unusual it was that these two grown people were still living in the house where they grew up. Here I was, essentially their peer, and I had established a whole life of my own. Yet, these two seemed trapped in their past. Maybe that was the root of the whole problem.

"Lemme tell you something, sis," Randy said. He opened up from the hug but kept his arm over her shoulder and gestured to me as if I were a new piece of furniture. "I've asked ol' Brent here to stay here for a few days so we can catch up on old times."

It was news to me.

I did my best to conceal my surprise, but Dana was an open book. Her jaw dropped, and her oh-so-kissable lips parted. Looking at them was a dizzying reminder of our encounter, and I took a sip of my beer to try and erase their taste.

"Really," she asked. Again, it was impossible to read her. Even if she wasn't outwardly pleased about it, it was clear she wasn't terrified by my presence either. That was enough to keep me from cutting in to contradict.

Getting to see her for the next few days was something I could definitely get behind. If, on the other hand, she made it clear she wanted me out of the house, I was more than happy to head back to my hotel. There seemed to be little chance of another physical encounter under the same roof as her father and protective brother. At least we might be able to talk.

"That's right," Randy said. "Ain't it, brother?" His whole demeanor bristled with a challenge. So much that I would love to have contradicted him, just to show him who was really in charge.

"You bet," I said instead. In the end, proximity to Dana won out.

"Good man," he said. The twinkle of victory in his eye immediately made me wish I had called him out. "In fact, we were just getting ready to head out to The Broken Tap to keep this party rolling. You want to come? A third wheel is always welcome, am I right?" He leaned forward at me with a wink, peeling out a healthy bark of laughter.

"That's right," I said.

Dana looked momentarily frozen. I tipped up the rest of my beer, but the whole time I was sending silent wishes to her.

Please come.

Not only was I itching to get close to her, but anybody who might act as a buffer between my college friend and me would be most welcome. There they both stood, familiar strangers. Him because I had known him so well, and he now seemed so foreign. Her, because we had only just met, and yet I felt like I knew the beating of her heart.

After all, I had felt it intensely just a few short hours before. Even though so much of her territory was unknown, I had been invited into her most secret places and seen the purest distillation of herself. And all I wanted was more.

"Actually," she said in a small voice. "I was kind of looking forward to a quiet night in. The day was—" her eyes flitted to mine, then away again, "unexpected."

"Suit yourself," Randy shrugged. She started for the hallway, but I found myself on my feet.

"Aw, come on," I said. "We won't keep you too late. Besides, between your brother and me, you are bound to get home safe. Isn't that right, Randy?" Shooting him a wink, it felt suspiciously like I was beating him at his own game. He gave me an enigmatic smile and nodded softly.

"Besides," I said. "I want you to go."

Turning back, I caught a glimpse of those same deer eyes I had seen on the bridge. A woman caught between herself and herself. Then, all at once, she seemed to shake it off.

"You know what? That sounds good. I'll be right back down— I just have to change."

With that, she turned and shot up the stairs toward her room. I looked back over at Randy, more to avoid watching her ass as she took the steps than anything else. That tight smile on his face deepened, and I had the suspicious feeling that I may have won whatever the test was, but he wasn't happy about it.

"What do you say," he said at last. "Shots before we head out?"

"One of us needs to drive, I think."

"Good thinking," he smirked. "I'll take yours too."

It was a night to meet whatever challenges came my way. So long as Dana was close at hand, it would all be worth it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“Fuck,” I hissed to myself under my breath as I threw clothes onto my bed.

Standing in just my bra and underwear, my skin was covered in goosebumps. Not because it was cold — quite the opposite. No, I kept replaying the scenario of what might happen if Brent walked in to find me like this.

He had already soaked my underwear through once that day, and I made a mental note to change them before heading out again. Which meant that for a brief second, I was traipsing around my room clad only in my bra. Which only made the fantasy more vigorous.

What had gotten into me?

Nothing yet.

I scolded myself for the thought but got weak in the knees, just entertaining it. And, believe me, it was entertaining.

After what I had heard in the office earlier, I knew better than to think my brother’s invitation was genuine. But, by a stark contrast, Brent’s very much was. While I couldn’t profess to know him from anybody in the world, I could hear the truth in his voice. When he said he wanted me to come, he meant it.

As if I hadn’t come for him already that day.

Yet again, my knees quivered at the memory. It was the only orgasm I’d ever shared in the company of another person, and perhaps that was why I was working so hard to choose just the right outfit. If he had invited me, it was impossible to refuse. Even if I’d wanted to, which I very much didn’t.

At last, I stood myself in front of the mirror. Jeans tight, but not shockingly so. A top low cut enough to invite the eye, but not giving all the goods away. Not that I had copious amounts of goods, but I was proud of them. And I wanted Brent’s eyes on them.

“Come on,” my brother called impatiently from the foot of the stairs. “If I’d known you were going to be a girl about it, I wouldn’t have asked you to come.”

Don’t get me wrong, I absolutely loved my brother, but he could be a first-class pain in the ass. More often than not, if I’m being honest. But, the image of Brent standing patiently beside him is what really got me hustling. Just a quick smudge of lipstick, and I ducked out to meet them.

The way Brent looked away as soon as he saw me told me everything I needed to

know. It was going to be a long ride to The Tap. I was going to have to keep my cool because if Randy caught even a whiff of flirtation, we were going to make it an early night.

"Wow. Things look like they're going well over there." Emily leaned over the bar on a pair of tattooed elbows and bobbed her eyebrows. She cast a significant look over to Brent, and I had to stifle a laugh.

"It's okay."

"Okay," she said, leaning back in surprise. "By the looks of your tab, they ought to be going like gangbusters." Which was true. Even with our small table, we'd managed to put back a few healthy rounds of drinks. I had never been much of a drinker, and booze didn't necessarily agree with my brother, but Brent? He'd matched us drink for drink without ever losing a drop of composure.

"Are you gonna gab with the prude, or are you gonna pay attention to paying customers?" Luke Pearson was a few stools down, and he'd been doing his damndest to make time with Emily all night. Not that it was anything new.

"Pipe down, or I'll smash a pint glass over your head, asshole!" You had to hand it to Emily, she was lyrical. She rolled her eyes at me.

"Guy's dad owns the bar, so he thinks he's entitled to everything in the place."

"So, is he really a paying customer?"

"Ugh," she glared at me. "He wishes. Guy never put a dollar on the bar his daddy didn't give him back. But I'm not interested in talking about his sorry ass. What's the news with tall, dark, and new in town?"

"Oh, Brent?" Even in the dimly lit bar, I could feel my blush radiating. "He came to talk with my brother about some business for the paper."

"Sure. Your brother. That's why he's been looking at you all night." Her matter-of-fact reading on things only confirmed what I had been hoping was true.

"Emily!" Luke again. This time he was waving an empty glass over his head. "Little help?"

"I'll get there when I get there!" I secretly envied her take-no-shit attitude. It was something I longed to cultivate to myself. Luke looked scarcely mollified, but I half wondered if he flirted with her for the abuse inevitably coming his way. It would have been his speed.

"So, lay it on me," she said, looking at me with her no-nonsense eyes. "The tall guy with the strong jaw. Is he trying to pick up you or your brother? Because body language tells me he's ready to go home with somebody."

"Actually, he's going home with both of us."

"Kinky!" She drew back to give me a high five, and I stole a furtive glance around before smacking her hand. One can't leave a girl hanging.

"Hardly," I said in a whisper. "Brent is my brother's best friend from college."

"Brother's best friend?" She whistled, "not that it's a type or anything." I blushed, but she wasn't letting me off the hook. "So, he's just in for some bro time?"

"He is here on business for the paper. Randy invited him to stay a couple of nights so they could catch up."

"Well, word to the wise? I'd say you make the most of those few nights. Because, unless he's got the hots for your brother, I bet he'd be willing to toss you up against the headboard for a while." She stole another glance over my shoulder, and I resisted the urge to follow her eye line. "More than willing."

"Seriously, Em!" Luke was not to be ignored. "Am I going to have to call my dad in here or something?"

"Jesus," Emily sneered under her breath. "If I had a buck for every time he invoked his father, I'd have a brand new motorcycle."

"Ever the charmer, huh?" In answer, she clapped her tattooed hand down in front of me and leveled her eyes at mine. "Listen, Dee. I know a charmer when I see one." With that, she clapped our drinks down and pointed to one of the shot glasses. It was poured just a little taller than the rest.

"Be sure bro's bestie gets that one. With my compliments." She turned to head down the bar to the noisy prick so intent on getting her attention. After a few steps, she looked back over her shoulder with that patented sly grin of hers.

"Or better yet— your compliments."

I collected the round and looked back to the table where the two men who escorted me to the bar were sitting. Randy was eyeing the pool table, but Brent caught my eyes the instant I turned back. A tiny smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, and I looked down for a moment before radiating a bright smile back at him.

I didn't have enough words to compliment him, so a tall shot was going to have to do.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



"Yeah, man, of course I remember!" I dug deep and managed to produce a hearty laugh. "That was the same game where Purcell threw up in the locker room, right? Tried to tell us all he was hungover from a big night out, but really he was just nervous!"

"Right!" Randy guffawed and slapped his leg, then took another gulp of his beer.

I did everything I could to try to stay focused on Randy as he barreled down memory lane, rehashing one of our old lacrosse tournaments. It was hard, though. For one thing, he seemed to care a lot more about our 'glory days' than I did. For another, I couldn't keep my eyes off Dana.

It had been easier when she went to get drinks. Sure, I'd had to resist craning my neck around to keep her in my vision the entire time, but at least she wasn't right in front of me. Not looking at her practically hurt.

All I could think about was their time at the pond earlier that day. Flashes of it kept coming back to me. The way she felt, taut against me as my fingers explored her slick folds. The way she felt when she melted against me in contentment, for those brief, marvelous few minutes. The sounds she made as her orgasm built, and then that passionate cry of pleasure when she came.

I shifted in my seat. Damn, did I want to pull Dana into the bathroom and continue right where we left off. I wasn't much for that kind of thing in public usually, but to have her in my arms, I wouldn't even hesitate.

If only we weren't sitting here, with her overprotective brother watching my every move.

Overprotective and increasingly unnerving brother. What was that shit in the house, saying he'd invited me to stay when he hadn't? Whatever was behind it, it was twisted and manipulative. My college buddy was always a good communicator and a good friend. Frankly, this version of Randy was neither.

I didn't know what he'd do if he knew about what happened at the pond. That after all his warnings, I had gotten right into Dana's panties, and I wanted more. Not only physically more, either. I wanted to spend hours holding this woman, learning about her, hearing her talk about photography and her past and anything else she wanted to share.

"I always wished I could see you play," said Dana, her voice yanking me back into the conversation.

"It was more fun to play than to watch." Randy shrugged. "Besides, if you'd shown up anywhere near my lacrosse team, I'd have had to kill half of 'em for drooling over you. College boys are a bunch of nasty horndogs, ain't that right, Brent?"

"Most of them, yeah," I agreed carefully, wondering if this was another test. I darted a glance at Dana to see her looking furious, once again. I wanted to tell Randy he was being a dick to his sister when all she said was a sweet thing about wanting to watch him play.

But I couldn't. I had to do everything I could to convince Randy that I wasn't thinking of Dana like that. Not just for my sake, but for hers. She clearly didn't need another scene with her brother.

"Oh, you know what that makes me think of?" I asked, resolving to change the subject as the best course of action. "That Halloween party where Luca came as a hot dog but couldn't get through the door."

"And then he got stuck." Randy snorted. "Blocked the entrance to the party for everyone for a good twenty minutes."

"Right, and people were climbing through the windows!"

Randy nodded, but his eyes were now tracking someone far away from our table. I turned around to look over my shoulder. It seemed like Randy was checking out a pretty brunette who'd swung up to the bar.

"I'll be right back," muttered Randy, and he got up. As I'd thought, he made a beeline for the woman. I wondered if she was that Laura girl he'd mentioned once or twice. I had to say, based on her reaction to his arrival next to her at the bar, his chances didn't look too good.

That wasn't important right then, though. I was alone with Dana, finally.

"Hey, I'm glad you came," I said, shooting her a smile. "I hope it isn't too weird."

"It's fine," she replied, but her voice seemed a little strained.

"Is everything okay?" I wanted to reach out and put my hand on top of hers, but Randy would be able to clock that from the bar. I held myself back. "After this afternoon, I mean?"

Dana took a deep breath and interlaced her fingers together on the table.

"I'm sorry about that." Her gaze was trained on her hands at first, but then she lifted her head and met my eyes. "I was embarrassed. I apologize for running off like that."

"Embarrassed?" Of all the things I'd been worried about, that wasn't something I'd considered. "Why?"

"I, well. I've never had a boyfriend before," she told me, the words escaping her in a rush. "Randy never allowed it, and I never fought him on it because there wasn't anyone I was all that interested in here in Willa Creek. So, I'm, um. Inexperienced. Not completely! But. Yeah."

That surprised me, although— I thought back to the way I'd imagined that orgasm might be her first and realized I hadn't been that far off. And her running off afterward made a hell of a lot more sense, knowing that.

"I don't care about that." I leaned towards her. "I meant what I said at the pond. You're incredible. Everything you did— it was perfect."

That blush I remembered came back onto her face, but her eyes weren't embarrassed anymore. They were wide with the same desire I felt. I could see it.

"Every sound, every movement," I murmured, daring to slide my hand onto her thigh under the table. "Dana. It was so sexy. You are so, so sexy."

Her face glowed at that, and her hand slid over mine, where I stroked her leg. Her fingers kept traveling until she found my knee.

Even through the denim of my jeans, her touch was electric. I bit back a groan as she ran her palm up and down the inside of my thigh.

"Sexy, huh?" Dana had a mischievous look on her face.

"You have no idea." I exhaled as her hand wandered higher, then higher. "What you do to me— I've never felt anything like it."

The smile she gave me was just the tiniest bit predatory. Her fingertips began to caress me between my legs, sending shocks of sensation through my whole body. I felt myself responding, my cock swelling right there in the bar.

Thank god for the tiny table and the dark lighting. I knew what we were doing was risky, but I couldn't have stopped her if I tried.

I was at Dana's mercy, and fuck, did I like it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



I couldn't believe my own boldness. I was sitting there, in a crowded bar, my brother mere feet away, and feeling up this incredibly handsome man through his jeans. I'd never done anything like this before.

I wondered for a moment if I'd gone too far. If Brent would think I was crazy. But the way he responded to my touch left no room for misinterpretation. Not to mention that he'd told me I was sexy. No one had ever told me that before, and I could tell he really, really meant it.

He was leaning forward on the table now as I ran my hand between his legs. I could tell I was turning him on. He'd practically groaned when I first touched him. His breathing was shallow and quick, and his eyes when he looked at me were blurry with desire.

I could feel myself getting aroused too. Heat kindled between my own legs as I felt him getting hard beneath my fingers. He swelled beneath the denim, and my own breath caught as I explored his impressive length.

"I want you so badly," said Brent, his voice rough and low. "I want you enough to carry you to the bathroom and worship your body right there."

"I wish you could," I whispered, my body thrilling at the idea of his hands on me, anywhere, everywhere.

Brent looked like he could be the hero in a black and white movie in the low light of the bar. His strong jawline and the way his hair swept over his forehead. Emily was right. He was a handsome stranger— although not so strange to me, not anymore.

Was it possible I had only met him that morning?

I slid my palm over the bulge in his jeans, pressing down. Brent's hips bucked slightly, pushing himself into my hand. I almost wanted him to lose it and carry me off to the bathroom.

Then, a motion in the corner of my eye caught my attention. Randy had just thrown his hands up into the air as Laura angled herself away from him. I jerked away from Brent as my brother began to storm his way back over, an angry expression on his face.

"Randy," I said, under my breath, and he sat back too. The innocent look on his face would've been hilarious if I felt like laughing.

I peeled at the label on my beer bottle, trying to look like I was bored. With Randy already upset, the last thing I needed was for him to accuse me of flirting with Brent.

I wasn't flirting, anyway. I was going way, way farther than that. The thought almost made me smile, but Randy collapsed back down into his seat.

"Laura won't even let me buy her a drink," he announced, jaw set. "Told me she didn't want to give me the wrong idea. Fucking ridiculous."

Randy downed what was left of the beer in his hand and slammed the empty bottle down on the table. Everything on the surface rattled.

"Hey, bro, calm down." Brent leaned over and patted Randy on the back. My brother went rigid beneath the friendly gesture. Brent got the message and crossed his arms, watching his friend warily.

"I'm not going to fucking calm down," hissed Randy. "We're leaving. I won't be made a fool of. She could've accepted one little drink, one! Instead, she blew me off, with everyone there watching!"

My stomach fell. I was glad Laura stood up to my brother, but the way he was reacting sickened me. She told me she'd been clear in rebuffing his advances. Obviously, he hadn't listened, and now he was acting like he was entitled to her attention.

"We got here barely twenty minutes ago, Randy," coaxed Brent. "This doesn't have to be a big deal. I'll be your wingman for any girl in this bar. Laura's got the right to say no, so let's roll with it and move on."

"It was the way she said it," my brother snapped. "Like I didn't matter. Like I was being annoying for offering something nice to her. We're fucking leaving."

He stood, turning towards the door impatiently. I took the opportunity to lean over to Brent.

"We should just go," I whispered. "It's the best thing to do when he's like this."

Brent raised an eyebrow at me but went ahead and chugged the rest of his beer. I couldn't do the same, not the way I felt. I pushed the half-empty bottle away from me and got up.

We followed Randy out of The Tap and into the parking lot. When we got to the car, Brent put his hand on the driver's door.

"You sure you're good to drive, man?" he asked softly.

"I know my own fucking limits," retorted Randy, gripping the keys in his fist. "I can drive."

"Okay." Brent nodded, although I saw the worry in his eyes.

I knew Randy was fine to drive and wished I could reassure Brent as much. After our car accident, my brother would never have put me in danger. He was good at holding his alcohol—too good if truth be told, but that was a different problem—and he knew the route home like the back of his hand.

The ride back was utterly silent. I sat in the backseat, thinking that even the back of Randy's neck looked pissed off.

What was he thinking, going after Laura Havens like that? As much as my brother's controlling behavior towards me was frustrating, his attitude towards Laura was almost worse. I didn't know what to do about it, though. He wouldn't listen to me, and if I brought up Laura anytime soon, he'd clearly blow up at me.

Brent had tried to say something to him, and I appreciated that. I thought that if

Randy would relax his protective crap a little, Brent would be good for him. Their conversation about their lacrosse days had been kind of cute. Randy had a lot of good memories there, and for a moment, he'd looked happier than he'd been in a good long while.

When we got back to the house, Randy flung his car door open and stomped inside before I'd even gotten out. Brent and I came through the door to the house right as Randy slammed the fridge shut, a six-pack in his hand.

"Wanna sit down, talk it out?" offered Brent, eyeing the beers in Randy's hand.

Randy gave him a scathing look but didn't say anything. Instead, he turned away and marched up the stairs. We heard the slam of his bedroom door first, and then, a few seconds later, the thump and screech of loud music.

The tension drained out of the air with my brother's departure. I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding and turned to Brent. Finally, after a night of subterfuge, my brother wasn't watching us anymore. Not the way I'd have chosen for things to go, but still. At least we were alone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



At least one thing about Randy hadn't changed.

"Is he serious," I said, raising an eyebrow at Dana. "Alice in Chains? Typical." She snorted out a laugh, breaking what was left of the cloud hanging over us. The easy smile looked good on her. Then again, pretty much anything looked good on Dana Mitchell.

"What can I say," she shrugged. "He is a man of simple tastes."

"I suppose," I offered back. "Though these days, I wouldn't exactly call him simple."

"No." Just a hint of a cloud passed over her, and I felt a pang at bringing things down again. With that, I stepped over to the fridge and pulled it open, making so bold as to get right at home. "I wonder if he left any beer for us."

"I doubt it," she smiled again. "Not much of a gentleman that way."

"Sure enough." Not a bottle in sight. "Well, I've probably done my drinking for the day anyway."

"I've done enough for the week," she said. "No telling what I'd do if I kept at it like this." It came out easily enough, but afterward, she seemed to blanch a bit at her own words. But there was no way I was going to let her retreat from me.

"Fingerpaint on the ceiling," I said, rendering her little quip as innocent as I could. "You know. Really get nuts."

"You got it." She laughed again, and it trailed off into that magnificent kind of silence that comes when two people are thinking the same thing. When their nights are pointed toward the same, inevitable moment, but neither is quite ready to put a name to it.

"You know where your room is, right?" There was just enough invitation in that for me to take the bait.

"I could probably stand a guide. Don't want to get lost." In truth, my bag was already in the room. Randy had dragged it up from the car while Dana was changing to go out, so I was pretty familiar with the layout.

Still, that wasn't what she was asking. And I answered with what I wanted most. So, the two of us crept up the stairs, like a pair of teenagers sneaking in past their parents at night. We might have pretended that it was about not disturbing Randy, but we both knew the deeper meaning.

To have him catch us now—in his state—would have been inviting a world of trouble.

After what had happened back at The Tap, I was sure he would be looking to vent his frustration on something besides a six-pack.

Again, I was confronted with how much he had changed. The Randy from school knew how to enjoy a drink, but he didn't have a morose bone in his body. We'd gotten close because he was so upbeat and ready for anything. While he would have balked at the appellation even then, he was the best second banana a guy could find.

"Would you listen to that," she said as we came past his door. Guitars wailed over the beat, and Layne Staley let out that signature howl.

"Takes me back," I whispered in mock wistfulness. Dana clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh, and we scurried on down the hall.

"Here it is." She stood in the doorway, hovering on the precipice of going in. As if she might with anyone else, but barely dared with me. I watched her standing there, leaning back against the frame.

"Yeah."

"Looks like you might already be acquainted." She let a nervous smile and gestured to my bag, clearly already placed on the foot of the bed.

"I was really in this for the company."

Again, those eyes met mine. Large, liquid, and almost fearful. As if she might bolt, but was also caught in the fascination of the moment. As much as I would love to have kissed her at that moment. I knew better than to try it. She was a girl who needed to take things slowly, whatever our rash clutch on the bridge might say to the contrary.

