

What

I

Should've

Said



m a x

New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Wow. Where do we even begin?

For days, we've tried to come up with a note from us that does this book justice, but we've continually come up empty-handed.

What I Should've Said changed our lives. It stole a piece of our hearts that we'll never get back—and never want to.

We can't even begin to tell you how honored we feel to have experienced creating this story, to know these characters as if they're our own flesh and blood.

Take care of them for us, would you?

All our love,

Max & Monroe

Disclaimer: *What I Should've Said* is a full-length stand-alone novel. And while it does contain the Max Monroe humor and spice you know and love, this book is a deep, emotional story that will pull at your heartstrings like you've never experienced. Summer will never be the same.

Additional Disclaimer: This book does contain sensitive topics.

DEDICATION

To heart-shaped pink sunglasses.

To the warmth of an eternal summer.

To the way this book changed our lives.

PROLOGUE

Sunday, July 25th

Norah

The bride couldn't remember what her soon-to-be husband looked like or why she was marrying him in the first place.

I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, willing the features of Thomas's smile to come to me, but all I see are black words on a gray page—a *New York Times* article I once read that compared two types of people: the ones who remember faces and the ones who remember names.

For the life of me, I can't recall what the study proved or what it meant to be one or the other, but I do know the premise of the article speaks to me.

I've *always* been a face person.

Eye color, nose shape, the depth of a smile—even a tiny, obscure dimple in someone's chin. I see it all so well, the details imprinting on the soft surface of my brain.

But a name? I can never remember a name. For six months, I thought my round-jawed neighbor's name was Sally, but her name is really Margaret. Her dog, on the other hand, is Sally, and is a Jack Russell Terrier with wiry white hair and a snobby-looking, pointy nose. Don't ask me how I found this out—Margaret and Sally running away from me every time I see them is trauma enough.

But today, on my wedding day of all days, there's a glitch in my matrix, and I can't remember what the man I'm supposed to marry looks like.

I try to picture him in my mind, but all I see is a foggy, blurred-out image of a man with great hair.

Thomas, my fiancé, does, in fact, have great hair. But he also has a face. One I've seen many, many times, and yet cannot for the life of me remember.

My reflection in the bathroom mirror reveals red splotches covering my chest, and my heart feels like it's doing jumping jacks inside my throat. I wet a paper towel with cold water in an attempt to ease the angry welts down, but it does nothing, because on the inside, I feel like a terrible storm is coming. Flight-or-fight engaged, everything inside me wants to seek refuge somewhere else. *Anywhere* else.

I hope the truth will set you free.

My eyes dart to the bathroom counter, landing on the manila envelope bullseye. The script on top is feminine and delicate and the exact opposite of the cataclysmic bomb of truth that lies inside.

When I walked through the giant doors of St. Patrick's Cathedral today, journalists and photographers from Page Six were already here, taking pictures of my entrance and wishing me an early congratulations.

They don't expect cold feet when you're marrying someone as *important* as Thomas, and for as much as I can't seem to remember what I ever liked about him right now, neither was I.

This cathedral, the very spot I'm supposed to get married, is a New York icon. Mariah Carey got married here in the nineties, and it sits smack-dab in the middle of Rockefeller Center and Saks on Fifth Avenue. It screams big money and big dreams and a one-in-a-million chance at happiness for a girl from a little bitty town in Vermont.

But the contents of that envelope prove it's all just smoke and mirrors to hide the dirty, appalling truth.

Because not only do I not know what my fiancé's face looks like today, I don't know *who* my fiancé is at all.

“Apparently, your whole damn life is a lie,” I mutter to myself and brace my hands on the edges of the porcelain sink. In the mirror, my stupid bridal face stares back at me. All thanks to the beauty team my mother hired, my naturally curly, light-brown hair is in a perfect chignon, and my makeup is an elegant combination of light pinks and neutral tones that highlight my features.

Besides hives, I look good. Beautiful, even. But someone has poked the inside of my chest with a hot branding iron, and the sting is so poignant I should be a blubbering mess of tears. Instead, I am devoid of feeling. The kind of numb a woman in labor hopes an epidural will make her when a baby the size of a bowling bowl is trying to make its grand escape from her uterus.