"Why don't I show you where the extra bedding is? In case it gets cold." With that, she broke the threshold and walked into the room. Walking over to the closet, I could almost feel her heartbeat from where I stood. "Here," she said, opening the closet door.

"Where else would they be?"

We were very close. I had come right behind her and could feel her radiating with energy. The air between us was charged, and when she turned to face me, we were as close as two people could be without touching. My whole body was alive with desire for her.

She didn't want to leave. That was as clear as anything in the world. But, without any other pretense for staying, we were at a breaking point.

"Well," she said, almost sounding dismayed. "I should probably say goodnight." She made to move past me, but I shifted slightly, and she fell still.

"Don't."

"Don't what?" Her breath was high and tight.

"Don't say goodnight."

"Okay." She hung in place, looking up into me with an open, innocent face. In it, I could read just a trace of fear, but it was balanced by an eagerness that came from pure, simple, uncomplicated desire.

"Would you stay?" She was still. "I'd like it very much if you stayed." There was a moment, and she walked to the door. When she reached it, she hesitated in place, as if crossing into the hallway would be to step into another universe. Then, with a move of subtle decision, she closed the door.

Pressing her palms against it, she stood there with her back to me. I could see her trembling from near the bed and crossed to her slowly. As I got close, her ribs swelled with a deep breath.

"Promise me something," she whispered.

"Anything."

"Take care of me."

My heart reeled in my chest. Reaching out, I took her shoulders and leaned until my lips just brushed the back of her ear.

"Always."

With that, I turned her to face me. I held her, my hands just cupping her shoulder blades, and let her fingers wander up along the line of buttons on my shirt. As yet, she wasn't daring enough to undo them, but the temptation was clear.

Leaning in, I kissed one eyebrow, then the other. As I did, Dana closed her eyes, and I kissed either lid. Then, her cheeks, then the points of her jaw. At last, I dusted her lips with my own, and the whole of her seemed to surge there to meet me. Even so, I resisted the desire to devour her on the spot.

"Come with me." Gingerly, I guided her across the room until she was seated on the corner of the bed. She looked small. For a moment, I almost doubted what was happening. But, when she looked up at me again, the expression behind her eyes was unmistakable. She wanted this every bit as much as I did— maybe even more.

How was it possible to have found someone like her? As delicate as a hummingbird but filled to the brim with molten fire.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



My heart was beating fast— perhaps as fast as the wings of a hummingbird. I sat on the bed, the mattress shifting under my weight, and looked up at Brent.

"You look so beautiful." He sat down next to me and, tenderly, brushed a stray lock of hair away from my face. His fingers brushed against my cheek, and electricity crackled under my skin. When he leaned into me, my eyelids fluttered, and my breath hitched in my throat. I felt my lips part of their own accord, anxiety and excitement washing over me, and then his mouth was on mine.

His hand went to the nape of my neck, his long fingers threading into my hair, and he lowered me onto the mattress. My nipples hardened as I felt the pressure of his chest on mine, and a scorching heat spread all over my body.

This is happening, I thought, this is really happening.

First, there was fear.

I'd never done anything like this before—my first soulless adventure certainly didn't count—but I wasn't going to let my inexperience stop me. Desire was stronger than fear. Even if I made a fool of myself, I still wanted this. And I wanted it bad.

"You'll have to guide me," I said, whispering those words into his ear. He pulled back gently and brushed the hair away from my face, his wide eyes brimming with curiosity.

"Are you a—?"

"No," I breathed out. "I'm not a virgin, at least not technically. It's just that— I'm not used to this."

"And are you sure about—?"

"I'm sure," I cut him short. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life." I let a nervous but wicked smile spread across my lips, and now I was the one threading my fingers into his hair. "Just tell me what to do."

He nodded.

"I can do that." He closed the chasm between us again, his full lips crashing against mine. His hands roamed down the side of my body, finding purchase on my hips, and that scorching heat from before settled right between my legs.

Then and there, I was all fire.

Brent's hands moved with the certainty of a man that knew what he was doing, and it wasn't long before I was down to my underwear. I felt exposed and vulnerable, but there

was something thrilling about it.

Kneeling between my legs, he moved one finger down my neck and onto the valley between my breasts.

"Your bra," he whispered, his voice gentle but firm. "Take it off."

I did as I was told, my hands moving of their own accord. I undid the clasp and, without taking my eyes off of his, I let the cups slide to the side. The room's cool air caressed my nipples, and they hardened some more, electric anticipation rushing through me.

"Perfect," Brent said, a little grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. His fingers wandered further down and, when he reached my thong's elastic band, he traced its length. "Take it off."

I nodded, my heart pounding in my ears, and lifted my butt up. I hooked my thumbs on the elastic band and, holding my breath, pushed my drenched underwear down my legs.

"We gotta be careful now," Brent whispered, his grin turning devious. "We can't be caught." He slid down his finger, caressed my inner lips, and then rested his thumb over my clit. I gasped, instinctively arching my back, and my eyes rolled in their orbits. With swift but confident movements, Brent stroked my clit and, at the same time, parted my inner lips. Moving fast, he then slid two fingers inside me, and I grit my teeth to stop a moan from escaping my lips.

Randy's music was still blaring loudly, that rock and roll wail filling the corridor outside, but I knew he could turn it off at any moment. Besides, my father was in the house too—he was probably fast asleep, but still. It'd be hell if I were to be caught like this. The thing is, instead of ruining the experience— It just added to the thrill of it.

"I want you," I said, using my elbows to prop myself up. Brent turned his fingers inside me, and this time I couldn't stop it. A quivering moan escaped my lips, and my whole body trembled with pleasure.

"Then lay down," he whispered, and my back was on the mattress before I knew it. He laid both hands on my knees, his fingers wet with my juices, and pushed my legs apart. When he lowered himself over me, I instinctively wrapped my legs around his waist as if afraid he'd suddenly get up and flee the room.

I unbuttoned his shirt with frantic and desperate movements, my fingers running over the corded muscles of his shoulder. I moved my fingers down to his chest and abs, and I only stopped when I felt the leather of his belt. I pulled it free from its loops and then turned my hand around and flattened it over the growing shape between his legs.

"Take me," I said once more, wrapping my fingers around his hard length. He kicked his pants down, his eyes locked on mine, and I did the rest. I tugged on his boxer briefs, and his hard member sprang free, its warmth seeping into my fingers.

"Yes," Brent merely said, and he pressed his naked body against mine. I sank into the mattress as he guided his length home and let out a long exhale as he eased himself in. The thick warmth of his cock strained against my inner walls, but it only took a second before he was fully inside me.

I kept my eyes closed as I kissed him, knowing that my brain could only take so much.

He kissed me back, his tongue dancing with mine, and started to thrust. His body rocked gently, his thrusts mellow and tender, but he quickly settled into a powerful crescendo.

The bed creaked as we moved, but I no longer cared about being caught. I had surrendered to the moment, and I couldn't think straight. My nerve endings were blooming like spring flowers, and I felt more alive than I had ever felt.

I had never really understood the gravitational pull of sex— my first experience had been a terrible disappointment— but now that I knew how good it could be— I couldn't exactly put it into words. But now, I had a primal understanding of ecstasy, passion, and lust.

And it was everything I could've wished for.

"Don't— don't stop," I stammered, struggling to get the words out. My hands went down to his backside, and I dug my fingers into his flesh, urging him to go faster and faster. He obliged, putting all his strength behind his hips, and I had to bite the inside of my cheeks to stop myself from screaming.

A kind of wicked pressure settled on the pit of my stomach, my inner walls tightened around his cock, and then— It happened.

A supernova of ecstasy exploded behind my eyes, and the shockwave of it ran down my body like a tidal wave. My body spasmed with lustful delight, and I let the sweetest oblivion swallow me whole.

"Oh my God," I breathed out, my eyelids fluttering open. "This was— " I couldn't find the word that I was looking for, but Brent got the message all the same.

"Yes," Brent whispered. "Yes, it was."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



I lay there on the bed, drawing deep breaths as I enjoyed the warmth of Dana's naked body. She had nestled up to me, and her hair spilled over my chest like tendrils of satin. Her chest rose and fell unevenly, but there was an aura of peace about her. With her, I felt at home.

"You are one of a kind," I whispered, holding her close. I didn't even know why I was saying it. There was just something about Dana that drew me to her, the pull she exerted on me magnetic and irresistible.

"As is my brother," she whispered back at me, tipping her chin toward the closed door. Jimmy Page's guitar's angry strings found their way past the walls and filled the room with its muffled echoes. Led Zeppelin— well, that was an improvement. Not exactly the soundtrack I'd pick for a moment like this, but it could've been worse, all things considered.

"I'm serious," I told her. "I don't know what it is about you, but—" I shook my head, trying to buy some time so that I could choose the right words. It was harder than I thought. "God, Dana, just trust me on this. You're special."

She turned, the dim light of the room tumbling over her naked breasts, and looked up at me.

"I could say the same, you know?" Her lips were parted, and her eyes shone like gemstones. "I never felt like this before." She laid her fingers on my chest, her touch as light as a sparrow, and slid them down to my waist. There, she found a hard barrier on the way. "Already? You're insatiable."

"You haven't seen anything." A lazy smile dawned across my lips, and now I was the one turning on the bed. Her delicate fingers caressed my length, but I reached for her wrist and put a stop to it. When her questioning eyes found mine, I just let my smile widen. "I just want to kiss you all over."

"You do?" Her eyebrows were arched up, but her smile was a teasing one. She was daring me to do it, and I was more than happy to oblige. I started by peppering her jawline with kisses and then moved down to her slender neck.

I didn't stop there.

My lips trailed down to the rising curve of her breasts, and my tongue danced around one of her nipples. I sucked it into my mouth, whipping her rosy bud with my tongue, and

closed my eyes as her little moans filled the room. Thank God Randy had decided to blast his music, or else there's no way we'd go unnoticed.

"That feels so good," Dana whispered, her fingers running through my hair. She didn't push my head down, but I didn't need her to do it. No more than a minute later, I continued my trek down the landscape of her naked skin. I traversed her flat stomach, my tongue like a curious scout, and quickly found myself on the V-shaped road that led to between her legs.

My heart skipped a beat as I went for her wetness, and I flicked my tongue at her inner lips. Unable to restrain myself, I crushed my mouth against her sweetness and wrapped my lips around her clit. Much like I had done with her nipple, I sucked it into my mouth and punished it with my tongue, relishing the purrs and moans that fled from her mouth.

Dana's fingers stopped running through my hair and, instead, she started yanking on it. I let that spur me on. I unleashed hell on her delicate body, using nothing but my tongue. Still, it wasn't long before I decided to let my fingers join the party.

I pushed them inside her, past the velvety embrace of her inner lips and into the warmth of her tightness, and then curled them upward into a hook. I drove them all the way in, only stopping once I'd reached that hidden crevice inside her body. As if I had hit a trigger, Dana's body tensed up, her limbs becoming as taut as a nocked arrow.

"Oh, shit," she hissed past gritted teeth, her arms landing beside her. She bunched up the sheets in her hands and pressed her thighs together. Even though she was threatening to choke me with her thighs, I didn't pull back. I just kept on going until her whole body relaxed, endless waves of ecstasy crashing against her.

But I wasn't done.

Not yet.

Kneeling between her legs, I hooked my fingers on the back of her knees and dragged her toward me. This time, though, she went on the offensive. Her hands shot up to my chest and, before I could even tell what was happening, I was lying flat on my back.

"I think I'm getting the hang of it now," she told me, dragging her teeth over her bottom lip and then climbed on top of me. I held my breath as she grabbed my cock, and my heart almost burst as she angled my erection just right, pushing its tip against her wetness. We exhaled at the same time, right when she lowered herself over me, and the sound of our ragged breathing sounded like the most perfect thing I'd ever heard.

"Fuck, Dana, you are something else," I said, my hungry hands settling on her backside. I craned my neck, eager to kiss her breasts, but she didn't give me the time for it. She started swaying her body then, the rolling motion of her hips squeezing all energy out of me. I simply lay back, numb to the world, and let her ride me straight to pleasure's cliff.

When we came, we came together.

My hand found its way to the nape of her neck, and I pulled her into me, desperate for the strawberry flavor of her lips. We kissed as our bodies became one, tall flames of maddening ecstasy turning our souls into ash.

"Sweet mercy," Dana breathed.

She crashed on top of me, completely spent, but I didn't move a muscle. I just held her close, my hard length still inside her, and wished I could stop time. If given a choice, I'd happily remain trapped in that moment forever. Somehow, Dana was the answer to questions I'd never asked. In her, I'd found a treasure I didn't even know I'd been looking for. If there was a map to the heart of happiness— Dana was the X that marked the spot.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



When the sun met us through the window, it was as if the entire world was starting again for the first time. Despite the fact that we had had precious little sleep, I felt wholly alive. Brent and I had shared so much more than mere sleep. After a night of such delight, any moment spent unconscious would have been wasted.

Somewhere in the midst of our tangling and untangling, the blare of 90s music from Randy's room had fallen quiet. He had probably finished the six-pack in the time it took for us to make love the first time.

My leg lolled over Brent's, and I relished the feel of his skin on mine. It had been cool and slick when we'd finally slipped into repose, but now it was cool and firm. When I pulled any part away, it came reluctantly, as if we had been forged into one through the slow hammering of our bodies.

Reaching down, I helped myself to the dormant rope of his cock. It felt strange to be so brazen, and yet after everything, I felt as if his body belonged to me— and mine to him. At my touch, it thrummed slightly. Threatening to awake and send us on another adventure.

"That feels good," he said lazily as he stiffened to my grip.

"Does it?"

He extended again to his full height, and I marveled that I could ever have taken so much inside me. Running my hand in a light graze along the underside of his shaft, I almost giggled at the power a simple touch could have.

"I should probably go," I said.

"What," he blinked. "After teasing me up like that, you're going to leave me?" I rolled my eyes at him, and we both indulged in a quiet chuckle. In those gray, pre-dawn hours, to venture more would have felt like trumpeting our voices to the world.

Lord knows we had held onto ourselves all night. I'd struggled to contain the wild cries that tore at my throat, so to betray ourselves now by laughing would have been a shame.

"I really should," I said. "The last thing we want is to get caught and ruin this." I slid my hand up to his chest and caressed the strength I found there.

"Nothing could ruin this, Dana." My eyes flashed up to his, but his face was calm. It's hard to say why that startled me, but it did. Maybe because I felt the same way, but I

would never have been so brash as to say it out loud.

"You're perfect," he said, laying a hand on my cheek. "Now, get out of here before you make me take you again." With that, he planted a playful smack on my backside, and I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

"You're dangerous, you know that?"

"Wait, that's what you've got? I call you perfect, and you call me dangerous? That hardly seems fair."

"Well, at least what I said is true. Keep after me like that, and we might have no choice but to go again."

"You asked for it," he said, craning his head down to kiss me again. Lord, it was so easy with him. Another firmer slap on my rump drew a small squeal. After our first time's tenderness, this new, naughty edge made things all the more tempting.

"That's just what I was talking about," I said, drawing his bottom lip out with my teeth as I pulled back from the kiss. "Dangerous." With that, I offered his magnificent cock a long, deliberate stroke to show him that I could match him in that department.

"You're playing with fire, Dana Mitchell. If you don't get out of here, we're going to have no choice."

"That's just what I was thinking."

With that, I gave him one final kiss and pulled myself out of bed. As I stood in the glow of morning, I could feel his eyes on me. It seems strange, but I'd never felt more beautiful than I did at that moment—tumbled and exhausted. The whole of me on full display. Body and heart.

Clambering back into just enough of my clothes to keep from stealing through the house naked, I made a beeline for my shower. It seemed a shame to wash his scent off of me. All I wanted was to live in the cloud of him as long as possible. But that might have invited more than a few knowing looks, so I retreated under the hot water.

If anything, lathering myself only reminded me of all the places his hands had been. His mouth. I very nearly came again just at the memory of it. After so long pent-up inside of myself, it seemed impossible to have found a lover who could draw me out so completely.

The whole day lay ahead, and it seemed full of possibility for the first time in my memory. I'd arranged to meet Christopher Miller before work, and a new kind of excitement started spinning in the base of my stomach.

Of all the realtors in town, Miller had his finger on the pulse. When he called me with a new property to see, I'd agreed with a little reluctance. The idea of my own dance studio felt like a pipe dream, and there were times when Chris seemed more fired up about it than I was. But then, he was the one who stood to profit from a lease signing.

Still, on that particular morning, it was hard not to get excited. As I towed off, I caught myself smiling. It was hard to remember the last time I had smiled for its own sake, and I let myself revel in the simple joy of it.

Between the night I had just spent and the morning lying in wait, there was plenty to smile about. Why not give over to it?

Standing naked in front of my closet, it felt good to be wholly in my body. Not rushing

to cover myself— just living in my own skin. It felt different after Brent's attention. Firmer. More alive.

Choosing an outfit for the day felt like an incredibly important task. After all, I was about to have his eyes on me all day. As much as I suspected he preferred me out of my clothes, I was determined to ensure that he had something just as good to look at.

As I slid into my favorite top, it occurred to me that I hadn't thought of Randy since slipping past his doorway on my way to my room. With all the things spinning in the world around me, I had managed to escape the omnipresent pressure of his thumb pinning me down. And that's when it came over me like a wave.

Maybe I was free of it. Maybe all it took was a little bit of spring in my step to reveal what had always been true.

I didn't belong to anybody but myself. Well, myself and whoever I actually chose to share myself with. Everybody else wasn't my concern.

With that dancing in my chest, I opened my door and strode out to meet the day.

CHAPTER TWENTY



It was hard not to whistle while putting the coffee together, and I'd never been a whistler in my life. Besides, if Dana wanted to keep things quiet about the night we'd just shared, standing in the kitchen chipper as a songbird would be a dead giveaway. Not that I expected Randy any time soon.

I've put back a six-pack in an evening in my time, but never on top of a night out. After drinks at the house. And whiskey at work.

If I was being honest, I was worried about him. Something had shifted since your days out on the green, and not for the better. Even if Dana wasn't a question, I would have seen it. In fact, her being a bone of contention actually made it hard to figure out how to address any of it with him. Because I sure wasn't going to do anything to jeopardize things with her.

"Smells good." She stood just in the doorway, looking remarkably refreshed. Radiant, even. The woman must've been really light on her feet because I hadn't even heard her on the stairs.

"How do you take it?"

"As hard as you want. You know that." The naughty edge in her voice sent me stirring again below the belt. The day before, I would never have been able to imagine the glint in her eye, but it was welcome. As if our being together had unleashed a dormant tiger sleeping just on the inside of her skin.

"Coffee." I was tempted to meet her in the innuendo, but that would just lead to me taking her on the table. Which was something we both probably wanted, but it would mean making her late for work.

"Oh, coffee," she said with exaggerated innocence. "Splash of cream and a pinch of sugar."

"I know how you like your cream." I dropped my voice to slide a wicked barb of my own back her way, and I managed to pinch her behind as she walked to the table. She let out a small squawk, covered her butt with both hands and looked at me in delighted surprise.

"What?" It was my turn to be the picture of virtue. "You said a pinch of sugar."

"Cheeky," she said, giving my arm a light slap. Then, with a quick look back toward the stairs, she wound her arms around my neck. "Hey."

“Hey.”

With that, she lifted to her toes and kissed me. Not the deep, passionate exploration of the night before, but also not the timid, first reaches of discovery. No, this was a kiss that felt wholly comfortable, like a promise for the future.

“I need to tell you—”

A thump from upstairs cut her off. A flash of fear sparked behind her eyes, and we heard a series of heavy footsteps. We were about to have company.

“Randy.”

She stepped away from me, sitting at the table and doing her best to look casual. It stung a bit to have to keep up our pretense, but I understood. If we wanted to play the long game, that meant being smart about things now. And I was definitely interested in the long game.

As quiet as Dana was traipsing down the stairs, Randy charged down them like a bull. If I hadn't been looking, I would have sworn he had fallen from the top to the bottom.

“All-fucking-right, man. Coffee.” He stood there for a moment, both of his hands bracing the door frame. He looked like shit. If shit had spent the whole night drinking.

Still wearing his clothes from the night before, his eyes were puffy and red, and he squinted from behind what was clearly a searing hangover. If he hadn't thrown up yet, it was definitely on the horizon for him.

“How do you take it,” I asked, trying to be casual about setting a cup in front of Dana. He clocked it, and his face burned with quiet frustration.

“Black. Like a man. Right?” He sauntered over and landed a punch on my shoulder—just a little bit harder than might have been playful. The violence disguised as camaraderie set my teeth a bit, but I was determined not to be the one who tipped the whole thing over. Dana deserved better than for the two of us to scrap in her kitchen.

“However you want it.” I poured one out and handed it to him. He gulped it hard, furrowing his brow.

“Shit,” he coughed out, “that's good. I needed that. If I'm gonna make it through today, I might have to mainline that stuff.”

“Actually, I could start the day off for you if you wanted.” Dana sat upright in her chair, bright-eyed in her offer to be helpful.

“You what?” There was trouble in Randy's tone. I could smell it.

“If you're feeling sluggish, why don't I go in and get everything rolling? It shouldn't be that hard to set everything in motion—”

“What would you know about it,” he smirked at her. Rolling his eyes at me, he gestured dismissively with his mug. My hand tensed on the counter, and for a second, I wondered if I was going to leave finger marks behind.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Her words may have been defiant, but there was clearly hurt in her voice. That keyed me up even more.

“I'm just saying, running a newspaper isn't exactly the next step for some high school cheerleader, thanks.”

“I don't think that's called for.” Before I could consider them, the words were out of my mouth, and Randy took them as a slap in the face.

"Excuse me?" Those red eyes narrowed in a challenge. In spite of myself, it was one I was rising to meet.

"From what I've seen, she's as much a part of that office as anyone. Cheerleading is all about teamwork— unlike some glory hound field hogs I could name." It was an ugly jab, but I was in no mood to have him stand there and put her down.

"You know something, chief? How about you stay the fuck out of my business?" His voice rang through the kitchen, and he fairly tossed his half-full mug into the sink.

"Actually," I said, matching and even topping his tone, "it is my business. The second we signed on the line, what happens at your little paper became my business."

"Alright," Dana said, getting to her feet. "I'm sorry I said anything. Let's not fight about it—"

"Little paper?" Randy was shouting now. "Listen, asshole, just because you think you're some kind of big city hotshot doesn't mean you can come in here —"

"Guys, please!"

"— and talk to me like some kind of minor league chump."

"Then maybe you should stop acting like one." It was an ugly thing to say, but it was the truth.

"You don't mean that," Dana said, gripping my arm. Again, I saw Randy clock that, and it only wound me up more.

"The hell I don't. A real professional doesn't keep whiskey in his desk drawer, I can tell you that."

"You know what, Brent? You can go fuck yourself!" The words cracked out, rattling the whole house.

"Jesus Christ!" At the sound of Paul's voice from upstairs, all of us froze. "This is no way to start a goddamn day! What's all the shouting about down there?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but I was interrupted by the screen door clacking shut. Spinning to look, I saw Dana's back as she tore across the lawn. Immediately, I felt ashamed for rising to the bait.

One day, I was going to have to figure out how to be around her without chasing her away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



I was sick to death of every single man in my life, from my jackass brother, to my father, who only paid attention when something inconvenienced him, even to Brent. He didn't need to fight my battles for me. Sure, eventually, we'd have to figure out how to handle Randy when it came to us being together. But that didn't mean Brent needed to insert himself as my defender or something stupid like that. I was capable of dealing with Randy in a mood by myself. Wasn't I?

I walked into town to try to forget about all of it, but the sense of optimism I'd felt barely twenty minutes ago had already been shredded. I hated the thought I kept having: that I should've known better than to offer my help opening up the office. The problem wasn't that I should have known better! The problem was Randy's cruel, belittling response to an offer kindly meant.

Then Brent had to go and escalate things.

I couldn't stop thinking about Randy and Brent yelling at each other. The way Brent had snapped and said some rude things himself. The way Randy compulsively tried to control everyone around him, and how mad he was that Brent wouldn't submit like the rest of us.

This morning, I thought maybe being free of Randy was nothing but a matter of a change in attitude. After two minutes of interaction with him, that dream had collapsed. It all seemed so simple until I was confronted with his crap. I always forgot how controlling he was when I wasn't face to face with it.

I guessed I had years of a different Randy still stuck in my head. Someone who was protective, sure, but fun and caring. What Randy was doing now? That wasn't caring, no matter what he said. He'd changed, and I needed to remember it if I was going to free myself from his hold.

As long as I lived in the same house as he did and worked for him at the paper, I'd be under his thumb. He would make life miserable for me without a second thought if I behaved in a way he didn't like.

For a moment, the concreteness of that fact almost crushed me. I had the wild urge to bail on my entire day, damn the consequences. All I wanted to do was curl up in a blanket under a tree at the pond.

I took a deep breath, straightening my spine.

I had a meeting with a real estate agent in a few minutes. Even if the space he was showing me today didn't work out, it was a step towards a more independent future. Every time I had the opportunity, I had to take those steps if I wanted to get away from Randy.

Turning onto Main Street, I saw Christopher standing outside the building already. I panicked that I was late, but a look at the time told me he was simply early. I exhaled in relief.

"Calm down, Dana," I muttered to myself. "Don't walk around acting like you're always about to do something wrong."

That was what Randy wanted me to feel, and I was done with it.

"Christopher!" I called, waving a little. "Thank you for meeting with me early in the day."

"No problem, Dana." Christopher smiled, pulling a ring of keys from his pocket. "I'm just happy you're interested in the space."

He unlocked the door and pushed it open. I stepped through, and at once, my breath caught in my throat.

It was beautiful. Hardwood floors in a rich, warm palette of brown, high ceilings and a wide-open space. The feel of it was simply—right. I could imagine teaching dance classes here.

"It is perfect, Christopher," I told him and gestured at the central area. "This is exactly the size I was looking for. It would hold a class of fifteen no problem. And there! That would make a great front desk area."

"I am glad to hear it," said Christopher, nodding. "Did you notice the windows, too?"

He indicated the wall to our left. I realized it was floor-to-ceiling windows, only currently covered by a series of curtains. I nearly bounced with glee and rushed to pull the fabric away.

Morning light poured in, making the space feel even more magical. Those huge windows looking onto Main Street would let in beautiful natural light all day long. And, it wouldn't hurt for people to be able to walk by and watch a class for a minute. Easy advertising, just like that!

I was in love. Endless images flitted through my mind: me outfitting and decorating the place, then working and teaching here, as kids and adults alike poured in ready to move their bodies.

Sighing, I turned to Christopher. I'd been saving money for a while now, not that hard to do when I still lived at home. Randy didn't know, or I was sure he'd demand I start paying rent to Dad or some nonsense like that. I had a good amount put away, but I doubted it would be enough for such a gorgeous, first-floor unit like this.

"What's the rent, Christopher? Is it at all negotiable?"

"It's not," he said, and my heart fell. "But I think you'll be pleasantly surprised." He handed me a clipboard. "Here are the full specs for it, and the rent is at the top. You'd have to pay a security deposit as well as the first month to secure the place and take it off the market."

My jaw dropped at the numbers in front of me. They were actually affordable. I

couldn't believe it.

"Are you kidding?" Unable to hide my shock, I lifted my face to see Christopher grinning at me. "I thought the rent would be much higher than this."

"This spot needs the right tenant to make it work," he said, shrugging. "We didn't want to price anyone out unreasonably."

I stared. This almost sounded too good to be true, but I trusted Christopher. He'd been honest and responsible in all his dealings with me.

I knew the usual thing to do would be to tell him I'd think about it, take the spec sheet and go consider. What if someone else came along and snatched it up, though? I knew I wanted it. Why wait on a golden opportunity?

Not to mention, after everything that had happened, especially Randy's behavior that morning, I was more desperate than ever to break out on my own. There were a dozen good reasons to hold my horses but more very good reasons to go for it. I had to reach out and grab my dream because no one else was about to do it for me.

"I'll take it," I told Christopher decisively. "Who should I make the check out to?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



"I'm sorry, sir, for waking you up," I told Paul as he stood in the kitchen with his arms crossed.

Randy glared at me, silenced by his father's bellowing demand to shut the hell up for one goddamn minute. If it were possible, he looked even more like shit than he had five minutes ago. I guessed screaming at me at the top of his lungs probably didn't feel great on top of that hangover.

"What on earth was going on that you two had to resort to shouting first thing in the morning?" Paul flicked his eyes from me to his son, where they stayed. His brows began to draw together in disapproval, taking in Randy's state.

"We had a minor argument, and it got out of hand," I said since Randy's lips were mutinously sealed. "It was childish of me to yell at Randy like that, and I apologize. It's not a habit with me. I can promise you that."

"Thank you for the apology," responded Paul, his voice gruff. "Don't worry about it. I certainly understand being moved to raise my voice when it comes to my son."

"Oh, and what's that supposed to mean?" barked Randy, coming back to life. "You about to yell at me too, pops?"

"Don't use that tone of voice with me." Paul took a few more steps into the kitchen, and I took that as a sign to get the hell out while I could. I began to back away as Randy got to his feet.

"Well, what's the problem?" asked Randy, a little less belligerent with his father than me, but not by that much.

"What do you think? You've clearly been drinking far too much, AGAIN. You are visibly hungover, and I'm sure you won't function for shit until at least noon, if then!"

"I had a couple beers, that's all."

"That's a load of horse shit. You got drunk on a work night! You aren't fit to run the business. I'm working so hard to try to leave you. What the hell do you think it says to the other employees that you slop into the office red-eyed and half-dead?"

The sounds of the father-son argument receded as I left them in the kitchen and went upstairs to grab my jacket. The whole thing had become a family matter, and no matter how much I wanted to ask Paul why he let Randy bully Dana, now was not the time.

I heard snippets of curse words and excuses from Randy as I made my way out of the

house. I was relieved when the door closed behind me, shutting off the sounds of their fight. I had never been so grateful for my home life as I was at that moment.

My parents would never have yelled at me like that. Never did, even when I was a rebellious teen behaving a lot like Randy was now. Although to be fair, they never got the level of provocation Paul did at this particular moment.

As I walked towards town, I regretted the way I'd lowered myself to Randy's level that morning. However, brief, I'd joined in the yelling, and I wasn't proud of that. I just couldn't help myself, hearing Randy insult Dana like that. She'd offered to do him a solid, and he made a nasty, uncalled-for comment back.

Seeing the glow of Dana's face dim at his words plain infuriated me. She was smart and strong, and she pushed on ahead when there were plenty of reasons to give up. Randy didn't see— didn't want to see— what an incredible woman his sister was. That was his loss, except for when his blindness made Dana suffer.

I shook my head, trying to clear it. I was in deep with this family, whether I liked it or not. I needed to stay grounded when dealing with Randy if I wanted to keep spending time with Dana and not make things worse.

Catching sight of the diner up ahead of me, I quickened my pace. I'd barely gotten to drink that coffee I'd made. No wonder my head still felt foggy. That cup of coffee I'd gotten the day before had been good, and I perked up, imagining another one.

I pushed open the door, the bells rang, and Dorothy looked up from behind the counter. Exactly the same as when I'd stopped in yesterday. Something about that made me happy. For someone else, it might feel monotonous after a while, but I couldn't imagine feeling that way. The familiarity of Willa Creek appealed to me, just like it had when I first arrived.

"Hey there, less of a stranger today," called Dorothy. She had a wide smile on her face.

"Hello, Dorothy," I said back. I sat down on a stool and breathed in the smell of toast and brewing coffee.

"Well, listen to you, you remembered my name," said Dorothy, looking pleased.

"Of course I did. You gave me some good coffee and some better advice," I told her.

"I'm happy to hear that." She beamed at me. "You want a cup of coffee now, too, I'm guessing?"

"Sure do."

"You're lucky this time. This pot finished brewing mere seconds before you walked in. For here or to go?"

"You know what, I'll take it for here." I felt peaceful in the diner and wanted to take advantage of that. I didn't have to be anywhere in a hurry, either. A novel feeling after the rush of my days in the city.

"All right, good coffee is taken care of. The question remains, did you follow that even better advice?" Dorothy winked at me as she set a steaming cup of coffee in front of me, then a bowl of creamer and some packets of sugar.

"Shaver's Pond is a beautiful place," I said, teasing her a little. "And everywhere else in this town isn't too bad either, if you're with the right person."

I took a sip of my coffee, that caffeinated godsend. I closed my eyes as I swallowed. It was what I needed, definitely.

“Let me ask you this then. Was it a good night or a bad night?”

I opened my eyes to see Dorothy looking at me, eyebrow raised and a friendly curiosity on her face. Her nosiness was once again charming, and I laughed.

“Definitely good,” I said, thinking back to having Dana in my arms all night. The morning may have been pretty damn bad, but it didn’t tarnish the marvel of our time together. I’d found someone special in Dana. Every minute I spent with her confirmed that.

“You drifted off somewhere I don’t want to know about, I think.” She chuckled. “I see those stars in your eyes. But good. I’m really happy you had a good night.”

“Thank you.” I inclined my head and took another sip of coffee. “Your encouragement is appreciated, don’t think it isn’t.”

“What can I say?” She reached over and patted the back of my hand. “I’m rooting for you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



It was perfect. Just what I needed to clear my head after the testosterone fueled posturing of the morning. Walking along the far wall, I looked back toward the door. It was easy to see where my administrative desk was going to be and the sitting area where the kids could change into their dance shoes.

A bank of windows let in a flood of natural light, and the whole room took on a golden glow. Maybe that's why Christopher had such a solid reputation as a realtor— he sure knew the time of day to bring me here. All that morning sun made it irresistible.

Almost as much as anything else, I was giddy with the impulse of my decision. I'd never done anything like that before, and it felt startlingly good to take control like that. To do something without consulting anyone but my own conscience. Was this what it felt like to be master of your own destiny because I could get used to it.

Not only that, but I had the place to myself. Christopher had darted back to the office to get a lease agreement together but let me have the run of the place while he was out. Rather than waiting at the diner, dreaming over a cup of coffee, I got to dream over the space in real-time.

I had always been the responsible woman. I wouldn't have indulged too much, but I let it all fly. More than just outfitting the room, I was falling down the well of class schedules. Improbable days of leading dance lessons from the morning well into the evening. It would be impossible to stay on my feet for so long, but I was ready to let myself swim in the fantasy of it all.

"Why the hell not," I asked into the empty room. My words sang in the air in that particular way they do in empty rooms. With nothing to deaden the sound, my voice came back to me. In it, I heard a kind of joy that had been sorely missing for quite some time.

Well, maybe it had come out in the muffled moans and cries of the night before, but it seemed miles away. Almost as if it happened to someone else— except that my skin was still humming with it. Maybe by the time I saw Brent again, I'd be ready to swallow whatever shouting match he and Randy had indulged in.

After all, he'd only piped up in my defense.

I shook myself hard. Here I was, standing in a space that already felt like it was mine, and I was tangling myself up over those men again. Turning that shake into a loosening

up, I decided to try the room on for size.

Kicking my shoes off, I tucked them neatly up against the wall. Even that little gesture reminded me of standing in a similar room when I was a girl. Before, I found cheerleading as an outlet. It was considered less nerdy than ballet classes, and I'd wanted so desperately to fit in that I'd been willing to let it all slip.

But there was never any question of what I really wanted to do. And here it was, laid out before me in the form of a place I could call my own. No dad, no Randy. Not even Brent— this was mine.

With that, I strode into the middle of the floor and kicked out a leg. It felt good. Looking down along the line from hip to knee to ankle, I got it all as straight as I could. The stretch spoke to muscles I hadn't exercised in a long time. That distantly familiar, beautiful burn ran along the underside of my thigh.

For a moment, I marveled at how limber I was, notwithstanding the time away. Then, I remembered the thorough stretching I'd received the night before. It's a wonder I wasn't even more flexible.

With a kick, I sent myself into a spin. A little shaky, but not bad. Once I had the freedom to do what I wanted, I'd knock off the rust in short order. Another kick and another twirl. Already, it was better. I felt alive with it.

Channeling my inner gazelle, I just started bounding around the room, paying no heed to style or form. Just letting my body lead the way and following whatever impulses came to me. It was thrilling in a way I hadn't anticipated— that kind of joyous liberty.

"What the hell are you doing?"

I snapped to a halt, the room swirling slightly as I looked toward the door. Randy stood there, poised as if he'd been ready to dive in and grab me.

"Dancing. What does it look like?"

"Yeah, I got that far. How did you get in here?" He had that possessive edge in his voice, but instead of bending as I always did, I rankled at it.

"Christopher Miller let me in, actually. He's just headed over to his office to get the paperwork."

"Paperwork?" The word broke through the air with a smack of derision. Instead of cowering under it, I decided to change the game.

"Yeah, paperwork. What are you doing in here, anyway? Keeping tabs on me isn't enough. Now you're outright spying?"

"I was on my way into the office and saw you making an ass of yourself in here." His read on things made my cheeks burn. "Jesus, Dana, anybody could have walked by and seen you jumping around like an idiot."

"I'm not an idiot!" It was the first time I could remember raising my voice to him, and he looked every bit as shocked as I was. "Besides," I tried to get back on top of myself, "this space is mine, so I can do whatever I want in it."

"What do you mean it's yours?" He ducked his chin and took a couple of steps toward me.

"I'm leasing it. To start that dance studio I've always wanted."

"And you didn't think it was a good idea to run it past the family first?"

"Why?" It was hard to keep from getting hot, so I decided to let myself boil into it. "I'm 24 goddamn years old! How long do I have to get permission for every move I make? It's time I started making some decisions of my own without having to ask my big brother if it's okay!"

"Well, I say no. We're not doing this."

"There is no 'we' in this one, Randy! It's my money, and it's my decision."

"The hell it is," he shouted so loud it nearly knocked the wind out of me. "Just anybody could come in here and do whatever the fuck they wanted, whenever the fuck they wanted, and you wouldn't be able to do a damn thing about it."

"Then it would be my battle to fight!"

"Not a chance. You know what I could do?" Suddenly, he was very close to me, his nose inches from mine. It was hard, but I held my ground, refusing to give in to his tantrum. "I could lock you in the house if I wanted to. How about that? Turn the key and let you sit in there all by yourself."

It was a stunning threat, and the steel in my spine buckled a bit. As insane as it sounded, I knew he would do it. When he got wound up, there was no backing down.

"You wouldn't."

"Try me."

With that, I tried to brush past him. This was no time to get into things. A hungover Randy was even less reasonable than a drunk Randy. But, as I stepped toward the door, he caught me by the arms and gripped me hard. Swinging me around, I lost my footing for a second, and he held me in the air like a doll.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going," he hissed through gritted teeth. Protective was one thing, but we had tipped into true danger.

"I'm getting out of here."

"Great idea," he said, dragging me toward the door. "Take a good look around because you're never coming into this building again."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



A little bit of air was good to clear the head.

After a morning embroiled in family tensions, I was dreading heading into the newspaper office. If what I had left behind at the house was any indication, Paul and Randy weren't going to be in the best of moods when I landed.

I'd also resolved to head by on my lunch break and get my things out of the house. Packing off to a hotel might cause more consternation, but at least I wouldn't be there to deal with it. The only consideration was how Dana would take it, but I'd have to sort that out when the time came.

Given that she'd bounded away from me again, I almost wondered if she'd be glad to see the back of me. It was a hard thing to stomach, given what we'd shared and how I was starting to feel. More than starting.

"Don't touch me!"

I would have known that voice anywhere. Even without having had a lifetime of experience with it, Dana's voice resonated inside my chest as if I'd known it forever. But, the anger in it was new, and it set me at full attention. If she needed help, I was going to be there.

"Don't just walk away from me!"

Randy.

I looked across the street to see them in the doorway of a building across the street. A large lease sign sat in the window, and they had just stepped out into the open. Whatever their argument was about, it was already at full heat.

On instinct, I turned and took a step in their direction. But, before I could get past the curb, I stopped myself. The problem that morning was that I'd gotten into the middle of family business. It wouldn't do any good to go charging in and repeat the same mistake.

Trouble was, everything in my gut was telling me to get over there. The desire to protect her was overpowering, but causing more trouble wasn't on the menu. "You can't keep treating me like this! I have to have some say in my own life!" She was livid. I would never have imagined Dana as the kind of woman who would have taken personal business into the street, yet there she was. It only spoke to how much Randy must have riled her up.

"You have say in plenty!"

"Ugh!" She clasped her head for a moment, then glared at him. "I don't have to put up with this." Dana turned to leave but didn't make it a step before Randy caught her. My stomach lurched at it, and I started across the street.

"Don't you ever walk away from me!" He was clearly still bleary-eyed from the night before, and my blood thundered in my veins at the idea that he might actually hurt her.

"Let me go!" She squirmed, but he clamped down even harder. I could see his knuckles turning white and my own fists clenched in response. Before I knew it, I was on them.

"Take your hands off her, Randy." They both looked startled, but an odd half-smile cut across Randy's face.

"Stay out of this, man. This is none of your business."

"To hell with that." I shoved in and managed to get an arm between them. Grabbing him by the wrist, I squeezed until he loosened his grip. Dana pulled back a step or two, and Randy made to follow. Giving a solid shove with the back of my arm, he lost his balance and tipped back onto the sidewalk, landing square on his ass.

"Are you alright?" Dana was all I cared about. She rubbed at her upper arms, blinking slightly at what had just been happening.

"I think so?" "Yeah," Randy said, getting to his feet. "All about my sister, huh? Never figured you were like the rest of them." With that, he was up and shoved me hard. I managed to keep from going down, but my anger flared up.

"Don't, man. Don't start this." The last thing I wanted to do was get into a fight. But Randy took a swing, and we were off to the races. His first pass only glanced at my jaw, but it landed enough for me to feel the intent behind it.

"Randy, stop!" Dana screamed, but he wasn't having it. He swung again and went wide, giving me a clear shot at his ribs. Landing a single, solid jab, he staggered back.

"Fuck, man." He rubbed his side, then launched himself at me, wrapping his arms around my waist. He tried unsuccessfully to lift me up but did succeed in getting me off my center of gravity. Reaching up, I clenched my hands and brought them down right on his shoulder. Not full force, but enough to let him know I was serious.

I wasn't looking to break anybody's bones—least of all a guy I'd known for years.

He wheezed, and his knees gave a bit, letting me square myself again. When he stood up, Randy reeled back a bit but managed to keep from falling over. I thought that was the end of it, but he came back with a haymaker that landed hard on my jaw.

It rang my bell, but I didn't go down. Dana screamed again, but my ears were ringing. After that, I let myself off the leash. Cocking back, I landed a punishing blow to the middle of Randy's chest, and he went down hard.

Something about seeing him bottom out shook me, and I pulled myself back into line. I stepped toward him, thinking I might help him back up. After all, I was pretty certain whatever fight we were having was over. But something was wrong. I came up short in mid-step and looked down to see a pair of slender hands wrapped around my arm to hold me back.

It was Dana.

She had caught my arm in both of hers, and she was hugging it against her chest. Her

eyes were wide, and her lips slightly parted. If anything, she looked frightened.

That was enough to rattle me to the core. Here I had come to try and stop a fight from happening, and instead, I'd leapt in and started throwing punches. In the process, I'd shown the worst side of myself to the woman who had come to live on the inside of my chest.

Stepping into the middle of a family argument was one thing, but this? If she had turned tail and run right then, nobody would have blamed her. Worse, if that was what happened, no amount of apology would have been enough to wipe the slate clean. For the first time that I could remember in my adult life, I was actually afraid of what might happen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



I could barely breathe.

It was bad enough that Randy had made an animal out of himself, but I had almost expected it from him. It was an ugly flash, but he was prone to tantrums. That was something I could bear.

But seeing Brent lose himself was shocking. He was so easy, so composed that it was unsettling to see what kind of power he had. Exhilarating, perhaps, but unnerving at the same time. I would never have expected it, but now there was no way I would ever be able to forget it.

Randy hit him first.

The words echoed inside my brain, begging me to remember how the whole thing had started. More than anything, I was upset that I'd been put in my damsel corner again. Two men were fighting over me. What I needed more than anything was to be able to fight for myself.