Between my mother and stepdad and Thomas and Thomas’s family’s invitations, there are three hundred people here to watch me commit myself to one man for the rest of my life, and instead of excitedly prepping myself to walk down the aisle, I’m staring at an envelope.

There should’ve been red flags. *I should’ve known*. But I didn’t know, and now, I’m here with hundreds of people waiting, and I can’t stop seeing her face. Or the way her hands shook as she handed me the envelope.

With clammy palms, I run my hands down the front of the twenty-thousand dollar dress my mother’s favorite designer custom made for me. It makes me remember the day I went with her and Thomas’s mother to speak with the designer—I sat silently while they selected every detail.

Story of your life.

At twenty-six-years old, I have a backbone of rubber, ready to bend to anyone’s will. The dress, the location, the guest list—you know, all the details that brides usually get a say in—have all been picked by someone else.

And if I’m honest with myself, so was the groom.

Thomas is born and bred of *real money*. Influential. Powerful. He’s the kind of man my mother always envisioned, and naïvely longing for her approval,

I agreed.

I look down at the envelope again and then back at myself in the mirror. I think about last night's rehearsal and the vows the priest had us practice.

"Norah, will you take this man to be your husband for the rest of your life?"

Rest of your life. Those words stand out like a penis in a pair of gray sweatpants, and they're not even the right words. The right words would be more like, *Will you promise to make yourself blissfully unaware of the truth and fake your way through the life your mother and Thomas want you to live?*

I shut my eyes and take a deep breath, but when I open them again, the mirror might as well be one of those funhouse mirrors at a carnival, comically scrunching and twisting and turning my face up into all sorts of horrific expressions.

I don't look like a blushing bride. I look like a woman who just had her entire world shattered with one sentence—***I hope the truth will set you free.***

Quickly, I gather the envelope, my little bridal purse, and the extra fabric of my train, and I exit the bathroom without looking back.

When I don't find anyone waiting for me in the hallway, I make my move.

The bride-to-be couldn't remember the groom's face...so she ran away instead.

1

Saturday, July 31st

Norah

Some people say the best way to start over is to dive in headfirst.

Though, those people probably aren't doing it into the emotional equivalent of a brick wall like I am.

The engine vibrates as the driver hits the brakes and brings the big ol' Greyhound bus to a stop with a less-than-gentle foot.

"Red Bridge!" she shouts over her shoulder, and her voice is so raspy, I imagine smoke billowing out from between her parted lips. She grabs the crank handle to her right with a hard hand and yanks the bus door open with a *bang*.

I hop up from my seat and gather my belongings as swiftly as I can.

After being sandwiched on this creaky metal tube for the past nine hours, only getting a handful of fifteen-minute breaks at gas stations so the driver could alternate between chain-smoking cigarettes and filling up the tank, *sometimes dangerously at the same time*, I'm more than ready to get the hell off.

I glance out the window as I swing my backpack onto my shoulder but stop in my tracks when I note the big yellow bridge that sits off in the distance.

"Last call for Red Bridge!" the driver shouts, and her blondish-gray bob swishes from side to side with her movements.

“Um...are you sure this is Red Bridge?” I call out toward her, cautiously making my way up the aisle, and she stares at me in the rearview mirror.

“Oh no, honey, you’re right. I’ve only driven this same route for the past twenty years and make a point not to follow the bus navigation. It gives me a real thrill to drop people off at the wrong stops.”

“I’m not questioning your bus-driving skills, which are awesome, by the way. Just fantastic, not-scared-at-all, feel-so-safe, this is the best bus ride I’ve ever had.” I punctuate that lie by holding up two thumbs. “But the Red Bridge red bridge is...well, yellow.”

She doesn’t offer any kind of response. Doesn’t even bother looking at the very *yellow* bridge I’m referring to. Instead, she just sits there, continuing to bore holes into my skull with crinkly, crow’s-feet-highlighted eyes. I think this is her silent, universal way of saying “Get off my effing bus.”