A look of profound shame came over Brent, and his arm went slack in my grip. Only then did I think to let him go, and he shuffled as if trying to think of anything to say. Randy groaned on the ground behind him, reaching up to gingerly feel where Brent had landed his blow.

For a moment, we stood facing each other, but Brent couldn't seem to manage to look at me. As if my eyes would strike him dead on the spot.

It wasn't that I was angry at him— just shocked. How was it possible he could let himself go like that?

"I— um—" For the first time in the brief space that I'd known him, Brent seemed at a loss for words. His voice was dry, and when his eyes finally landed on mine, they were filled with hopeless apology.

"Look, Dana. Do you want to get out of here?"

He extended a hand to me. The same hand that had just knocked my brother to the ground. Still, he had done it in defense of me.

That's when it burst upon me. The thing that was really at the core of all this. I wanted Brent, but what was I doing, really? He kept stepping up to defend me when what I really needed was to learn what it meant to defend myself.

If I took his hand, would I just be trading one overprotective man for another?

As much as I wanted to let him lead me away from this mess we'd all perpetrated on the sidewalk, I hesitated. It couldn't all be that simple. Tied up in a bow by the hero who came to rescue me.

Randy was an asshole, but I knew where his heart was. As twisted as his reasoning could be, he was trying to look out for me. Even when he was being a complete psycho about things, that was what was behind it.

Brent's hand hung in space, and I could see the wavering in his face when I didn't take it immediately. He knew that things had changed. The trouble was, even I didn't know exactly how or even what it meant.

Breaking our gaze, I looked up the block to the front of the newspaper office. There, seemingly oblivious to all of our turmoil, was my father. He stopped for a moment to check his watch, then walked into the building. Stealing one last look back at Brent, I turned and headed up after my dad.

Whatever was going to happen back there in front of the studio I'd hoped to sign for, those boys were going to have to sort it out on their own. I didn't want any part of it anymore.

"Dad," I said, coming into the office. "Any chance we could talk for a second?" His eyes were tired, and I could tell that he'd also had his helping of family trouble for the morning. Even so, he smiled.

"Sure, sweetheart. Let's step into my office." He led me in and perched on the edge of his desk while I arranged myself in one of the chairs. "What's up?"

Suddenly, I felt the weight of all the years of not being able to decide things for myself. It felt suspiciously like sitting in the principal's office, but I was looking up at my own father. The time to be accountable to other people was behind me.

"Listen, dad. I've been thinking I need to branch out on my own." He nodded as if he'd known this conversation was coming since I was twelve.

"Things have been tough for you, huh?"

"You don't know the half of it. Listen, dad. I found a place up the block I'd like to lease. You know how I've wanted a dance studio?"

"Yeah?" There was just a bit of twinkle at my mentioning it that allowed me to smile.

"The place is perfect, dad. I even had the lease paperwork on the way—" I trailed off, and he just nodded.

"But then Randy showed up, right?"

"Right." He pulled his lips tight and sighed hard. "I can't keep living like this. And, I get it. I know he loves me, but dad? Randy controls every move I make. Like, it's only a matter of time before I'm going to have to ask his permission to go to the bathroom."

"Yeah, well." He chuckled slightly, then looked at me with a clear gaze. "This is my fault. I'm sorry."

"What?" It had never occurred to me that he might feel that way.

"It is," he said. "After your mother died, I was pretty useless for a while. I let it distance me from you guys, and I shouldn't have let that happen. The accident only made things worse, and by the time I got my head straight, Randy had already pretty much declared himself the man of the house."

“He’s a big one for taking charge.”

“Always has been,” he laughed again, and this time I joined him. “Listen, sweetie.” Dad leaned forward and put a hand on my shoulder. “Whatever you want to do, I’m with you, and there’s not a damn thing Randy can say about it then. You want that studio? Go get it.”

I reached up and put a hand over his. As much as I wanted to thank him, my throat closed up. All I could do was nod. It felt like so long since either my dad or my brother had actually believed in me, and when it came, it was like a whirlwind in my chest. A thousand doors seemed to open up inside me at once— doors that had been closed so long, I’d almost forgotten they were there.

He stood up, and I stood up with him, wrapping my arms around him.

“Thank you,” I managed at last.

“Of course, sweetie.” He rubbed my back the same way he did when I was a little girl, but instead of feeling patronizing, it built me up. “This has been a long time coming.”

Two light raps on the door pulled us out of our little embrace, and I turned to see Brent standing in the doorway. He looked sheepish and cleared his throat before speaking.

“Hope I’m not interrupting anything?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



My heart was still in my throat.

When I'd come into the offices, I wasn't sure what to expect. Dana hadn't exactly fled as she had done in the past, but I'd still watched her back as she walked away from me. It took a full turn around the block to feel like I was ready to walk into whatever she had coming.

Then, there she was with her father. Walking in on a conversation was one thing, but a hug was something else again. It only leveled up my anxiety over intruding. All I had done since arriving in Willa Creek was stick my fingers into this family's business. Somehow, I couldn't manage to stop.

"Hello, Brent." Paul had an enigmatic look on his face— neither overly friendly nor cold. We were both waiting. Taking our cues from Dana as to how to navigate each other.

"Hey." She wiped a wrist at her nose and stuffed both of her hands into her back pockets. Even she was keeping her cards close to the vest. This was no way to make progress.

"Mr. Mitchell," I said, clearing my throat, "I wonder if I could borrow Dana for a second? I'd like to talk to her."

"Sure," he said, eyeing us both. A man of his years was no dummy, and I was willing to bet he knew that whatever was between us was more than purely professional. After all, I'd come to sign some paperwork and lock in a deal. That should have had nothing to do with the woman who snapped pictures for the paper.

"I've got a bit of work to do, as it turns out, so the two of you are free to find a spot." He settled in at his desk, and it was clear that we weren't going to have any privacy there.

"Is there somewhere—?"

"Yeah," she said. "Come on."

Giving Paul a nod, I followed her out into the main office. Thankfully, she cut to the right, heading toward the back. The only other office that I knew of was Randy's, and I didn't relish the thought of what might happen if we'd set ourselves up in there.

Having him bust in on us trying to have a legitimate conversation was the last thing we needed. There was no way we were going to scrap again, but a shouting match

wasn't out of the question. And, I'd done enough fighting for one day.

"Back for more, huh?" The sports guy looked up from his desk, seemingly grateful for any chance not to work. "If you're not careful, you're gonna become a fixture around here. You'll wind up with a desk grinding out copy."

"If you ground out more copy, maybe we wouldn't always be pushed up against the deadline, Brian." Dana fired her quip without breaking her stride. To anybody watching, it would have been impossible to tell what kind of day she'd been put through. I admired her composure. Given the way I'd been acting, I could stand to borrow a bit of it.

"Here." She pushed open a door just at the far end of the room. The darkroom. Something about it intimidated me. A kind of forbidden sanctum to guys like me.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm basically the only photographer on staff here. And I'm damn sure the only one who still uses film. Nobody will bother us. They probably wouldn't even know where to look."

"Fair enough." With that, I stepped in, and she followed, pulling the door shut behind her. I settled on a stool, but she remained standing, arms folded across her chest. For a moment, I didn't know where to start.

"Listen," I managed. "About what happened back there. I lost my head."

"You think?" Her eyebrows were raised, but it wasn't exactly a full-on reproof. There was just enough snark about it to allow me a sheepish laugh.

"Yeah, well. I have to be honest. I haven't hit anybody since my days out on the field. And as far as actually throwing punches goes, I must have been in middle school."

"Middle school about describes how you and Randy have been circling each other."

"Good point." It was embarrassing the way we'd been at each other. "Dana, I just really need to apologize. Not only for the— what happened out on the street, but for carrying on back at your house. I didn't have the right to do any of that."

"Thanks for saying that." Her demeanor softened, but I felt like there was more to be gained between us.

"I guess I just couldn't stand to see Randy treating you so badly. All he's done since I got here was treat you like you're some kind of kid. And you're not. You're worth more than the way he treats you."

"Thanks." That one was softer. More genuine.

"It's not just that. Out there, when I saw Randy get his hands on you like that? I don't know what it was, but I knew I could never let anybody do that to you. I had to stand up for you, even if it meant—"

"Putting him on his ass?" She had a little half smirk, and her eyes told me she'd probably enjoyed it a little more than she was willing to admit.

"Yeah," I laughed. "That's about the size of it."

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't appreciate it, but I have to be honest. I've been under Randy's thumb for so long, I need to learn what it feels like to fight my own battles. Otherwise, he's never going to respect me."

"I understand that." She was right. If I insisted on charging in, all she would be doing is changing one guardian for another— and that was no way to live. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright," she said. "I know your heart is in the right place."

The mention of my heart sent something humming inside me. She knew my heart, so she had to be able to read all the secrets written there. Things I wasn't even ready to start leafing through on my own.

"Dana, your independence is important. Especially given how little of it you've been able to carve out for yourself. I want you to be able to stand on your own feet and make the decisions that matter most to you."

I looked up into her eyes, and all the barriers that had been holding me back had fallen. When I gazed there, I could see straight through to her soul, and it filled me up.

"Could I just say one thing?"

"Yeah," she said, barely above a whisper.

"It would mean a lot to me if I could be by your side while you find your way. I'm not asking to have a hand in any decisions you feel like you need to make. I just want to stand with you while you make them."

There was so much promise laced behind those words, and I knew that she heard it all. Everything I meant but couldn't say yet. The love that was latent in my offer.

Leaning forward, she took my face in her hands and kissed me. A kiss that felt more than a little bit like forgiveness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



After the ridiculous scramble of the day, how was it possible he could say something so perfect. If I had carried any doubt about just what kind of man Brent was, that dispelled it. It was impossible to doubt that he meant every word of what he had just said, and all of it spoke to exactly what my soul had been yearning for.

As I kissed him, I breathed in all of it. All of him. When we had kissed on the bridge, he had led the way. Up in his room, I'd deferred to him.

But there, in the dark room, my own private domain, I got to be the one who instigated. I was the one kissing him. My first step to owning my whole self. And it felt marvelous.

It started simply. Just a meeting of the lips. Somewhere between an offer and a promise. It wasn't meant to be anything more than a gesture to let him know I was willing to move forward from all the ugliness we'd been through.

Then something shifted in me. The pent-up frustration pooled in my core, and my cells vibrated with the memory of the previous night. All that sweet, forbidden release. The transgression of it added to the glory of what our bodies had exchanged. In a flash, I found myself demanding more.

My lips pushed and tugged at his, and I felt him rising to meet me. Not leading, but answering. Allowing me, in my room, to take charge.

"God, Dana," he said when I set his mouth free.

"Quiet," I whispered. "Everyone is just out there."

"Anything you say." It was as if he was making a point to render himself to me. That only made me madder for him.

"Shit," I hissed, suddenly overcome with need. There was only one way this could go, and I was ready to let the consequences be damned.

In a single, fluid swipe, I pulled my blouse over my head and let it fall on the developing table behind him. Brent's eyes widened in surprise, and I reveled in besting him. Even as I soaked that in, my fingers worked behind me until my bra came free, and I let it slide down my arms.

It's impossible to describe the look on his face upon seeing my breasts. I'd seen the look the night before as well. As if the sweetness of my body ached inside of him.

Being a smaller busted woman had always made me self-conscious, but under his eyes, there was no other way to be. When he looked at me, I felt perfect.

Stepping forward, I took his head again, but instead of guiding his mouth to meet mine, I led it to my tingling nipple. At the warm, damp softness of it, I had to bite my lip to keep from groaning. His hands found my ribs, and he pulled me closer as he worked me to a shockingly sensitive peak.

I could have lost myself to him right there. No man had ever cherished my body, and even that delirious attention might have been enough to reduce me to a shuddering mess. But I was counting on more.

Pushing him back with a sudden force, his back bumped against the table. Those eyes looked up at me, and I could see that he was worried that I was about to throw it all over. That I was about to dash away again, leaving him at odds. Instead, I tugged at the button on my trousers and began to work them down my thighs.

"Fuck," he said upon seeing the whole of my nakedness.

"Shhhh," I said again, half giggling. Were we ever going to be able to be intimate without sneaking around? It was infuriating and titillating at the same time. The proximity of others lent the stolen moment a kind of delectable danger. My skin was alive with the indiscretion of it.

He was working at the buttons of his shirt, but I was in no mood to wait. Leaning forward, I took him by the shoulders and forced his eyes up to meet mine.

"Just take your pants off."

For a moment, he tried to stand, but I kept my hands firmly in place. My body made the decision before my mind did. I wanted him on the chair. In a second, he had taken his pants down past his knees, and I caught sight of that massive piece that had so stirred me the night before.

It had seemed improbable that I would ever be able to take all of it, and yet I had—begging for more even as he'd filled me. Stepping forward, I was slick with anticipation to have him again. Settling my hips over him, Brent angled himself to meet me, and I slid slowly down over the tip, my breath catching at the pressure of him inside me.

"Jesus Christ," I hissed.

"Go slowly if you have to."

"I can't." With that, I pushed down until he was fully seated inside me. The tiniest twinge of pain only sharpened the edge of the pleasure, and I began to rock into him.

"Fuck, Dana." His voice was low and hot in my ear, and his hands gripped my backside as I bucked into him. Wrapping my legs around him, I hooked my feet into the back legs of the chair to give myself greater purchase. That done, I began to ride him hard, grinding my clit into his pelvic bone.

A wave of pleasure suffused up from the deepest point where he was buried inside me. His mouth dove down along my sternum, and he feasted on my breasts again. In answer, I ground harder into him.

"Give it to me," I found myself saying. "Give me all of it."

Scooting his hips forward, he offered me even more. I gasped as he stabbed even deeper, forcing ecstasy out of me in one hard thrust.

“Shit!” It was so hard to keep from crying out. I bent low over his head, pressing my forehead to him and jolting into him. The inevitable was so close. Even if I had been the most experienced woman in the world, this man would have chased me to the brink in an instant.

That low, familiar fire began to burn deep inside me, and my knees began to shudder. My body took over, increasing to a frenzied pace as I rode harder and harder into him. Using him to make myself come. And I was going to. Something shattering and unknown started swelling up inside me— thick and undeniable.

“Brent,” I gasped. “I’m— I’m going to—”

“Come for me,” he insisted. His hands pulled me to meet him, and he began to match my rhythm with swift, decisive thrusts. “Come for me, Dana.”

“Fuck.”

“Dana, come for me.”

“I’m going to—”

“I’ll come with you.”

That was all it took. I exploded into a blinding flash of pure light, probably ruining every negative in the room. Sparks flashed behind my eyelids, and I couldn’t breathe. If I had managed a breath, it would have torn from me in one long scream, and that would have brought the world to our door.

Just when I thought I might come apart at the seams, Brent released into me. Each pulse of him sent a surge of cum into me, forcing me further into the mayhem searing through me.

If this is what it was like being with Brent, it was all I wanted for the rest of my life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Dana lay against me, panting. Our bodies were covered with a perfect sheen of sweat. It may have only been ten or so minutes, but I was as spent as if I had run twenty miles.

“You know something,” I whispered into her ear.

“Hmmm,” she responded in a lazy groan. The orgasm had left her with that wonderful, barely conscious malaise.

“If I go back out there with a print of your naked body on my shirt, there’ll be no denying what happened in here.” Leaning back to give my chest a light slap, she let out a muffled laugh. Even if it didn’t fill the room, the contractions of it squeezed my cock, sending a fresh wave of delight up through me.

I held her hips and shushed her lightly, more to keep from falling too far than out of worry over who might hear. Easing forward, she kissed me again. The kind of kiss that let me know exactly where I sat in her heart.

“You’re a thinker, Brent Hawkins. That’s what I love about you.” It was the first time the word had broken from either one of us. Even if it had come out in jest, I caught it from the air and tucked it into the pocket of my heart. I wanted to remember the first time she had said it to me.

“We should get dressed,” I said, giving her butt a light slap.

“Always with the butt smacks,” she said, rolling her eyes in mock frustration. Unhooking her ankles from the chair, she slid off of me and stood on unsteady knees. I was grateful to be sitting, so she didn’t see that she had the same effect on me.

She was completely naked, and I only had my pants down. Unfair, perhaps, but it meant I was dressed again pretty quickly. That gave me ample opportunity to drink her in as she retrieved her clothes. While she pretended not to, it was clear that she knew I was watching. Memorizing each new facet of her.

I could spend the rest of my life exploring her body and always find something new to lose myself in. Stepping back into her underwear and pants, I mourned each inch of skin that vanished from my sight.

She reached over me to pluck her bra off the table, and as she did, I indulged in one more taste of her supple, pink nipple. The salty tang of her sweat was more intoxicating than the best bourbon in the world. Sliding into her cups, I tsked as she reached behind

herself to fasten the strap.

"What?"

"Pity," I said, shaking my head lightly. A moment of confusion danced across her face, then she broke into a broad, open mouthed smile.

"Oh, shut up!" Reaching up, she pulled the shoulder straps down and bared herself to me again. "Is this what you want? For me to go out there like this? You'd like it if everyone else got to see what you've been seeing?"

"Not a chance," I said, getting to my feet and helping myself again. She suppressed a squeal, and I indulged in a low, throaty chuckle. A handful of playful slaps chased my mouth from her chest up to her lips, and I drew her shoulder straps back up as we sealed the moment.

"So, I guess that's a no, huh?"

"That's right. Those things are mine from now on." I gave her bra a final pat, enjoying a bit of easy play.

"Noted," she said, then reached across to fetch up her blouse.

"Though," I said slyly, "I can't imagine they don't have some idea what's been happening in here."

"Oh, you think so?"

"Well, we walked in here a good little while ago. When's the last time you had a conversation in the dark room that lasted more than five minutes?"

"Brent," she let a sigh and dropped her arms, her top hanging lazily from her hand. "Those goobers barely registered us. They probably forgot we existed the second we closed the door."

"Is that what you think," I asked, raising my eyebrows. "I can tell you one thing, that sports guy—?"

"Brian."

"Yeah, Brian. He loves a good story, and it ain't about baseball. He may not look like he's paying attention, but I bet that guy knows my shoe size and how long we've been in here to the second."

"You're probably right." She let out a genuine laugh, only slightly muted to keep from drawing too much attention. It was wonderful to see her like this. Radiant in the flush of our clench. As bound up as we'd all been since the hard words in the kitchen, sharing a moment of pure, casual easiness felt like a revelation.

Better still, she seemed in no particular hurry to get her top on. As if she enjoyed being on display. Standing in her bra and pants, I caught glimpses of what it might be like to share a home with her. Oddly, this state of half-dress looked like it was about as comfortable as she'd felt outside of making love.

"Hey," she said, her eyes slightly hooded. "Get over here."

She didn't have to tell me twice. Sidling over, I took her by the waist and pulled her into a deep kiss. Her hands ran up into my hair, and she reached up to meet me even more, slipping her tongue in to meet mine at every turn.

"I fucking knew it!" The door slammed open, and Randy stood there, glowering in the doorway.

"Shit, Randy!" She ducked behind me, and I stood in front of her in an attempt to cover her state of semi-undress.

"How about a little privacy, buddy?"

"Buddy?" He spit the word back at me like a javelin. "You're nobody's fucking buddy, asshole. Punching me in the street and running back here to fuck my sister? That's some low shit."

"Now, you wait just a second!" Dana shoved out from behind me, hurling her blouse in his face. After all our hiding, she was rolling out to meet him without a shred of shame.

"Look at you," he sneered. "Traipsing around like a common fucking slut!" That last word snapped through the whole office like the crack of a whip. If we'd wanted secrecy, it was all out of the bag now.

"You don't get to talk to her like that," I barked. But, before I could get another word out, Dana turned and planted a hand in the center of my chest.

"It's alright, Brent," she said with remarkable composure. "I can handle this." Looking at her, there was no doubt in the world that she could. This was the chance to make good on what I had offered just a little while earlier. She was about to find her feet, and my job was to stand by her side while she did.

The days of letting other people fight her battles for her were over. And I had a front-row seat to the debut performance.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



My knees were shaking. Hell, my whole body was quivering. But it was a very different sensation to the astounding rattle I'd just felt straddling Brent on that chair.

This was a feeling I'd never felt before. It was adjacent to rage, but there was fear mixed in. And, dare I say it, pride? As if the whole of my life had been pointed toward this particular showdown. A moment years in the making.

"You know what, Randy? Enough is enough. I'm through with this."

"You're through with it? Jesus, listen to yourself. And cover up, would you?" There was something dismissive in his tone that only made me dig in harder. As if he didn't even remotely consider me someone worth listening to. I was just some fly to be swatted away or bottled up.

"Like hell I will!" I grabbed up my shirt but made a show of standing there exactly as I was. That got his attention. No guy likes to see his sister in her bra, let alone have her shout at him. There was no way to win an argument like that.

Which was exactly how I wanted it.

"Just do what I tell you, will you?"

"No!" Now it was my turn to shout the office down. We had all spent plenty of time listening to him carry on like some tinpot tyrant, and now it was somebody else's chance to run the show.

"You've spent the better part of our adult lives telling me what to do, and I'm through with it. Do you hear me, Randy? The time for that shit is over!" He hated it when I said his name like that, and he hated it even more, when I swore in public. As if it made me less ladylike in a way that reflected badly on him.

"Wow, you're just determined to be a harpy today, aren't you?"

"Don't you ever fucking speak to me like that!" A new voice came out of me— as if drawn up from the center of the earth. It caught his attention, and he looked at me with fresh eyes. "I'm a grown woman, and I've had it up to here with being treated like some child you can boss around."

"I don't—"

"I wasn't finished! It's one thing for you to stomp around here telling me what to do, but outside this office, you're not my boss. And, if I want to rent a space and do

something important to me, it has exactly zero to do with you.”

“Is that what this is about,” he balked. “Your stupid little dance studio?”

“It is not stupid,” I hissed.

“She’s right,” Brent said behind me. “There’s nothing stupid about it.” I turned to look at him, grateful for the small vouch of support. He was giving me the floor but letting me know that he was still in my corner. That bolstered me to turn my ire back on my brother.

“Will you stay out of this, you prick?” Randy seemed grateful to have a man to get angry with. That was territory he could handle.

“You’re a fine one to tell people to stay out of things,” I called his attention back to me. This was our showdown, and there was no way I was letting him derail it by goading Brent back into another fight.

“Watch your tone, kiddo.”

“I’m not a kid! In case you’ve missed the last decade, I’m an adult now, and I get to say what to do with my life. The scared little girl you knew is long gone, and you’ve been too busy shoving everybody around to notice. Well, here I am!”

I threw my arms out, and he turned his head, shying away from the sight of me. Point made, I yanked my top back over my shoulders.

“So, whether you like it or not, I’ve grown up. That’s something you’re going to have to accept. And, I’m probably going to make some mistakes, but they’re mine to make.”

“You’ve made a pretty big one in the last couple of days, from what I’ve seen.” His eyes burned over my shoulder to Brent, the implication sparking me further.

“The time I’ve spent with Brent is about the furthest thing from a mistake I can imagine. And if you think differently, then that’s just something you’re going to have to deal with because I’m not about to compromise my happiness just because it makes you uncomfortable.”

“It’s not just that. God, you’re so naïve.”

“Naïve?”

“That’s right. He’s involved in business with the paper. As an employee, anything you do with him could jeopardize a major business deal.” He suddenly had his boss tone on. Reasonable in a way that barely masked the venomous intentions roiling under the surface.

“What are you saying, Randy?” If he was going to dare, then I intended to meet him every step of the way.

“I’m saying, Dana, that if you insist on carrying on with a business partner, then the paper will have no choice but to let you go.” It was like a bomb went off inside my chest.

“You’re saying you’ll fire me if I keep seeing Brent?”

“It’s good to see you understand.” If I could have fired lightning bolts from my eyes and burned him to the floor, I would have done it without a second’s remorse. Suddenly, everything broke into stunning clarity.

“You know what? I’ll save you the trouble.” Pushing past him, I strode out into the main office. Everyone was looking, but that was no surprise. In fact, it felt oddly satisfying to have an audience for my liberation.

“What do you think you’re doing?” He stood dumbly in the door to the dark room,

watching me warily.

"I'm quitting. Consider this my official resignation." With that, I grabbed up the camera equipment from my desk and slung it over my shoulder.

"You can't walk out with that," he barked. "It's company property."

"Check the receipts," I called back. "These were purchased with my own money. They're mine to take." With that, I shot him a mock salute and looked at the rest of the room. "It's been a pleasure working with you guys. I wish I could say the same for everyone here." Darting one last defiant look at my brother, I turned and headed for the door.

Dad stood at the threshold of his office. He'd clearly been watching with everyone else. While I hated to think that he knew what Brent and I had been up to in the dark room, I was grateful to have his eyes on the rest of it.

As I strode past, I gave him a small nod. This was the moment to find out where he really stood on things. He returned my nod, adding a quick wink.

That was all I needed to know. Dad and Brent were on my side. And the rest of the world could take a flying leap as far as I was concerned. Pushing open the door to that office for what very well might have been the last time, I let the sun hit me full in the face.

There was a danger that it might have felt like a loss, but instead, it rang of something completely different. Freedom.

CHAPTER THIRTY



“You—” Like a bloodthirsty predator, Randy spun around to face me. His jaw was clenched so hard I could almost hear his teeth grinding. “This is all your fault.” He crossed the length of the room, barreling toward me like a charging bull, but I stood my ground. If he wanted me to rearrange his face one more time, then that was his problem. “You hear me? This is all your fucking fault.”

He pushed one finger against my chest, and now I was the one clenching my jaw. I had to make a very conscious effort not to twist his arm and send him flying over a desk. I had just apologized to Dana for roughing up her brother, and I didn’t want to apologize again.

“You put that finger on me again, and I’m going to snap it in half.” It was the kind of high-noon, gunslinger bullshit I never expected to say, especially to someone I had once considered a friend, but I meant it. Randy had ridden his high-horse to the limits of decency, and I wasn’t about to let that go unpunished. Sure, I was making an effort, but even I had my limits.

“Are you threatening me?” He hissed, but he still pulled his hand back. “Haven’t you done enough, Brent?” His hands were now balled into fists, his knuckles already turning white, but I didn’t think he had the courage to take a swing at me. Part of me, though, wished for him to do it. Again, I was making one hell of an effort to behave, but if given a chance—

“Go home,” I told him, my voice calm and firm. That actually surprised me. I’d never thought of myself as the stoic type, but I was somehow pulling it off here. “You’re embarrassing yourself, Randy. Just turn around, go home, and think of how you’re going to apologize to your sister. Because, make no mistake about it, you are going to apologize to her.”

“Yeah?” He snarled, spittle flying out of his mouth. “Are you going to make me?”

“If I have to.”

“Get out of my face, Brent.” He rocked back and forth on his heels, his arms swinging as if his shoulders had turned into hinges, but he couldn’t muster the courage to punch me. He knew he couldn’t beat me, and he didn’t want to risk another beatdown. That was smart of him. “In fact, you can get out of my face forever. I never want to see your sorry face again. We’re done, Brent. Whatever business you were expecting to do here— it’s

not going to happen.”

I arched my eyebrows and shrugged.

“Do you even have the authority to decide that?” I asked him, and his eyes burned with anger. They turned into burning coals, two dark pieces someone had rammed into his hollow sockets. He opened his mouth as if to say something but clamped it shut again. Then, he spun around and marched toward Paul’s office.

On the main floor, everyone was slack-jawed. They were like passers-by on the boardwalk of some old west town, watching as some bandito wreaked havoc and threatened to ruin everyone’s day.

Paul was still standing there, on the threshold of his office, and he watched Randy walk toward him with disbelief and sadness. I felt sorry for him. Paul struck me as a good-hearted guy, honest to a fault, and he didn’t deserve to have someone as pathetic as Randy for a son.

“You are canceling the contract,” Randy said, his fists still clenched as he talked to his father. “Whatever has been drawn up or signed, I don’t care. We are tearing it up, all of it.”

“Son...” That word came out of Paul’s mouth as a sigh and a weary one at that.

“I don’t wanna hear it,” Randy continued, his voice rising in pitch. The man was straight up losing it. “I’m sending that asshole away before Dana gets any more ideas into her head. You know that he’s a bad influence! Just look at what’s happening here, and all because he’s been messing with Dana’s head! We have to send him away! I want him gone. GONE!”

The veins on Randy’s neck were now bulging, like venomous serpents, hell-bent on choking him out. His face had turned red, and he was shouting so loudly his voice was already turning hoarse. I knew I should have just walked away, but something kept me rooted to the place. Maybe I was afraid of what he could do. Randy was so out of it that I wouldn’t be surprised if he tried something insane.

“Shut your mouth, you petulant child.” Paul’s voice filled the office like the crack of a whip. Randy wasn’t expecting it, and he took a step back, almost as if afraid his own dad was going to beat the living shit out of him. “I am not doing any such a thing. You heard Dana. She’s a grown woman, no matter what you believe, and she’s entitled to her own choices. As for the contract, I don’t give a rat’s ass what you say. We’re going ahead with it.”

“But, dad, can’t you see that—”

“Haven’t I told you to shut your mouth?” Paul snapped. He lowered his gaze and shook his head, his shoulders slumping under the weight of all he was saying. “I should’ve put a stop to this years ago. It’s my own fault for not paying any attention to my own children, but I’m not going to let things continue the way they have.”

“What are you saying?” Randy asked, his voice folding into a trembling whisper.

“I’m saying that, as your father, I want you to get your shit together.” Paul’s voice rose again, but it wasn’t as out of control as Randy’s had been. There was strength to it, but it was an even-handed kind of strength, one that came from deep-rooted certainty. “Now, you either calm down, or you can get the hell out of my office.”

For a moment, I thought Randy had come to his senses. He unclenched his fists, let out a long exhale, and his shoulders drooped.

"This is bullshit," he muttered, and then his anger returned with a vengeance. He turned around, fast as lightning, and swept the contents of an entire desk to the floor. A stack of documents exploded in the air, a keyboard clattered over the ground, and an old laptop swung back and forth from its cord. "This is fucking bullshit!"

He stormed out. Behind him, a stunned silence.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



I ran, and I ran hard.

I didn't even know why I was doing it, but I couldn't stop. Even though my lungs felt like overinflated balloons, my legs like uprooted trees, and my heart like a jackhammer— my body demanded it. I needed to get away, to put as much distance between Randy and me as was humanly possible.

And so— I ran.

I ran down the sidewalk, the little stores nothing but a blur of vitrines and colorful displays, and I ran through the market square, my shoes slapping the cobbled sidewalks with the anxious steadiness of a drumstick.

Overhead, angry clouds marched over the mountains, swelling up as they met the jagged peaks. The bright flare of lighting cast away the darkness for a moment and thunder rumbled lazily. A split second later and the gunshot snap of thunderclap exploded in the air. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as if electrified, but I didn't stop running. If anything, I just ran faster.

It wasn't long before a curtain of rain was falling over Willa Creek.

The few people still out hurried back into whatever diner and store they could find, and the lively town became like a ghost version of itself. You couldn't hear the usual laughter that punctuated a lazy afternoon, nor the twittering of birds as they danced in the gnarled branches of oak trees. A few SUVs rolled past, the rain dancing in front of their headlights and exploding out from their tires, but soon they were out of sight.

I was the only person out in the street.

Surprisingly, I didn't mind.

The adrenaline coursing through my veins tangled with my frustration, turning it into a wicked version of exhilaration, and that made the loneliness bearable. More than just bearable, it made it desirable. My frayed mind was already giving me enough trouble, and I didn't want to deal with anyone wondering why I was running like a madwoman during a storm.

I only stopped running when a furious wind joined the rain. The thin sheets of water swelled up and turned into a downpour. The rumble of thunder reverberated inside my chest. I was soaking wet, my shirt sticking to my skin, but I barely noticed it. There was just too much on my mind.

Despite putting my body through the wringer, my mind insisted on circling back to Randy and his pathetic display. I remembered each and every one of his words, the sharp tone of his voice, and the disgusted expression on his face. I still couldn't believe the way he'd talked to me. He'd treated me like his property, not like his sister. And, worst of all, he'd done it in front of the whole office.

Despite acting all tough in front of him, I had to admit it— his stupid antics had embarrassed me to no end. How was I supposed to face everyone back at the office now? I'd done nothing wrong, sure, but still. This wasn't a position I liked to be in. Thank God I'd already quit, even if my hand was forced.

Surprisingly, part of me was happy Randy had lost his shit. That had given me the opportunity to finally stand up to him, and I was quite proud that I'd actually done it. I'd always let him treat me as a child, and deep down, I'd already accepted that he was the one person in the world I couldn't disobey. He loomed over me like some authoritarian figure, watching my every move while passing judgment, and it felt absolutely glorious to put an end to that.

For the first time in years, I felt free.

Of course, it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. After all, I didn't know what any of this meant for us going forward. Even though he was the undisputed king of assholes, Randy was still my brother. I wouldn't have to see him at the office now that I had quit, but that didn't mean I could avoid him forever.

Then there was my father.

He had given me his silent approval, but I still needed to talk with him. A wink and a nod were a good start, but they certainly weren't enough, and the last thing I wanted was to hurt the relationship I had with him. Granted, he'd been absent and distant after mom's death, but how could I blame him for it? The man had been hurting for years, but he never failed to put food on our table.

It's too much, I thought, my mind feeling like an overloaded wagon. I'd always believed thoughts to be weightless but, then and there, I could feel them weighing down on me like boulders. My mind was like a whirlpool of memories and worries— Brent, Randy, dad, the dancing studio, the newspaper— and I felt my sanity circling toward the drain.

Maybe it was instinct, but my feet carried me straight to Shaver's Pond.

The rain was falling harder now, and the wind howled like an angry wolf, but I didn't care. I ambled toward the bridge, relishing the bitter cold on my face, and stood right at the center of it. I laid my hands on the railings and looked down at the rolling surface of the lake, the gentle waters now stirred by the wind.

The boards creaked, the wood swelling up against the metallic frame, and the bridge started shifting and moving. It felt like I was aboard a steamboat, one of those ancient things that still inhabited the rivers down south. Even so, I didn't move. I'd been here on this bridge a thousand times. Was it madness to stand on a bridge during a thunderstorm? Yes, it was, but I knew this bridge.

I was perfectly safe here.

More than just safe, I felt strangely at peace.

I closed my eyes, felt the rain on my face, and smiled. There was a storm out there, its fury coming down from the mountains, but inside me—

That inner storm was subsiding.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



I couldn't get out of the office fast enough myself. Unlike Randy, though, I made sure to take my time about it. I didn't want to give the impression that I was chasing him because I wasn't. I wanted to find Dana.

I was so proud of her for keeping it together and standing up to her brother like that. The way she'd confronted him in her bra at first was a stroke of genius. Let him be as uncomfortable as he'd made her for so many years.

Yet, despite Dana's triumph, I wanted to make sure she was all right. She seemed empowered and calm by the end, but I knew from experience that could all drain away after a confrontation. Plus, she just quit her job.

That was a lot for one day— one half hour, practically. Dana was my girl, even after such a short time. The way I saw it, I needed to be there for my girl. Then she could decide what kind of support she needed from me.

Heavy rain was falling as I walked outside. It soaked the top of my head in less than a minute. I cursed under my breath and pulled my coat up around my neck, trying to shield myself. The threads of rainwater wiggled their way down and past my collar anyway.

This was some storm that had blown up, and I didn't like thinking about Dana being out in it. I knew she didn't have so much as an umbrella. Not that one would do much good against this driving wind and rain.

I hoped she'd taken shelter somewhere. There were enough shops in town that it would've been easy enough to duck into one the moment the rain started.

I walked into Valerie's, a bakery I'd noticed but not yet tried out. A pretty blonde woman stood arranging cookies in a case, and she looked up as I walked in.

"Welcome to Valerie's," she said with a smile. "Need a bit of sugar to brighten up this dreary day?"

"Maybe another time," I replied distractedly. I didn't want to be rude, but I was focused on checking all the tables. Dana wasn't there.

"Everything okay?" asked the woman, concern coming into her face.

"Oh, yeah, I'm just looking for someone. Dana Mitchell? You know her? You haven't seen her in the past fifteen minutes or so, have you?"

"Dana?" That concern on the blonde's face deepened. "She's a good friend of mine, but no, I haven't seen her for a day or two. What's going on?"

I didn't want to spill Dana's private business, even if this woman said they were friends. So, I shrugged.

"Nothing much. I only wanted to check on her after a little dust-up she had with her brother."

"Fucking Randy," said the woman under her breath, then caught herself, looking around the bakery to see if any of the other customers had heard. I smothered a snort of laughter, and she gave me a sheepish smile. "Uh— sorry about that. I hope you find Dana soon."

"Thanks." I gave her a quick nod and stepped back outside. Across the street was an awning that said Old Town Flower Shop, and I had a vague memory of Dana saying another friend of hers worked there.

I crossed the street, my feet splashing through the puddles already forming. Even in my two minutes inside the bakery, the storm had intensified. The wind flapped at the awning of the flower store as I entered it.

Pretty quickly, I saw Dana wasn't inside. The brunette I'd seen Randy hitting on at The Broken Tap— Laura, he'd called her— was moving between the flowers, adjusting them in their displays. She gave me a quizzical glance as I craned my head to double check that I hadn't missed Dana's tumble of red hair.

"Hey there," she said, a question in her voice.

"Hey, I'm searching for Dana Mitchell. Any chance you've seen her this morning?"

"Oh, no." Laura straightened. "Why?"

I hesitated and decided against bringing up Randy after what I'd seen at the bar. Laura probably didn't need to be reminded of that unpleasant experience.

"Just wanted to make sure she got out of the rain," I told her. "I'll keep looking."

"Nice of you." Laura grinned at me. "I'm pleased to hear Dana's got such a handsome fellow worrying about her."

I had the wild impulse to say, of course, I was worried. Dana was my girlfriend. I didn't, but some part of me wanted to tell everyone that we were together. Now that Randy knew, hell, I felt like yelling to the heavens that I'd finally found the woman for me.

"She is a special woman," I said instead and lifted my hand in farewell as I left the flower shop.

It was likely unnecessary, but I was beginning to feel a sense of urgency. As the wind spat rain in my face, I crossed my fingers that Dana would be in the next place I checked.

Which was The Willa Creek Diner. I swung in, those cheery bells ringing and saw Dorothy sliding a plate of eggs in front of an older man. She clocked me standing in the entrance, and her eyes widened.

"You're soaking wet, Mr. Not a Stranger Anymore," she said. "Wait right there, and I'll get you a towel or two."

"That's okay, Dorothy." I looked down to see a puddle spreading around my feet. "I'm sorry to drip all over your floor. But I only wanted to see if Dana was here?"

My gaze swept over the diner as I asked, looking for her beautiful face. There were a couple of folks staring at me, but none of them was my girl.

"I haven't seen her," confirmed Dorothy, a dash of worry in her eyes now too.

"All right, I'll keep looking. Sorry again for the mess." I sent Dorothy a little wave, trying not to seem too panicked myself. I didn't want to alarm anyone.

Once outside again, I headed towards Dana's new dance studio. Maybe she'd run there? I could understand her wanting to be in the one space that was hers.

But I didn't even have to go inside to see she wasn't there. Through those tall windows, I could see a man I assumed was the real estate agent, standing in the middle of the room looking confused. He had a sheaf of papers in his hand and was checking his phone every two seconds.

"Dammit," I muttered to myself. The rain was cold on the back, on my neck, and my wet clothes were clinging to my skin. I had to find Dana. But where would she have gone?

Then it came to me. Shaver's Pond. I remembered how much Dana loved that place and realized that's where she would have gone. High on the emotion of her confrontation with Randy and needing to think through all the unanswered questions that opened up.

Thunder boomed in the distance, and I gritted my teeth. I couldn't keep my panic away anymore. If Dana was out at the pond, that wasn't good. I took off in that direction as fast as I could, hoping she was okay.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Thunder thrummed through the air, and I looked up at the sky, smiling. I thought the sound of thunder felt like the sound of the natural world breathing. Or maybe that was the wind, and the thunder was the grumble of the discontented hills. Perhaps they didn't like getting wet as much as I did.

I laughed at my whimsical imagination and let the rain patter down on my face. It was soaking me to the skin, but I didn't mind. My silly ideas about the thunder made me happy, and being happy in the rain made me think of my mother.

She always loved the rain, my mom. It felt like a sign to have this storm roll up, right as I'd stood up to the two men in our family. It felt like my mother telling me the only way she could that I'd done right.

One of my only memories of my mother was running through a warm downpour on a summer's day. I was only four or five at the time, but the memory remained crystal clear. Certain images stood out as if I'd photographed them.

Like— a purple popsicle I'd been eating, dripping down my hand. The afternoon had been so sweltering, the thing melted before I could eat half of it. In the way of kids, I was all set to wail about it. My hand was covered in sticky purple juice, and my treat had been cut short. I remembered trying to lick up the mess on my hand and my mother laughing.

The rain had begun to fall then, and she'd tugged me out in it. Another image, as powerful as if she was in front of me: my mom's face, lit from within with joy, as water droplets slid down her temples.

"Let the rain wash it off," she'd told me, pointing at my hand. "Dance it away, sweetheart!"

My mom had started to dance then, goofy at first, then graceful. She could've been a water spirit, some magical faerie woman. I'd joined in, doing my own little twirls and kicks. At one point, my mom picked me up and danced us around together, hand in hand.

Randy had watched us from the porch, frowning. He didn't understand and didn't want to get wet. Now I wondered if he had been too afraid to give himself over to the rain. It would've been losing control, and maybe he was uncomfortable with that even then. As mad at him as I still was, it almost made me feel sorry for him, thinking of what he'd missed out on.

Ever since that day, I'd loved the rain. It felt like a gift from my mother. I had so few

things from her since she'd died when I was so young. But the rain was a big one, and I was grateful for it.

I didn't quite feel like dancing, even being lost in memories of that time with my mother. I was still a little too worked up over what happened at the office for that.

Yet, I was moving somehow. I felt myself swaying back and forth, but I wasn't dancing. Was I? Pulled back into the present, I realized the thunder had gotten louder. Worse, the wind had picked up.

As I looked around me, a huge branch across the pond came crashing down, torn from its trunk by the gusty wind. My eyes widened as the wind buffeted me too, and I reached out to steady myself on the railing.

It didn't do any good, though, and that was when I figured out the bridge itself was rocking back and forth. The danger of this storm suddenly asserted itself to me as I took in just how bad it had gotten.

I needed to seek shelter right away. Turning back towards dry land, I headed towards it. I was shocked to find the going was incredibly slow, the wind pushing against me every time I lifted my foot. I leaned into the gale, pressing forward. Fear ran through me for the first time since the rain had begun.

I would have felt a lot better if the bridge wasn't shifting under my feet.

Grasping the railing, I managed one step, then another, then another. I was getting there. I set my jaw and threw myself forward again. A little further, just a little further.

Once I was off the bridge, I hoped the wind would be less intense. Arcing out over the water as it did, the bridge was exposed. Good not to be in danger of being squashed by a fallen branch, but definitely not a comfortable experience. The way the boards were creaking made me extremely nervous.

No sooner had I thought that than there was a loud crack. I tensed, looking around to see what tree was about to smash to the ground.

But it wasn't a tree. It was the bridge.

I watched with horror as a plank dipped in front of me. It seemed utterly surreal. This bridge had stood for as long as I'd been alive. What was happening?

Terror filled my veins, and I tried to run, but it was too late. That one plank became the next, and then the railing buckled. The entire bridge was breaking apart. I froze, wondering if I could jump over the gap that had opened up between me and dry land.

I couldn't because that was when the whole thing collapsed. I screamed as I slid forward and then fell, the deafening sound of breaking wood all around me. Something heavy hit my forehead, plunging my face into the pond and cutting off my cry.

I sputtered, trying to get my face above water. I managed to dislodge the heavy board pressing on my head, but, with the motion, a heavy beam slipped down to pin my leg against another part of the fallen bridge.