But as you might suspect, Red Bridge has always had a *red* bridge. For the first six years of my life that I spent in this sleepy Vermont town and, again, five years ago when I came back for my grandmother’s funeral—red.

As the driver glares, I speed up my crisis of reality and scoot my way down the rest of the aisle as carefully but quickly as I can. But cautious turns into clumsy, and before I know it, I’ve run over three people’s shoes with my bag and elbowed another two in the backs of their heads.

Each impact earns me more glares.

“Sorry! I am so, so sorry,” I mutter and flash apologies at as many people as I can, but the only real solution is to get the h-e-double-hockey-sticks off this bus, whether it’s really my final destination or not.

When I finally reach the exit, I lug my suitcase behind me, and it bounces erratically down the four big steps. Each time the wheels contact metal, a painful clanking echoes inside my ears.

I cringe. This is definitely *not* the kind of care my best friend Lillian had in mind when she let me borrow her favorite Louis Vuitton suitcase. And I

highly doubt Louis himself expected this kind of trauma to his luxury goods. Lil's poor bag will probably need therapy after this.

Clear of the bus door, I pause to get my bearings, but Harsh Helga at the Helm of the Greyhound is done waiting. In a cloud of dust and dirt and through the scream of its engine, the bus takes off behind me, leaving me in a whirlpool of its wake.

Just like that, I'm alone—something I haven't been in *years*. And I'm in the middle of nowhere.

I look at all the trees and the absolutely wrong-color bridge.

This has to be Red Bridge...right?

I pull my cell out of my purse, hoping to get some confirmation from Google Maps, but I have zero bars of service. No doubt, my cell provider saw no reason for service out here because...*no one* is out here.

It's been a while since I've been here and my memories are hazy, but the bridge does look familiar, even though the color isn't right. And if I squint, I swear I can see a small sign sitting beside it that I *think* reads *Red Bridge*.

With no other option, I haul my suitcase behind me as I head toward the yellow beacon in the distance. Dry dirt kicks up with each step I take, and by the time I reach the bridge, my black boots look brown, and my jeans are thinking about retiring to a Utah ranch.

Truthfully, they're my best friend Lillian's black boots and jeans, but that's an issue for another day. Right now, the town sign is transporting my mind straight back to twenty years ago.

Welcome to Red Bridge, it announces in big red letters. **The smallest town in Vermont: Where everyone is someone and home is right here.**

Right after my father passed away—after he'd battled an aggressive brain tumor for a year—my mother decided we were going to move away from this small town and start a new life in New York, and that sign is the very last thing I saw the day we left. I could barely read on my own at the time,

but I can still hear my twelve-year-old sister Josie reading it aloud through her tears.

My grandmother Rose wasn't happy about our leaving, but Eleanor Ellis, my mother, has always been a determined kind of woman. Maybe you have to be when you've buried both your youngest daughter and a husband before your thirtieth birthday.

But when Josie turned eighteen, she finally had a choice. She left New York and moved back here, despite our mother's complaints. To this day, she and our mother aren't on speaking terms, but it was like this town and our history with it were in Josie's blood. Like she didn't feel like she belonged anywhere but here. And for the past fourteen years, this is where she's been.

Or, at least, I hope that's still the case, because she's the whole reason I got on that Greyhound and headed here. My whole life was in New York, and I walked away from it—*had* to walk away from it.

I check my cell again, hoping for enough service to GPS myself to Josie's house, but half a bar isn't enough juice to power anything but the time. So, I continue walking, hoping I'll spot civilization at some point.

But the more I walk, the farther I feel like I'm going from actual humans.

I know the town is small, but where is it? Did they move it?

The late July sun beats down on my back, reminding me that even Vermont gets hot, and a small part of me wonders if I'm going to die out here alone with only a Louis Vuitton suitcase filled with my best friend's clothes beside me.

I stop halfway across the bridge to catch my breath and watch the river flowing beneath it.

Everything about my life feels trapped in the flowing, bubbling, swirling water. Like I don't know where I'm going, but I'm still moving forward at ten miles per hour.

Tires crunch on dirt and rock in the distance, and my head whips around to find the culprit. An old, vintage Ford pickup in a pristine shade of baby blue

with chrome accents that glitter in the sun drives toward me.