Rain fell in torrents, and the pond's water level was already higher than it had been in months. Waves slapped at my head, filling my mouth with water. It took every muscle in my body to strain to hold my head up high enough that I could breathe.

I was so scared I couldn't even cry. I was trapped, unable to free myself. Trapped, and not a single other person knew I was here.

I was on my own.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



My throat slammed shut. Everything inside me shrank into an icy, rigid knot in the center of my chest.

Mere moments before, I had been standing in awe. Dana was standing on the bridge, right where we had shared our first intimacies. The rain that had pelted me, driving me on to search for her, seemed to have a very different effect on Dana. If anything, she looked angelic.

She had stood on the bridge, face turned up toward the sky, arms spread as if to welcome the elements to wash her clean. To interrupt that would have been transgression bordering on a mortal sin.

But in an instant, it had all shifted. Not even that the bridge collapsed— more like it vanished into a jagged heap all at once. And somewhere in the midst of it was the woman I needed more than anything. A hole tore open in my core at the thought that she'd been swallowed into darkness.

I ran. Before my brain could catch up, my body had leapt into action. Not the same tight run from the first part of my search, but long, desperate strides. The horror of it replayed over and over in my mind— that tiny squawk of fear and the splinter of wood as she slid through.

“Dana!” As if I expected an answer. Or even to be able to hear it above the spattering rain and roar of the water.

At a distance, it was as if I could pinpoint the spot where she had plunged, but the closer I got, the more confused it all became. The bridge had continued to crumble, only adding to the jumbled chaos. Still, if I had to pull every rotten timber out with my bare hands, I would. If that's what it took to save her, I would do it twenty times over.

Skidding to a stop in the slimy mud of the bank, I searched the sodden rubble frantically.

“Dana?”

Nothing.

The rain beat the water in hard, heavy goutts, shattering the surface and making it impossible to see. A bolt of thunder lit across the sky, bringing that startling, sizzling boom that rattled the bones under my skin.

It was as if the universe itself was calling death out across the water. But I wasn't

about to let that happen. If the water was going to swallow her, then it would be taking me with it.

I dove in. The assault of drops replaced in a moment by the full, thick caress of the water. It deadened my ears, chasing away the thunder and sharpening my focus. Opening my eyes, the murky darkness pressed in on me. There was no way to see any sign of her.

Thank God it was a pond and not a river. If the current had been running, I would be fighting against it, struggling in the vain hope that it hadn't carried her away. Groping through the freezing water, I finally found a chunk of the bridge. Dragging myself to it, I reached blindly into the wreckage, searching for anything soft. Anything human.

All my fingers met were splintered wood held down by twisted metal. My lungs burned, demanding air. But I had to hang on as long as possible. If I was hungry for it, Dana might be starving. Or worse.

At last, when it felt like I was about to split in two, I bobbed to the surface. Taking in a great heave of damp air, I scanned the surface. She hadn't been in the dead center of the bridge, so maybe if I paddled out a bit and worked my way toward shore, that would increase my chances.

This was no time to panic. If I didn't keep my head straight, she would be lost for sure. After giving in to my impulses every time Randy had set the bait, it was a hard lesson. Control was the only way I was going to save her.

Gritting down hard, I slipped a few strokes toward the middle of the pond and dragged myself into the debris. Fighting against my soaking clothes, I struggled to climb on top to get to a better vantage point. Every time I gained a purchase, something shifted. That or my foot slipped on decades of moss.

It was all too dangerous. If Dana was somewhere under all this, and I somehow shifted even more on top of her, then I'd be responsible for making it all worse. The need to save her was tempered by the caution not to throw her into any more danger.

In the end, I sank back down into the water and dragged myself along the edge. Every few feet, I'd hold position and pick over the ruin with eager eyes. Anything remotely human was a reason to haul myself in and cast aside as much as my arms would allow. Even with all the elements against me, I felt stronger than I had ever been.

I had to be.

Flashes of our time together kept coming over me, each one carrying a new grief that they might be lost forever. That first glimpse of her, when those liquid eyes struck a chord in the hollow of my chest.

Or, the first time I saw her on this bridge when it was whole. A model of peace after the bewildering tempest of her brother. A man I thought I knew so completely changed in such a short amount of time.

The stolen, honeyed moment we had first shared here. The sublime line of Dana's throat as she surrendered to her first climax at my hands. And all the torrid tenderness that followed. For all of that to be lost would be a tragedy beyond measure.

A small splash caught my eye. At the epicenter of the destruction, just a little further towards the shore. It wasn't the motion of some inanimate shard dropping into the pond.

It was alive. Intentional. A new surge welled up inside me, and I dragged myself with new vigor.

Dana was there. And she was alive. If I could only reach her in time, she would stay that way.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



My ears were ringing. So much that it almost drowned out the dull rumble of the rain pounding on the water. I tipped my chin back as far as I could, stealing little sips of fresh air. If I brought my face back to level, even my nose would be submerged.

My throat was tight, and the back of my neck ached with the strain. Worse, my head pounded with a deep, resonating thrum. Somewhere back in that tumble, something had caught me hard on the forehead. It was hard to say whether I'd banged it as I slipped through the planks or if something had fallen and hit me once I was in the water.

Mere seconds before, I might have been able to follow the line of events, but now everything was jumbled. I'd pushed whatever it was off of me, but just how I had hit it was lost. Not that it mattered, really.

It was all a blur. The way traumatic or painful events usually were. It was that way when I tried to remember the car accident, too.

There was a memory of my head rebounding off the window, but the pain of it was lost in the shock of the moment. Or the ugly, sudden crunch of the door collapsing. The spray of cubed glass from the windshield as it peppered us with tiny cuts.

It was all there, somewhere, but as if it had happened to someone else. A different me that I was watching through distant eyes.

Even in the instant after the fall, it seemed impossible that it had happened to me. The daze of a crack to the head only aided that along. Blinking hard against the damp on my face, I reached a soaking hand out of the pond in an effort to wipe some of it away.

My palm was red. Runny, almost translucent red. Blood mixed with water, but unmistakably mine. There was no way of knowing just how badly I'd been hurt, but if I didn't get my arms back to treading the water, it was all going to get worse.

Closing one eye, then the other, I managed to determine that I still had both of them. That was something.

I kicked in an effort to swim out of my trap. One leg was free, but the other was locked in place. Pinned by a hunk of the bridge now completely swallowed by the water it used to span. Planting my left foot on whatever held my right ankle, I pushed hard. Maybe I could stand and drag myself out.

Nothing.

Adjusting my position, I tried to shove first one way, then another. There were two distinctly different objects pinching me in place, but neither moved. If something didn't change fast, I was going to run out of hope. Nobody knew I was here.

Laura knew I liked the pond as a refuge, but there was no hope of her chancing along in a storm like this. Brent might have known I liked it here. Our first tryst could have spoken to that. But what were the chances of him being out in this? More than likely, he was still back at the office, defending my honor to my brother.

For all Randy's talk about protecting me, even he was useless. After so much stifling attention, he was blind to my moment of true need. Which felt oddly typical. It had always been more about him than me, anyway.

Holding a deep breath, I ducked under the water and doubled over. Maybe my hands would be deft enough to manage what my foot couldn't. If I could just discern exactly what was holding me down, maybe I could pry myself free. It might have been a vain hope, but it was something. Hope was in pretty short supply at the moment.

A hunk of wood ran hard against the back of my leg, and that was braced against a stone. But, along the top of my ankle was a heavy span of metal. Maybe if I was at a different angle, I could pry it away, but as it was, there was no chance.

Unfurling back up to meet the surface, I stretched as tall as I could to get as much breath as possible. Rain pattered into my gaping mouth, mingling every ounce of air with a teaspoon of water. A person could drown like that just as easily as they might if they slipped below the surface.

A creak above me brought me back into the moment. Just barely off to one side, not far enough to offer me any shelter, was the underside of the bridge. Standing on it so many times, the water seemed so close. Now, looking from underneath, it seemed impossibly high.

I was tempted to reach up and try to grab it. Maybe I could pull myself free. More likely, I'd wind up bringing even more of the shuddering hulk down on top of me. Another groan of the wood and an ugly lurch told me that it might not need my help to come down.

The thing was going to collapse—it was only a question of time. And when it did, I'd be crushed under the weight of it. All the memories I'd made for myself, idling on that bridge in fairer weather, and the last thing I would ever see was it careening toward me. The injustice of it sat like battery acid in the pit of my stomach.

Launching into a sudden frenzy, I splashed and writhed in a fruitless effort to get free. I wasn't going to die like that. Not if I had anything to say about it.

The thump of timber on timber locked me up. Had it started already? Panting with exertion, I cast a furtive glance in every direction. Another hearty thump echoed the first. Nothing had fallen from above, and my heart settled slightly at that.

A watery splash and the sound of heaving wood cut through to my very marrow. I wasn't alone. Someone was coming. Holding my breath, I ducked my nose below the water and looked in the direction of the sound. A figure, barely discernible through the downpour, was carving a path toward me.

My heart leapt at it.

I was on the brink of being saved. But whoever it was had to hurry. Another juddering shift from above told me just how little time I had before it was all over.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



I kept my eyes on those splashes, pulling myself closer and closer. The mud at the bottom of the pond sucked at my feet, trying to hold me.

I would not be held back from Dana. No fucking way.

Lifting my knee clear up to my waist, I got free and took a giant step forward. The motion brought me close enough that I could see a flash of Dana's bright hair, tangled and muddied. The sight gave me a new surge of energy, and I jerked myself forward, pushing away from a big piece of rubble. I got a splinter for my trouble, but I was beyond caring.

Then, I saw a different kind of red from the glowing fire of Dana's tresses.

Blood.

Blood curling on the surface of the water, spreading out in a dark red stain.

My heart leapt into my mouth. Dana was bleeding. I didn't know how badly or why, but that wasn't good. At least she was still moving—the ripples and splashes of water in her direction told me that much.

Until they stopped, that was.

I thought I couldn't get more afraid than I already was, but a new level of terror spread through my very bones. She wasn't moving. If it weren't for her hair, floating on top of the pond, I'd have no idea she was there.

No.

Dana. My Dana, the fun and spirited and affectionate woman that had come into my life mere days ago, but who I already loved with all my heart.

Loved?

The revelation burst through me with the power of a sun. I had known the depth of my feelings for Dana already, had them hovering on the edge of my consciousness. It wasn't exactly a surprise to me, at the same time as it was.

I hadn't said it to myself, not like that, so plain and simple. I loved Dana. That was the truth.

There in the pouring rain, struggling against wind and mud and jagged planks, I knew it with more certainty than I had ever known anything. Dana was the only woman I loved—the only woman I would ever love. There wasn't a future for me without her. At least, not one I cared to think about.

"Dana!" I yelled, but the wind tore her name from my throat. Even if she were conscious, there was no way she could hear me calling to her.

But with another two massive steps, I saw her face. White, with blood streaming down from her forehead. Her eyes were fluttering, not quite closed but not open either. She was still alive.

Heedless of the shards of wood digging into my hands, I pulled wreckage away as fast as I could. Dana's situation was revealed to me agonizingly slowly. She'd been surrounded by planks, but she should've been able to move towards the shore. Why hadn't she?

Then I saw it. A massive beam, one that had been a support for practically half the bridge. It had fallen and was jutting out at a low angle from the surface of the pond. The trajectory of the line was clear: the beam was pinning Dana down somehow.

I threw aside one more piece of splintered bridge and finally reached her side. She was barely conscious, not registering my presence. I wanted to touch her, assure myself she was still alive, but the time for being driven by pure emotion was over. I needed to act quickly and wisely.

Taking a deep breath, I plunged under the choppy water. It was too murky for me to see through, but I threw my hands forward, feeling in front of me. My questing fingers found the warmth of Dana's leg, and on top of it, the rough texture of the beam.

She'd been pinned down, hardly able to keep her head above water. Between that and the head injury, no wonder she had almost fainted.

Still unable to see it, I managed to get my hands around both sides of the massive piece of wood holding Dana trapped. Bracing myself as best I could in the sucking mud, I heaved.

Every muscle in my body was tense. I was using strength I didn't know I had, my arms screaming with the exertion. I pushed, using my legs to lift like I'd been taught by my dad, and slowly, aching slowly, the beam came up.

I had to hold it long enough to move it off of Dana completely. If I lifted it, only to drop it on her calf or foot, we would be in even deeper trouble.

I shook with the strain, but I refused to give up. I didn't care if my muscles became useless shreds after this. The only thing that mattered was getting Dana loose.

Finally, with a boost I didn't know I had, I shoved the beam away from us. It thudded back into the water, sending waves shuddering out across the pond.

I pulled Dana into my arms, reveling at the feeling of her against my chest. She was disoriented, but she was breathing. I could feel it. Holding her to me as securely as I could, I dragged her through the pond.

Our way was mostly clear. The only problem was the deep, churned-up mud. I knew how to get through it now, though, and bit by torturous bit, I dragged Dana to the shore.

I crawled up the grass, pulling us up the bank. When we were a few feet away from the edge of the pond, I collapsed to a seated position. I tugged Dana's limp unresisting form into my lap, cradling her to me.

Blood still ran down her face, but her eyes blinked open. Brilliant green in that pale face, they seemed not to see me.

"Dana," I whispered. "Dana, my love. You're okay. You're here with me."

Her eyes refocused, and I saw her come back into herself. She was there with me, she was alive, and she knew who I was.

I could've cried at that. After everything, after all the moments I'd been terrified that I'd lost her, Dana was safe.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



Everything around me was a blur. A rush of sound, wind in my ears and splashing water and groans. Whether mine or the bridge's, I wasn't sure. My vision was filled with grey. I couldn't make out what was going on. That figure coming towards me through the sheeting rain— did it ever get to me? I didn't know.

I thought I might have been moving. Or perhaps things were moving around me. Maybe the rest of the bridge had finally tumbled down on me, I thought distantly. Maybe everything had slowed down the way it did, supposedly, right before you died.

Suddenly, there were warm arms around me. That was new. So different from the lash of cold rain and painful weight on my leg. I was being held against a strong chest, first desperately, then tenderly.

Reality began to dawn. I wasn't dead, I was breathing, and I was out of the water. The heaviness of the beam pinning me down was gone. I blinked, and the clouds over my eyes began to clear. Water was dripping on my brows and down my eyelashes, but I could see again.

The warm arms around me belonged to Brent.

He held me cradled in his lap like I was the most precious thing in the world. His shirt was off, leaving his bare chest exposed to the storm. Goosebumps were rising on his skin from the chill. I reached out my hand to touch his skin.

"Dana, you're okay, oh thank god, you're okay," Brent was saying, almost in a low chant. I felt his heart hammering fast underneath my fingers. "I was so scared I'd lost you, Dana, oh my god. You're okay."

I tasted blood in the corner of my mouth, and I remembered my head injury. Was I still bleeding?

Oh. That was where Brent's shirt had gone. He was pressing it to my forehead, trying to staunch the bleeding. I'd forgotten how much head wounds bleed.

"You found me," I said, as the remnants of my confusion began to fade. "You saved me."

"We were so lucky." He shook his head, his handsome face troubled. "I got here just in time. If I'd been a moment later, I wouldn't have seen you fall. The bridge would've already been collapsed and— god, I don't know. What if I'd decided that meant you weren't here?"

"But you knew," I realized, thinking back to my moment in the water, assuming no one would come for me. "You knew I'd be here."

"I'd been looking for you everywhere." Brent grimaced and held me a little closer. "I thought to check everywhere but here, and by the time I thought you might be here, it was nearly too late."

Warmth bloomed in my chest. Brent had been looking for me. There I was, assuming he'd stayed at the office, wrapped up in some pissing match with Randy. Instead, he had searched for me and found me when it mattered. He'd really listened to what I'd said in the darkroom. He'd put my feelings first.

And because he had, because he hadn't thought for a second of his own safety when rushing into the wreckage of the bridge, I was still alive.

"Thank you," I said, my eyes filling with tears. "Thank you for coming for me."

"I'll always be there when you need me," promised Brent. His gaze softened as he stared into my eyes. "I love you, Dana."

I straightened, happiness rushing through me in a wave. Sitting up as best I could, I put my arms around Brent's neck.

"I love you so much," I whispered. "I didn't know it could be like this."

"Me neither." Hand still holding his shirt to my forehead, he brushed a tender, gentle kiss over my lips.

"You don't need to be so careful with me," I started to tease him. "I'm all right."

Then I caught a glimpse of my father over Brent's shoulder. He was running across the grass, soaking wet and slipping everywhere.

"Dana!" he cried. "Are you okay? Oh my god, what happened?"

"Dad," I croaked, emotion flooding my throat. "How did you know we were here?"

My father dropped to his knees beside us, reaching out a hand towards me. Gingerly, he stroked my cheek.

"I know Shaver's Pond is your favorite spot," he said. "I may be a shitty father a lot of the time, but I know that. I was on my way to check on you, make sure you were all right after the blow-up with Randy."

"You're not a shitty father." I put my hand on top of his, smiling at him. "We've all been a little stuck, is all."

"More than a little," my dad muttered. His eyes focused on where Brent held the wad of his shirt against my forehead. "Are you hurt?"

"The bridge collapsed," I told him. "I was standing on it when it did, but Brent saw the whole thing and saved me."

My father huffed out a long, drawn-out breath.

"Brent. Thank you for saving my little girl. I— words can't express my gratitude. The idea that I could have lost you, Dana, it's torment."

"I know how you feel, Paul," rumbled Brent. I could feel his words reverberate through his chest. It made me want to curl up in his arms and never go anywhere else again. But even I knew I needed to go see a doctor before doing anything of the sort.

"I am sorry again about what happened." My dad shook his head. "All of it. From the scene at the office, the scene this morning, to all of Randy's behavior the past few years."

I am sorry to both of you, but most of all to you, Dana."

"I know, Dad." I struggled to sit up even straighter and felt Brent brace his arm against my back. I shot him a grateful look. "It is okay, really it is."

"I hope you know I only want you to be happy," said my father. "I might not have been the most hands-on parent after your mother died, but no matter what, I only want you to be happy. And it seems like you've found someone who really cares about you, in this young man."

He looked at Brent, reached out and patted him on the shoulder.

"I would do anything for your daughter." Brent met my father's eyes. "I promise I will make her happy for as long as she lets me."

"I can see that." My father smiled, finally. "Well, this is a ridiculous place for a heart-to-heart, but we did it anyway. But enough of that. Dana, let's get you to the hospital."

"Good idea," replied Brent. He gazed down at me, so much love in his eyes I could hardly breathe with the wonder of it. "Let's not take any more chances, Dana. Okay?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



Driving Paul's car, I dropped him back off at the office. Then, I took Dana home. The storm was letting up as I drove, narrow rays of sun filtering through the brightening clouds above us. It felt like a whole new world in the way that things do after a storm. It seemed right to me, given how much had happened and how much had been cleared up in the past few hours.

I took it as a good sign.

I kept glancing at Dana on the short drive to her house, unable to stop reassuring myself that she was there and pretty much fine. Sure, she had a few stitches along her hairline, but that was it. The doctor had been happy to find it was no more than a bad cut. Dana wasn't showing any signs of a concussion, but I'd been firmly instructed to keep an eye on her.

That would be easy, given I wasn't letting her out of my sight any time soon.

Dana had been prescribed rest for the next day or two, and I was more than ready to be by her side for the entire time. Anything she needed, I would get for her. I couldn't deny that I was kind of looking forward to some quiet time spent holding each other, either.

Not that it was a big deal, but I'd gotten a bit bandaged up myself. All that throwing around of splintered wood hadn't been good for me. I'd had probably a dozen splinters removed, some big enough that they clattered when they hit the doctor's little tray. Now my hands were covered in fancy band-aids, and I had to be honest and say that they hurt a little bit.

I parked the car in the Mitchell's driveway and rushed around to help Dana out of the passenger seat. She sent me a wry look, exasperated amusement in her eyes.

"I'm not made of glass, you know," she said. "It was five stitches. I got more than that for a cheerleading injury."

"Five stitches on your head," I reminded her. "That's an important detail. Anyway, I am only doing what the doctor ordered—making sure you rest."

"I don't think walking to my door exactly counts as exertion," retorted Dana, but her eyes were sparkling at me. I couldn't help myself from leaning down and stealing a kiss.

"I don't know if that counts as resting either," began Dana as I opened the door, her voice teasing. She cut herself off, though, when she saw Randy waiting for us.

I felt Dana tense against me. I pulled her into my side, staring at Randy. I didn't know what I would do if he started yelling at her now. I'd promised not to get into any more shit with him, but the last thing Dana needed after her ordeal at the pond was another fight with her jerk of a brother.

"I'm sorry, Dana," he said, surprising both of us. "I am so, so sorry."

I took in the expression on Randy's face and realized he meant it. He stood there, hands awkwardly at his sides, looking miserable.

"Dad called me and told me what happened down at Shaver's Pond, and I— I just—" He rubbed his palm over his jaw, upset. "If something had happened to you with things so bad between us, I don't know what I would've done."

He took a deep breath and a step towards Dana. She didn't flinch away like she might have only this morning but waited.

"You were right. Everything you said to me at the office," began Randy. "I was wrong to try to control you, and I can never apologize enough for all the horrible things I said to you. I could give you a million excuses, but the only one that matters is that I twisted myself up into thinking I was taking care of you."

"By controlling me, you mean?" Dana's voice was even, without a trace of anger or resentment in it. She sounded like she was genuinely asking.

"Yeah." Her brother hung his head. "I don't know when I lost sight of everything so badly and thought that control was the same thing as love. I've been thinking it was the accident— I don't know. You don't need to hear all this. The point is that I'm sorry."

"I'd kinda like to hear it," said Dana, cocking her head. "What about the accident?"

"Well— the accident made me feel so out of control," confessed Randy. "You know I'd promised to protect you after mom died, and the crash was a real big failure to do that. I thought if I could keep track of you, keep you from doing anything that had any chance of hurting you, I'd do a better job."

"Instead, you kept me from living my life," replied Dana, but her tone was gentle.

"Yeah. I know that now." He sighed. "It's funny. I was so worked up about keeping you safe when this guy's the one that actually saved you today." Randy gestured at me, but there was no malice in it. He seemed tired more than anything.

"Yeah." Dana looked up at me, her incredible sweetness and love shining through even that brief glance. "He did."

"I can see Brent really cares about you." Randy nodded and finally met my eyes. He indicated my bandaged hands. "I heard about everything you did to save her, man."

"It was nothing," I said, shrugging. "I'd do what I did and more, any time I had to, if it meant keeping Dana safe."

"Yeah, I get that now." Randy turned back to his sister. "I'm sorry I tried to get between you two. I know it's an excuse, but I swear I only wanted you to be happy, Dana. I didn't believe there could be a guy worthy of you, but now I see that there is."

Dana broke away from me at that and went to her brother. He stared at her warily, but she reached out to draw him into a hug.

"It's okay," she told him. "I forgive you. You've made me really angry a lot recently. I won't pretend you didn't. But I know that the root of everything was always you trying to

protect and care for me. I never forgot that, even when I wanted to punch you.”

“And I’m sorry for actually going ahead and punching you,” I chimed in, moved by Dana’s generosity. Watching the two of them touched me, my chest warming to see Dana releasing all her frustrations with her brother so readily.

“Yeah, well.” Randy looked embarrassed. “I guess you could say I started it.”

“Sure, but any brother would want the best for his sister,” I said, walking over so I could clap Randy on the shoulder. “I understand. And I promise you, my intentions towards Dana are really, really serious. I’m hers as long as she wants me.”

“In that case, not that you need it, but I wanna offer my blessing— and stuff,” said Randy, his ears going red.

“You know what?” Dana smiled at Randy, tilting her head. “I actually appreciate that. Thanks, brother.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



Even being a cheerleader, I'd never been one to actually watch the games. It's hard to say why, but I'd just never gotten into football. Being a part of the squad was all about being part of a group and getting the athletic, physical charge I'd lost when I stopped dancing.

That being said, I was loving the homecoming game. The competition itself was pretty thrilling, but it was the social aspect that got me more than anything. Being squarely under Randy's thumb for so long, I'd hardly ever been able to indulge in something like this. But, at the moment, it was a rich and wonderful feeling to be out and about.

The stands were packed, and it seemed like the whole town was crammed side by side. Which was probably true. There were even some faces from the past scattered throughout the throng. People who had left Willa Creek for one reason or another yet always found themselves drawn back for the simple joy that a yearly celebration like this offered.

"Here you go." Brent came easing his way through the crush of people, a bag of fresh popcorn in his hand. Instead of the usual hard looks, one gets when jostling strangers, everyone met his nudging with broad smiles. That's the effect a borough-wide outing like this had.

"Thanks, babe."

I was still trying out pet names for him, reveling in being able to use terms of endearment in public. It was like bursting out of a cloister so hard that I had left the doors hanging loose from their hinges. We weren't exactly smooching in full view of everyone, but hey. Baby steps.

Besides, as great as it felt to be beside him, it came with a tiny twinge in the back of my mind. Despite all the contention at the newspaper offices over the two of us spending time together, the deal remained in place. His company was now fully partnered with my father's paper.

Which, in essence, meant that the deal was done. So, whatever joy Brent and I were sharing, I couldn't shake the feeling that it was all on borrowed time. After all, he had to go back to the city eventually, right? There was no point in fooling myself that this was forever.

"Something to wash that down with, my dear?" He'd produced a cold can of beer from his pocket, and I laughed out loud.

"So, are we sharing?"

"Are you kidding?" He made a wry face and pulled its brother out of his other pocket. Even the guy next to me laughed at that one.

"I don't know," I said. That little worrier bred into me by years of looking over my shoulder reared her ugly head. "Isn't drinking in public illegal?"

"At homecoming?" He smirked and nodded down the stands. "Why don't you ask him?"

Following his gesture, I scanned along the crowd until I saw Police Chief Mendez. He had a beer in one hand and balanced a shiny flask on his knee with the other. I laughed and shrugged while cracking my own beer.

"When in Rome, I guess."

The end of the first half came up in a rush, and the score was close enough that even I was excited to see how it would all end up. The crowd rose, ready to mill around as halftime settled in over us.

"Come on," I said, scrambling to my feet. "Let's get down there and get to work!" We dove amidst the crowd, and I dug a bundle of leaflets out of my shoulder bag. We'd printed up a king's ransom in fliers for the dance studio, and this was the perfect time to start getting the word out.

Claiming a prime spot next to one of the concession stands, the things started flying out of my hands faster than I could pull them from my bag. Flocks of eager middle schoolers and high schoolers scooped them up, poring over the information. It felt like the town had been starving for a studio like mine, and I'd hit paydirt before even really opening.

"Hey!" It was Laura.

"Hey! I don't suppose you've got an interest in dancing?"

"With my two left feet?" She beamed and gave me a chuck on the shoulder. "That's not what I came over for." Leaning in, she raised a significant eyebrow toward Brent and gave me a thumbs up. That spoke more than anything she could have said.

In fact, it started to feel like for every person who wanted info on the classes, someone else wanted to find out who the handsome man was that snuck me the beers. Everyone seemed to approve. Strangely enough, almost nobody more so than Randy.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw him at the head of a brace of his high school buddies, monopolizing Brent's time. There was something decidedly charming about it—which is something I never thought I'd say about my domineering brother.

"Stand back, gentlemen, this is the guy," he crowed. "I knew it would take just the right guy to win Dana's attention, and this son of a bitch is about as perfect as a fella could be." Big words from someone who'd taken a swing at him on the sidewalk. Or shouted the room down any time Brent so much as looked at me.

Still, I was ready to take it. If this represented an effort on Randy's part to let the past go, then the least I could do was meet him there. To hold a grudge would have been callous, considering how well things were going.

A whistle shrilled out over the top of the murmuring crowd, and everyone began to filter back toward the seats in one massive clump.

"Hang back a second," Brent said.

"Good thinking," I answered. "Let everybody get settled, then it'll be easier to get in."

"Actually, I had something else in mind."

"What's that?" He looked shiftless somehow. As if there was something on his mind.

"What if we took a walk through town or something? Just to get a bit of air."

"Really?" I raised an eyebrow at him. "Even with the score so close?"

"Eh," he shrugged. "We'll be back before the last quarter. It would be nice to get a little bit of one-on-one time after all the hustle."

He was right. Squirreling away the sparse few fliers we had left, I took his hand, and we strolled away from the bright lights on the field. The buzz of the game faded behind us, and before long, the gentle call of crickets and cicadas rose up to meet us. The last vestiges of summer as fall really took hold.

The town lay before us, silent and pristine. No lights were burning except for the lamps lining the streets. It was almost perilously romantic. Exactly how I wanted to spend as many nights with Brent as I had left.

Tamping down the bittersweet edge to it all, I told myself to savor everything I could. After all, there was no point in mourning something that wasn't over yet.

CHAPTER FORTY



We made our way through the streets, and I couldn't help enjoying just how quiet they were. How still. Willa Creek always had a lazy feel about it, but it felt positively deserted with everyone at the homecoming game. As if the whole town belonged to the two of us alone.

"It's kind of great, right? Like, I did the right thing?" We stood for a moment, lingering in front of the building Dana had rented for her studio. She clung to my arm, gazing at it with a strange kind of attention.

"It's not for me to say. If you feel like it's right, then it's right." She looked up to meet me, seeming slightly dazzled. Like nobody had ever said anything like that to her before. "But, yes," I nodded. "It is kinda great."

She buried her face in my shoulder, nuzzling at me hard before planting a kiss on my jacket. Steering her away from the sidewalk in front of her dream, I did my best not to let my excitement get the best of me as we walked up the block. After all, this was more than just some excuse to get away from the crowd back at the field.

"I've always liked this place," I said, stopping in front of a tidy looking apartment building.

"Oh, always, huh? In the forever you've been here?"

"You know what I mean," I laughed. "It's just— I don't know. I think it's cute."

"Yeah," she said, looking at the building with me. "This town is full of little places like that."

"Maybe," I said, digging into my pocket. "But this one is special." When I held out the key, she looked at it, uncomprehending for a moment. Then, all at once, it seemed to dawn on her. At the same time, she leaned back slightly as if she didn't dare to believe it.

"What's that?" She sounded almost afraid.

"Try it."

Taking the key from my palm, she walked up the paving stones toward the front door. When it opened, she looked back at me like a kid who had just unlocked a different universe. As far as she was concerned, stepping over that threshold might send her tumbling into Narnia.

"Upstairs," I said. "Number four."

I watched the sway of her hips as she climbed the steps, admiring her shapeliness. My

palms sweat lightly at what lay just at the top of the flight. We made the landing, and she pushed the key into the handle of number four. The knob turned, and we stepped inside.

The bare wooden floors had a light shine to them, and the freshly painted walls looked like a gallery awaiting the hanging of a new installation. It all had a kind of crisp newness to it that settled through me in a completely unaccountable way.

"What is this," she asked at last.

"An apartment."

"Har, har," she rolled her eyes, mocking my intentional denseness. "Why do you have this key?"

"Because it's mine. I signed all the paperwork with that Christopher fella earlier today."

"It's yours?" Her voice was small.

"Every bit of it. I can paint, hang pictures, do whatever I want in here."

"But—" she looked around as if she expected to wake up at any moment. "I didn't know you were staying. You didn't tell me you'd be staying in town."

"I thought it would be a nice surprise," I shrugged. "It's only an hour's commute into town, and my boss has said that there's a lot of work I can actually do remotely. So, this felt like the right answer. After all, this is where I want to be."

"An hour's commute?" As much as I'd tried to say, she barely seemed to hear any of it. So, I stepped up to her and cradled her face in my palms.

"You are worth it, Dana. Believe me, if it was five hours each way, you would still be worth it. Wherever you are is where I want to call home."

That did it. The whole of it seemed to crash down around her in an instant, and she leaned up to kiss me. It felt like the whole of everything we'd been through was behind that kiss, and it spoke more than any mad jumble of words could ever have hoped for.

"Brent," she said when her lips were free again, "this is more than I ever thought possible. I'm just—"

"Happy, I hope."

"I am," she nodded vigorously, letting out something between a laugh and a sigh. "I'll be honest, I didn't think I'd ever know what this kind of happiness felt like. It always seemed like this kind of thing was meant for other people. Something I just got to watch in the distance."

"Well, how does it feel?"

"Perfect. It feels completely perfect."

"Then you deserve it." Then, stepping around her into the main room, I gave the wall a couple of knocks as if testing them out. "Not only that, but I've got my own place now." I turned to look at her, but she didn't seem to register the significance of that.

"No more sneaking around," I said. "No more needing to be absolutely silent. We can be as loud as we want. That is, provided you actually want to come over here from time to time."

"All the time." She charged over and wrapped me up in another one of her fervent kisses. "All the time I have is yours. Whenever you want me, I'm yours."

“Good thing,” I said. Because now that you are here, I really don’t want to watch the door close behind you.”

The passion of our embrace burned hotter. Our mouths blended without the gentleness enforced by fear of being caught. This was something new. The moment wasn’t stolen— it was ours for the taking.

We pulled at each other’s clothes, suddenly desperate to get skin to skin. In answer to all the times we’d had to watch ourselves, Dana let out a deep, full-throated groan when I planted a heated kiss at the crook of her neck. It only spurred me on, and I kissed her some more, doing whatever I could to pull even more groans out of her.

She answered readily, clearly indulging in the newfound freedom as much as I was. And then, a devil in the center of my mind took over.

“Take your top off.” With that, I knelt and began to pull at the button on the front of her trousers. That tiny pink bow sewn on the front of her underwear peeked out to meet me, beckoning me onward. With a tug, I stripped her down until she stood bare to me. Her shirt and bra joined the pile of clothes in the same moment.

When I looked up into her face again, she was trembling. Her lips slightly parted, her eyes filled with trepidation and hunger.

“Lie down.” She did as I asked, and her knees fell open to me. What I saw took my breath away. Then, gently, I lowered myself to meet her glistening secret. If we had the chance to make a little noise, then I was going to drive her to be louder than she had ever been in her life.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



"Oh, my God!" My voice rang back at me from the bare walls, echoing in the empty space. But being able to be as loud as we wanted wasn't the newest thing we shared. Brent was doing something that I'd never experienced before. Something I never dreamed I might feel.

"Shit," I hissed and knotted my fingers in his hair. His hot breath met my wetness with a damp caress, only to be bested by the slick firmness of his tongue. The first lash of it sent a shiver up the whole length of me, and I had to push myself back into the floor to keep from rocketing up to the ceiling.

Then, with another slow draw, he parted me from the very base, where the dangerous tickle threatened to drive me wild. Then, he lingered just at my entrance, prodding at me. Giving me a hint of what was yet to come. But, as he moved up along the line of me, my breath drew high and tight in my chest.

As if I might coil so hard, I'd shatter. When at last he found the insistent nub of my desire, the barest brush sent me bucking wildly.

"Fuck," I howled. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." Over and over again. I pulled him by the hair, putting his mouth exactly where I wanted it. "More," I panted. "That. Again. Please." I was incapable of more than single-word commands, but my mind was lost in the maze of pleasure.

Ever a diligent and eager listener, Brent lapped at me again, groaning as I swiveled my hips to show him the way. He met my every impulse, speeding when he heard my chest tighten and growing more forceful as my whimpers begged for release.

And then it came. Like a torrent rushing down a mountainside, I was awash with something I had never felt before. Under Brent's careful attention, I had climaxed before, but this was something different. Something wholly singular. The radiant shudder that came from him buried inside me was one thing, but this was uncharted territory.

As the aftershocks began to subside, I opened my eyes, amazed that the kaleidoscope of lights hadn't been hanging in the air in front of me. Gasping in deeply, I tucked my chin and looked down along the line of my own body to find him.

He was watching me, a subtle smile cut across that unbelievably handsome face. My wetness covered him, and I yearned to taste myself on his lips. To know the mixture of us as fully as I could.

"Get up here," I begged.

Sliding my legs off his shoulders, I could see how hard I must have been holding him from the red marks I'd left behind. As he came to meet me, he dragged the hard fact of his chest up along the softness of my own body, letting the pull of his skin prolong the ripples still radiating through me.

Our lips found each other. The richness of us combined was even more intoxicating than I could have thought. Not only that, but the gentle prod of his manhood reminded me of all that lay in store.

Reaching low, I raked my nails up from the base of his firm, sculpted ass, along the densely muscled ribs and up into his hair. There was no sensation quite like gripping his hair and wreathing it around my fingers.

Bracing on one elbow, he let a hand wander the plane of my chest, flicking from nipple to nipple until both were hard and keen for his touch. Then, in a single fluid motion, he rolled onto his back and scooped me with him. Almost surprised, I looked down into his eyes, dangerously close to losing myself in their depths.

"Is this how you want it," I asked, more than a hint of wickedness in my voice.

"Well," he shrugged. "I figured I would let you take complete control."

I quivered all over at the idea. It was one thing to be had by this magnificent man, to be completely at his mercy. But to be able to take him? To let my body lead the path to our release?

Tucking my knees up on either side of his glorious hips, I took him in my hands and angled him up to meet me. The heat was so intense, I almost worried that I would scorch him with my need. Then, easing my hips down slightly, the tip of him entered me. Even having had him before, the shock of it took my breath away.

In one long, slow, torturous push, I took the whole of him into me. He stretched me to meet his width, and I wanted everything he had to give.

"God, Dana." Only at his voice did I realize I'd been clenching my eyes shut. I opened them to find him gazing at my pale skin in pure adoration. "You are the most singular woman in the world."

All I had in answer was a cry as I rocked my hips. Feeling him pull and push into the deepest parts of me. I moaned again, louder this time. After needing to conduct ourselves in silence for so long, it was as if I was determined to make up for lost time.

Bracing my hands against his chest, I surrendered to the demands of my body. It was like being steered by a demon in my core. Drawing out lazy, loose riding mingled with frenzied, close grinding. Whatever pleasure demanded, I gave. Brent's hands clung to my impulsive hips as if struggling to keep hold of whatever it was I was stealing from him.

At last, he gave up that post and reached up to pinch and tug at my nipples. That was all it took. A burning in my chest cut straight up through my throat, and only after I felt it rattling in my mouth did I realize it was a scream. Empty apartment or not, I would have been amazed if the whole town didn't hear.

My nails dug divots into his chest, and he screwed his eyes shut and pressed his hips up into me, lifting us both off the floor.

"Holy shit, Dana!"

He throbbed hard inside me, and I could feel the warm rush of each release. Filling me with the liquid fact of his love until I lost myself completely. My body fluttered around him, milking him. Begging him for more. My own orgasm was tightening me down in an insane attempt to prolong his.

We locked into that cycle. The harder Brent came, the further it pushed me into my own abandon. The further I went, the more he rose to meet me. It seemed to go on for days and yet had the same fiery impermanence as a bolt of lightning. All at once, the wave broke, and I fell to his chest in a loose, ragged heap.

"That—" I tried to speak too soon, and words were out of reach. My brain hadn't returned to the place yet where language was an option. Instead, I just hummed lightly as he ran gentle hands all along my back. As if smoothing out the disarray left behind by the wild fury of our lovemaking.

"You know what we need," he said at last.

"Hmmm?" I couldn't imagine a single thing.

"Furniture."

And we both fell into a well of laughter so perfect, I never wanted to climb back out.

EPILOGUE



"Alright, kids. That'll do it for the day. I'll see you all next Tuesday to review our barre exercises."

The room descended into a profusion of excited voices as they scrambled to change back into their shoes. I stood by the mirrored wall, hands on my hips, watching with a flicker of pride in my chest. Any one of them could have been me at the same age. All elbows and knees, brim-full of dreams.

Being around kids was something I had always enjoyed. Still, not even my fantasies of that studio could have prepared me for the best part. Fostering their hopes was even more rewarding than polishing their technique. Some of them had real promise, but most of them just wanted that little bit of positive attention a place like this offered.

And I was happy to supply it.

As they clambered toward the front, I edged over to look into Studio A. Things had gone so well in our first year that I had decided to split the space up the middle. One massive venue wasn't nearly as useful as two comfortable ones.

Plus, it was nice to be able to see Crissy Ford every day. The two of us teaching side by side had felt like a pipe dream for so long, I had to keep pinching myself when I came in. She stood at the head of one of our advanced classes, minding the girls as they flowered into themselves.

Perhaps nobody had blossomed more than Crissy herself. Except for me, that is. Spending my days demonstrating moves and stretches had made me even more limber and taut than I had been as a high school cheerleader. Something Brent was vocally appreciative of.

Sauntering back over to the desk, I basked in the long, sideways light the setting sun cast on my little realm. Here, I was master. After so many years of wondering if I would ever be able to have anything that was truly mine, it was a revelation. And, learning by the examples I'd been given, I was determined to be anything but a tyrant.

Tapping my phone on the counter, I saw a text from Brent. Even after living with him for so long, I got a thrill when I saw his name pop up. Another instance where I kept pinching myself.

You coming straight home?

I smiled to myself. It felt so good the way he missed me. This wasn't a demand that I

come rushing back, but a genuine expression of love.

Heading out now.

Snagging up a pad of sticky notes, I scribbled for Crissy to lock up after me. We tried to be good about alternating, but even she had to admit she needed reminding sometimes. Not that there was any danger if the place sat open overnight, but it was the principle of the thing. No sense in tempting fate. I have done that enough in my life already, thank you very much.

Even when I didn't know that is what I was doing.

The dusky air of fall wrapped itself around me as I stepped out into the street, and I set about winding my lazy way home. The house I had grown up in lay in exactly the opposite direction, and after I'd first set up shop, I had to fight the habit to head the other way. Brent and I had a place of our own now.

Both Randy and dad had been great about it. Not that I was asking their permission when I brought it up. I'd simply informed them of what was happening. Even so, it felt good to get their unreserved support for my independence.

Being a grown woman living with her dad and brother hadn't seemed all that odd until it was well behind me. Only when I stepped into my first apartment at 24 did I realize what it must have looked like to everyone else. Not that it mattered. All that mattered was where I was standing now.

"Hey there, Buster!" The second I came through the door, our spaniel met me. He was a good size but still puppy straight through to the bone. All energy and delight in seeing us. As if when we walked out the door in the morning, he wondered if he would ever see us again.

"Do I hear the talk of Willa coming through the door?"

"You just might," I laughed. Brent trotted out of the kitchen and came to kiss me. Or maybe it was just to scratch Buster behind the ears. I'm sure we both thought we were the object of the trip.

"How is everything working out with the new guys," I asked. The paper had been thriving under the partnership and had even been able to poach a couple of key writers from some of the neighboring towns.

"Raymond is settling in," he said. "Nice guy, but adjusting to a smaller town has been proving difficult for him."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," he sighed. "Evidently, he can't get over the fact that everyone seems to be coupled up already. I suppose that's a problem for an eligible man landing in town."

"Didn't seem to be a problem with you," I tugged at his shirt.

"Well, mine was a special case." He pulled me in for another kiss, this one more than just the perfunctory greeting. We still made love every night, but it didn't change the fact that I couldn't keep my hands off of him. If I had anything to say about it, we'd go several times a day. Fortunately, I got my say fairly often.

"Do me a favor," he said.

"Anything."

"Close your eyes."

My heart danced lightly. Brent was forever doling out little surprises. Closing my eyes, I let him guide me by the shoulders. It was the same way I'd met Buster when he was a puppy. Now, he tagged along so close there was a real threat he'd trip me up.

"Okay," he said, bringing me to a halt. "You can open them."

"Oh, my love." The lights in the dining area were low, and an array of candles flickered on the table. It was immaculately set, and a bottle of my favorite red stood open on the table. The black and white snaps I'd taken of Shaver's Pond glowed warmly from the walls, and the whole scene looked picture perfect.

"Brent, this is wonder—"

When I turned to face him, he wasn't where I expected. Instead of looking up to meet his eyes, I had to cast my gaze lower. I couldn't breathe.

There he was, Brent Hawkins, kneeling at my feet. His face was turned up to mine, full of expectation. Buster paced and snuffed, beside himself to get a bit of attention now that daddy was on his level, but the man I loved was not to be swayed. Everything he had was bent on me.