Proof of life!

Without thinking, I start waving both hands in the air and try to flag down the unknown driver. Yes, I've listened to far too many crime podcasts to engage in this kind of reckless behavior on a normal day, but the boob sweat and three-inch helmet of frizz that's now sitting atop my curls is anything but standard.

As the truck moves closer and closer without slowing, I realize this is a real red-wire, blue-wire kind of dilemma. The only thing that's going to stop it is a risky move by me. I imagine this is what Bruce Willis felt like when they were trying to defuse the bomb in *Armageddon*.

Time is dwindling.

The truck is closing the distance.

And I cut the proverbial wire and put myself *in* the road. Directly in front of the moving truck.

A beat of time lifts my heart into my throat before tires skid across the dirt, and the truck comes to a shaky stop about a foot away from my body. A cloud of dust rushes forward and swirls around me like a tornado.

When we're finally close enough to see each other, the driver's eyes lock with mine, venom and disbelief within them. Guilt and shame form a friendship in my chest, shaking hands and sharing smiles and leaving me feeling like a buffoon.

"I'm sorry!" I exclaim toward him, lifting my arms in apology at his huge, unmoving frame. His tanned knuckles tighten reflexively around the white steering wheel.

Cautiously, I walk toward the driver's side door. His window is rolled down, and the soft sounds of an oldies sixties song my father loved to listen to when Josie, Jezzy, and I were just kids trills from the speakers.

The man in the driver's seat, however, is soundless.

I feel seventy shades of awkward, but I swallow past my discomfort and try to cut through the tension with an apologetic knife. “I’m really, *really* sorry. I just... I was just trying to get your attention and—” I stop midsentence when his blue eyes move across the dashboard to meet mine. The malevolence in them would silence anyone.

“And you thought it was a good idea to throw your body in front of my truck?” he questions with a deep, husky voice of honey and sandpaper all at once.

My stomach lurches and pitches to one side. I loathe upsetting people, even strangers, and yes, I imagine Freud *would* have something to say about that.

“Again, I’m sorry.” I wince and swallow past the nausea that’s migrating up my throat. “I just got off a nine-hour bus ride where I was sandwiched between two people who found camaraderie in chatting about politics and a driver who must’ve gotten her license from NASCAR. It’s been a bad day, an even worse week, and it’s hot, and while I know my methods for trying to get your attention weren’t ideal, I’m just...I’m trying to get into Red Bridge.”

He might as well be made of stone.

“Again, I sincerely apologize.” I continue to try to win him over. “I’m not generally this much of a mess. Normally, I have it together, I swear. It’s just that the bus driver dropped me off out here, and I’m starting to question if they’ve moved the town. I don’t know the logistics that are involved with moving an entire town, no matter if it’s the size of a shoebox or not, but I can imagine it would take, like, NASA engineers. And permits. Lots of permits. Everything needs permits these days, you know?” I joke and offer an encouraging “go ahead and laugh with me because I’m really funny, right?” kind of laugh, but it comes out all stilted and stropy because I’m talking a million miles a minute and my lungs are having a hard time keeping up and I’m starting to wonder if I should be muzzled. Or sedated. Either would probably work.

Get it together, Norah. Do not make this more awkward for this guy than you already have.

The man behind the wheel looks to be midthirties, is *definitely* attractive, but he's also big and kind of intimidating. A real brute of a man. He could play hockey or football and certainly gets more than enough protein every day. For all I know, his favorite pastime includes lifting big, heavy things for fun.

If we were back in the Stone Age, he'd be the alpha of the tribe, his brow and nose and chin all screaming "marble-cut barbarian."

It also looks like he hasn't shaved in at least a month. He has thick brown hair that's showcasing an "I just run my fingers through it" kind of style, and splatters of pastel-colored paint mar the skin on his hands.

Basically, he's attractive in a can-make-women-turn-feral kind of way. Still intimidating as all get-out, but definitely *good-looking*.

I bet he's the type of guy who tears your panties and throws you up against the wall when he wants to make you come. And when he does make you come—

"You need a ride or what?"