There in his hands was a small, black box. He didn't even have to open it. Hell, he didn't even have to ask the question. With a resounding yes, I flung myself at him and smothered him with kisses. As if living together wasn't enough, now we were something more than just two individuals living side by side. We were one.

The candles had burned down, and the dinner was cold by the time we finally rose naked from the kitchen floor. But, even chilled, it didn't make the meal any less perfect. When we'd pushed the plates away, Brent dabbed trails of wine across my breasts with his fingers, and we had each other again.

FINDING YOU AGAIN



Chapter One - Sam

I read the same paragraph for what felt like the fiftieth time. For a number of reasons, I just couldn't focus. Some of it might have been worry over the shop, but I'd be kidding myself if I thought that was all it was.

Being surrounded by books every day had always been my dream, but they could also be traps. Not just because of what lay between the pages, but the associations they carried into different corners in our lives. Who gave them to us, the spirit of why they were given, and when. They become little snapshots of our lives, even before we open them.

Jack had given me *East of Eden* as a graduation present. It was a doorstop, to be sure, but he had promised to read it with me over the summer. A romantic gesture — particularly because he had never been much of a reader himself.

But we never even got a chance to crack the spine.

The Steinbeck paperback sat like a brick on my nightstand, a daily reminder of just how suddenly he had vanished. Every time I saw it, my stomach tied itself in knots; but the thought of putting it away made me feel even worse. As if I was accepting defeat — giving in to the fact that he had abandoned me and wasn't ever coming back.

All the love I had for him had hardened into something less generous. Love and hate were twin sides of the same coin, and while I could never actually bring myself to hate him, the betrayal of his departure had infected every single memory I had of him. But even with all that I went through, I couldn't even date another man. I couldn't look at another man and think of romance. It was always Jack.

Ever since he left, I spent time every day struggling with my feelings for him. Some days, I was confused, others I was angry, and still others, I was sad.

On the better days, I wanted to hug him and just ask him why. But it didn't matter anymore. It happened so long ago. I should have moved on years back, and in a way, I did. But whenever I glanced at the book, those emotions resurfaced as if he had just left.

So, there I sat on my little stool behind the register, determined to finally read the damned thing. Maybe it would put a button on things. Exorcise him from my heart so I could finally move on. God, I so needed to. It was a little pathetic that I was still clinging

to my love and anger at Jack.

The bell above my door rang, and I whirled around, looking up from my book. After two days without anyone even coming in to browse, a customer would have been a blessing.

"Hey, Sam!" It was Crissy from the bake shop.

"Hey! What's up?" She'd been in when her sister was looking for something for her AP English class, but that had been a while back.

"Oh, nothing much. I was wondering if you'd put up a poster in your window for our ornament stand? We're hoping to cover the whole town before the Fall Festival."

"You can, but I'm not sure how much good it will do." I did what I could to keep the bitter edge out of my voice, but it was tough. A New Leaf had done pretty well when everyone was buying their books for the beginning of school, but it had been pretty lean since then. It was hard not to get discouraged.

"Oh, no." She closed the door behind her and stepped toward the counter with that pitying look on her face, which always caused a pit in the bottom of my stomach. "Things have been slow, huh?"

"Honestly?" I stuck a receipt to mark my page and thumped my book down next to the register. "Things would have to be going twice as well to be considered slow." Crissy shared my rueful laugh and nodded slightly.

"It's tough out there," she said, casting an eye toward the front window. "They say the first year is always hard for a new business. Besides, a used bookstore in Willa Creek?" She cocked her head to the side and raised an eyebrow. It was the same look I'd gotten from lots of folks when I talked about opening my place, but somehow it stung even more coming from her.

"I know, I know. I just hoped..." I gave a mild shrug, uncertain of exactly what I had hoped for in the beginning. It seemed like a long time ago, and whatever optimism I'd had was hanging by a thread.

"You know what I think?" Suddenly, Crissy was bright again. "You should get a booth at the Festival. Just raise your profile a bit. Let folks know what you've got going on."

"Yeah, maybe." I didn't want to tell her I was anxious about the expense. If things continued at this rate, what would be the point of throwing good money after bad? Just then, the bell above the door rang again, and we both looked up to find Curt Dugan darkening the doorway.

"Well, well, well," he said with that oily smile of his. "I told you things would start looking up soon, Sammy."

"Crissy's just here to put up a poster, don't get excited." I hated being called Sammy, but somehow, Curt never took the hint. He was pretty lousy at taking hints in general, I'd come to find out.

"Anyway," Crissy turned to me, her eyes betraying how much she was ready to get out of there. "I should probably get this up and get back to the shop. If we want enough inventory for the Festival, Mom's gonna need my hands busy."

"I'm sure she'll be fine for a bit longer?" Suddenly, her presence seemed imperative. The last thing I wanted was for her to slip out the door and leave me alone with Curt,

though I could see it was inevitable.

"Let the girl go," Curt said with a wink. "If she's busy, she's busy. At least somebody is." There was more than a hint of malicious glee in his voice. It would have been easy to be offended if I valued what he thought in the slightest. I'd been around Curt my whole life, and he'd always had a shitty personality.

As Crissy hastily taped up her poster, Curt set about wrestling something in through the doorway. It looked like a small trunk, and he cursed at it lightly — as if that might help get it over the threshold. The better part of me would have gone over to lend a hand, but getting close to him would have invited his hands, and I wasn't interested.

The instant he was clear of the door, Crissy was out, tossing a wave through the window as she hustled down the block. The door clapped shut, setting the bell off to jingle into the taut air she'd left behind.

"Well," he said, dusting his hands and putting them on his hips. "Shame she couldn't stick around." Sidling up to the counter, Curt's voice was thick with irony. As if he was inviting me to be as grateful for her departure as he was. Somehow, he always expected me to want to be alone with him as much as he wanted solo time with me.

"It is," I said, suddenly very busy with the rare books on the shelves behind the counter.

"You mean to tell me you aren't even a little curious?"

"About what?" I turned around to see him leaning over the counter, his hands braced wide.

"About what I brought you." He pulled a conspiratorial grin and nodded over his shoulder. Dusting off my hands, I stepped to the edge of my little refuge. Maybe if I feigned just enough interest, I could get him out of the place. Because giving him the uninterested look just wasn't working.

"What is it?"

"That, my girl, is my old military footlocker." I hated it when he called me 'my girl'. As if I belonged to him, which I certainly did not. Trouble was, he did it all the time. "Why don't you come around, and take a look at what's inside?"

Surrendering my post behind the register removed the barrier between us, but what choice did I have? Slipping past him, he gave way, and gestured for me to open it. As soon as I bent, I regretted it. It was clearly a trap so he could stare at my ass. Crouching down to mitigate his view, I kicked open the lid to find the thing crammed with dusty books.

"What do you make of that," he said proudly. "I figured I could donate a few things to help the shop. Some of those are pretty valuable, let me tell you." As if he had any idea what they might be worth.

"I'll bet," I said politely. He stepped closer, putting a hand on the trunk lid to lean over me.

"Not only that, but I want to leave the locker here, too. It'll go real nice with the rest of your shop. Besides," he looked around with a solicitous nod, "it'll be nice to be around the place permanently, so to speak. A little piece of me to keep you company."

"Thanks," I said past the bile in my throat. "I'll go over these after lunch and find a

place to put it." Standing up, I darted back to the register and readied to leave. At least he had to take up this hint and get out of here.

"Lunch, huh?" He paced lazily, clearly not going anywhere. "How about I treat you? After all, this old thing ain't the only reason I stopped by." Curt gave the corner of the trunk a firm little kick. "Fact is, I just got promoted to junior executive at the bank. I was hoping you'd want to celebrate that with me?"

"Can't." My answer wasn't exactly polite, but I'd tried to be polite with him many times in the past, and it never seemed to work. "Too much to do today, and a celebration lunch sounds like it might take a while."

"Yeah, well," he ambled over to put a hand on the gap in the counter, penning me in. "Anything with me takes a while." A wink emphasized the innuendo dripping from his voice. Suddenly, the danger of being alone with him made my blood run cold.

"Besides," he went on, "I was thinking maybe we could talk about how I could help you now that I'm up the ladder a bit. The mortgage on this place must be pretty high, and maybe we could figure a way to make some of that go away?"

Every bit of me writhed under my skin. The guy had been trying to get into my pants ever since he'd come back from the service, but this was the most overt line he'd ever thrown out sober. Presuming he actually was. It was one thing to keep saying we were 'perfect for each other', but suggesting he'd erase my mortgage if I'd fuck him was something else entirely.

"We'll need to talk about it later," I said, ducking under his arm and making for the door. "At the moment, I've got lots to do." Tugging the door open, the little bell heralded his invitation to leave.

"Yeah, I can see that," he said, nodding in appraisal of the empty shop. "Another time."

As he stepped through the door, his fingers came dangerously close to brushing my hip, but I managed to rock back just enough to escape them. With him well clear, I locked the door, and hustled across the street to the Willa Creek Diner.

My stomach was so knotted up, I wondered if I'd be able to get anything down besides coffee. At the same time, a strong cup of Joe felt like what I needed to get the nasty taste of Curt out of my mouth.

FINDING YOU AGAIN



Chapter Two - Jack

"Is this the last of them?"

"I think so, sweetie. Thanks for coming to lend a hand."

Mom patted me on the shoulder, and I stepped back to take a look at my handiwork. The shelves were even and tipped forward just enough to give an eyeful of her baked goods to whomever came to visit her booth. It was nice to know my time in the city hadn't made my hands too soft for some good old-fashioned work.

"You got it," I said, letting my hammer clatter down on the front sill and digging nails out of my breast pocket. "Want me to get some of those stands out of your car?"

"Why don't you rest a minute? You've been working all morning."

It was true, but I actually didn't mind at all. Getting this kind of time with Mom had been rare since I'd shipped out, and stepping right into a corporate job hadn't made things much easier. Granted, it was only twenty minutes away when traffic was light, but as busy as they liked to keep me, it might as well be three states away.

With that in mind, I was taking any opportunity I could to help her out while the firm had me back in my hometown. Sleeping in my childhood bedroom gave an odd kind of comfort, even if it did make me feel a little juvenile.

"Oh, mercy."

She settled herself on a stool and leaned back to let the autumn sun warm her neck. At 52, she was strong and clear-eyed, which was encouraging to see. After Dad had died, she'd been a wreck, and I'd spent most of my time overseas worrying about her running the farm on her own. Coming back to find her making a real go of it had been pretty damn encouraging.

Farm stands every weekend helped her offload produce and eggs, but the Fall Festival let her trot out her baking skills. The Creekside Bakery didn't have anything on her. I'd tried to get her to fold things up and dedicate more time to that, but she always protested that she didn't want to let the farm go to seed.

"Penny for your thoughts, kiddo."

"Hmm?" I realized I'd been staring off into space and shook my head with a slight smile. "Honestly, not all that much. Just enjoying being back."

"I'm enjoying it, too," she said. "Any idea when those boys over at Burmaster are gonna want you back?"

"Hard to say," I shrugged. "The whole reason they sent me out here was because I knew the town."

Although, I'd been more than willing to return. I secretly hoped to see Sam. Hoped that maybe there could be some chance of me rectifying my wrongs. But more than that, hope that I could get back the only girl I ever loved.

"And that's why you came back?" Mom asked, watching me with a raised brow.

"Yeah. With urban sprawl, they want to get a jump on the real estate out here..."

"Blah, blah, blah. We've covered this ground. I'm asking when they're gonna drag you back to the city." Always right to the point, Mom. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Probably not until the projects are done. So, a couple of months at least. The place over on Pine is looking like a full gut job, so they'll be stripping it to the bricks."

"Out of town labor for that one?"

"Nope," I shook my head with a grin. "I convinced them in-town was cheaper. Why house folks from the city when we've got plumbers and electricians, and all that out here? Plus, it's good PR to stimulate the local economy before you move in."

"Smart kid," she said approvingly. Mom had a habit of calling me 'kid' or some variation, and I always liked it. "But then, I raised you that way." With an overly sly wink, she set herself chuckling.

It was nice to see her so upbeat. When I'd first come back, she seemed pretty harried. The farm was a lot to handle, but she'd protested that there was barely enough money to keep herself together, so hiring someone was out of the question. Still, it was clear how much easier things were with an extra set of hands around.

"Well, what do you say," I said, clapping my hands to my knees. "Enough sitting around. How about we get those racks out of your car? I can stay here and continue setting up, and you can get back to the house and keep after the baking."

"Let's do it," she said, sliding off her stool. "The blueberries aren't going to pick themselves. Little bastards."

"Damn straight."

She swatted my arm lightly. We both swore, and it was kind of a joke between us that she wanted me to stop. In truth, she was worse than I was.

Walking lazily back to the car, we peeked on everyone's progress. The square had turned into a veritable village of booths, and everyone was bustling. It was tantamount to a reunion, and I was sorely tempted to make the rounds and see who was knocking about.

Mom, on the other hand, was all business. It's easy to be that way when you see the same people all the time, I suppose. For me, everything I saw kicked up a dust of nostalgia.

"Alright," she said, unlocking her station wagon. "Let me lift from the front, and you can drag them out the back." They were the same stands she used for her vegetables on the weekends, and I couldn't help but wonder how she managed on her own. The image of her manhandling these wooden crates on her own gave me a light stab in the gut.

We got the first two out easily enough, but as I was pulling out the third, I happened to look up the block. A figure moved across the street toward the diner, and my body recognized the way it moved before my brain could catch up. Which was to say, my chest went tight, and my skin tingled all over. Ah, shit. There she was. The real reason I wanted the job and a return to my hometown.

Samantha Andrews.

I would have known her anywhere; that athletic gait, mingled with just a hint of graceful bounce to her steps. Her shoulder-length hair trailed just lightly in the breeze, and I felt like I'd been socked square in the heart.

Seeing her, even at this distance, warmed and chilled me at the same time. A lot of water had passed under the bridge, but I found myself almost afraid of her. And not without cause.

Part of me had wondered if she was even still in town. Not that I had been actively looking for her. But only in that moment did I admit to myself just how much I'd been hoping to see her. And, at the same time, I'd been a little afraid she'd be fully married with a whole brood of kids.

Yet, there she was – lithe, lean and vibrant. A brace squeezed at my heart, leaving me almost unable to breathe. It hurt to look at her. At one point, she'd been the only future I wanted, but life got in the way, and I let her go.

She probably moved on and I stayed behind. I may have left, but I never dated. I never had any other relationships. I stayed stuck on the fact she had been the first and last woman I wanted in my life. The only woman who could ever share my life. The only woman who's smile filled me with a love that made me feel like Superman. She was it. There would never be anyone else. If it wasn't Sam, it would be no one. So I stayed alone.

"What's got you today?"

"Hmm?" I turned to find Mom watching me keenly from the side of my eye.

"You keep going all distant and funny. What's up?"

"Nothing. I think I just need a cup of coffee to get my blood flowing. Do you want one?"

"I've got my thermos back at the booth, we can pour some of that."

"Okay." It wasn't what I wanted at all. I wanted to break into a dead run and scoop Samantha up from the middle of the street. But, instead, I helped Mom lug the crates back to her stand, my stomach tingling with every step.

What was going on with me? I felt like a lovesick teenager all over again. That little fluttery feeling over seeing someone you couldn't wait to get close to, even if it was just to neck a bit in the back of the car. In those days, that was a rapture all its own.

"You know what," I said as we got things situated. "I think I'm in the mood for something freshly brewed. I'm just gonna nick over to the diner real quick. That okay?"

"I suppose." Mom had a slightly suspicious face on. "I'll probably fiddle here a bit then head back to the house. You're good to get back on your own?"

"Uh-huh." My feet were already moving of their own accord; carrying me, as if on instinct, toward the woman I'd thought of every day since leaving town.

FINDING YOU AGAIN



Chapter Three - Sam

I was hoping I'd feel better as soon as the diner door closed behind me, but that had been a false hope. Thankfully, it wasn't one of those record scratch moments where every eye in the place turned to me. There was no way I'd have been able to handle that. But the bustle of the lunch rush made sure everyone was too focused on other things to notice the local bookworm slinking in under a cloud.

As usual, there was room at the counter, so I slumped on a stool, planted my elbows on the Formica, and buried my face in my hands. Sure, not the best way to avoid attention, but what was a girl to do? Perhaps being in public wasn't the best place for my misery, but part of me actually worried about being on my own.

There was something about Curt Dugan that made my skin crawl, and I was weirdly certain being alone with him was a bad idea. It's not as if I hadn't been clear about my lack of interest, so why the hell couldn't he just leave me alone? If anything, the more I kept my distance, the more joy he seemed to take in coming around.

Maybe I'd been too polite? I'd only been overt about telling him to buzz off once or twice, but each time, he could have been drunk enough to forget. Or, at least seemed to.

While I sat wallowing in misery over being hounded by the local slimeball, there was a sidling thump under my arms, and the roasted scent of coffee wafted up.

"Looks like somebody's having a great day."

"Hey, Dorothy," I said, rubbing my face and pasting on a smile. "Sorry to bring a funk into the room."

"Pfft," she waved me off. "In case you haven't noticed, nobody seems particularly bothered. But I've got an eye for things like this. Seeing any customer so upset gets me worried, but especially you."

"Why me, in particular?"

"Well," she said with a slight twinkle in her eye, "given your penchant for Sylvia Plath, there's no telling what you might do."

"Oh God!" I let out a laugh that drew more eyes than any amount of moping could do. "Didn't we all go through a phase like that?"

"Yeah," Dorothy shook her head, her shoulders bobbing with light laughter. "But you

took it to a whole 'nother level. After Winter Trees, I practically had to pry the book of her letters out of your hand."

"At least I was reading," I protested.

"You may have been the only one. Nothing I assigned, maybe, but at least you read." She got a slightly wistful look on her face. I'd always been an avid reader, but Dorothy Leonard's English class had tipped me into being a full-blown bibliophile. Not everybody might agree, but she was the kind of teacher you could only hope to have.

When she took over the diner, it actually made me sad for all the kids who would never get to take her class. But then, the death of her husband had left her looking for a new direction. And a bit of adult conversation never hurt – something she pursued like mad among her customers.

"Anyway," she said, shrugging herself out of her reverie, "what's the scoop, Sam? What's got you so tangled?"

I looked up into her face, and the warm, maternal roundness of it almost invited me to spill everything. At the same time, it seemed weird to sit here gossiping about how uncomfortable Curt made me. Not that I didn't trust her, but the small-town rumor mill was a real thing.

"It's just the store," I said, which was part of the truth.

"Things aren't so hot?"

"It was good at first. All the moms brought their kids in to save money on used copies of the required reading. But there are only so many copies you can sell of *The Red Badge of Courage*. At a buck a pop, it's not gonna go far to get the bills paid."

"I hear that," she said, nodding with a faraway look. I leaned in, suddenly glad for a sympathetic ear.

"What if it was a mistake? I mean, folks looked at me funny when I talked about opening a bookshop, but I was just so sure it would work. But most days it's so slow, I wonder why I opened one at all."

"People will come. Trust that."

"They'd better," I said, blowing on my coffee. "If things don't turn around soon, I'm gonna be in a sticky situation with the bank. It took most of my inheritance to make the down payment on the building, and my parents would roll in their graves if I lost it all in the first year."

"Getting your footing takes time. Remember this place three years ago?" She looked at me, but, in full truth, I didn't. I was only twenty at the time, and the diner wasn't exactly the hippest spot to hang out in.

"Of course, you wouldn't," she smiled and went on. "After Ron died, I needed something, and this place was on its last legs. But, adventures were adventures, and I knuckled down."

"What did you do?"

"Are you kidding?" Her eyebrows shot up in amusement. "Deals and specials, girl. Take a loss on some things to make money on others. Free coffee, half-priced lunches, anything to get asses in seats." It was oddly funny to hear my old teacher cuss, and I chuckled.

“Well, books aren’t exactly the same thing,” I said.

“Maybe not. I’m just talking. Speaking of free coffee, you want a top up?”

“I’ll take a warmer, for sure – but I’ll pay for it.” Things may not be the brightest, but I could afford a cup of diner coffee.

As Dorothy came back with the pot, I heard the door behind me open. I wouldn’t have thought twice about it except for her reaction. She looked up, and almost gasped, then her eyes sparkled like she was seeing a celebrity. Mrs. Leonard may be the effusive type, but this seemed genuine enough to make me turn around.

Dorothy’s gasp had been real alright. My own breath caught in my throat, tying itself in a thick knot. As if on instinct, a tiny sting of tears prickled along the bottom edges of my eyelids.

It was Jack Miller.

I knew him in an instant. He was taller and more filled out than when we were in school, but he was unmistakable, even without his letter jacket. Sandy hair, easy confidence, and the same, slightly crooked smile.

It all burned like acid into my gut. My heart sped up and an instant knot formed in the back of my throat. My initial reaction was to smile, as if I’d been hard wired by all the time we’d spent together. But, in an ugly little instant, all the hurt flooded in to smother it.

How dare he walk in here looking all confident? Smiling as if the last years just evaporated, and he could do whatever he wanted?

What the hell was he doing back? I wanted to get up and scream at him yet eat his image up with every ounce of being. Jack had been my whole life, and it messed with my heart and emotions for him to be back.

He was back. Why?

For a second, he scanned the room, but, as soon as he saw me at the counter, his face softened. Just like it used to. The years had made a man out of him, and I battled with my bitterness. Just because he was handsome was no reason to give up the anger I’d been carrying, and yet... People may joke about high school sweethearts, but there was something about a first love that stuck to your insides.

Girl, it’s been years. Why haven’t you let it go? You should’ve moved on by now.

Yes, I should have, but it was hard when he’d left us unfinished. When he just left me. Along with the inevitable heartbreak.

And Jack Miller sure did break my heart, the son of a bitch.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi, I'm Reese. I'm a big city girl who loves a good romance. When I'm not writing, you can find me taking walks with my furbabies.

I'm a huge fan of real life romance and when I meet people who are truly in love it makes me crazy happy. It fills me with joy to know someone I know is living that romance we all dream of.

I love to sit at restaurants and have coffee and dessert and some good one-on-one conversation. I will take that any day over a party or a large gathering.

If you love heart melting romance, check out my books and be sure to sign up for my [newsletter here](#).

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