His question is an abrupt snap of fingers in front of my face.

"Wh-what?" I pause and silently pray I heard him correctly. "You'll give me a ride?"

"You threw your body in front of my truck," he states without humor. "Anyone that desperate gets a lift to the town square, at least."

Hold the phone. I didn't *throw* my body in front of anything. I *stepped* in front of his truck. *Walked* to the middle of the road. *Calmly* made my presence known. But I definitely didn't *throw* my body in front of his vehicle like some kind of desperate woman being chased by Michael Myers with a chainsaw.

Don't get sassy, Norah. Just be polite and accept the damn ride.

"Thanks. I'll get my bag," I answer, keeping my manners intact. Quickly, I move back around the front of the truck to the side of the road where the

dusty Louis sits.

I reach for the handle, but a big hand grabs it before I can, the weight of his presence behind me hitting like his truck, had he not managed to stop.

Is he some kind of ninja? I didn't even hear his door open.

I have to look up, up, *up* to meet his eyes, and I realize just how tall the macho man is. He has to be well over six foot and makes my average five-foot-four frame look pint-sized.

If this were a rom-com movie, this would be our meet-cute. I'd be the petite damsel in distress, and he'd be the big, strong, and sexy hero ready to save the day. But I'm not Emma Stone, this isn't a movie, and if I go by his tight jawline or furrowed brow, this guy isn't thrilled with his supposed hero role. Or me, for that matter.

Without a word, he lifts my suitcase and carries it to his truck, tossing it in the bed like it weighs less than a trash bag full of feathers. And then, he's back in the driver's seat before I can say thank you. Before I can say or do *anything*, actually.

I guess this is the part where I get inside the truck?

2

Bennett

I glance through my windshield and see the woman just standing in the middle of the road, looking at my truck and not moving.

What is she doing?

First, she asked me for a ride by playing a game of chicken with my truck, and now that I've agreed and tossed her suitcase in the bed, she's...not going to take it?

It'd certainly be the smart thing to do. Hitchhiking a ride from a total stranger isn't generally touted as safe.

I let out a sigh and reach forward to fiddle with the radio, turning up the volume on the only station available in Red Bridge to drown out my growing irritation.

I don't know what she's doing out here, on the outskirts of Red Bridge, but she's not a local. Her expensive suitcase and designer boots and the T-shirt that molds tightly over her perky tits, *and that probably costs more than most people's entire wardrobes*, is proof of that.

I'd say she's from Boston or Chicago or...New York.

Yeah. I scoff to myself. *Definitely a New Yorker.*

I should know; I was born and raised there.

And since she doesn't look a day over midtwenties, I'd guess she's the worst kind of New Yorker—a *trust-fund baby* New Yorker. Probably a

daughter of some rich asshole who works in tech or makes a living out of stealing people's money under the guise of investments or some shit.

I glance through the windshield again and note that she's still giving her best impression of a statue. My eyes scan the black letters on her white T-shirt, *J'adore Dior*.

Give me a break.

It looks like something my sister Breezy would wear. And she looks like the kind of woman who spends her afternoons on Fifth Avenue, contemplating if she should get the Chanel or the Dior handbag to match the cocktail dress she's going to wear to some stupid charity function where the money very rarely goes to charity and serves as one hell of a tax write-off for the wealthy attendees.

I know that scene all too well. The posh "I have money, and I can buy anything or anyone I want because of it" scene. I lived in it for most of my life.

But why this woman chose Red Bridge? I haven't a clue. For all I know, she read *Eat Pray Love* or some shit, and this is the first leg of her big journey to "find herself." I guarantee the sushi Earl carries in the only grocery store in town isn't going to provide any kind of spiritual awakening, but none of that matters to me.

Make up your mind, sweetheart.

The wind blows her wild mane of brunette curls around, and her big brown doe eyes stare back at me. I can't help myself from taking in the rest of her body again, painfully noting that she has the kind of curves that used to tempt a man like me. *Used to* being the operative words. I might've enjoyed the fun curves like that could bring me when I was still living the superficial high life, but that ship sailed a long-ass time ago.

I'm no longer the kind of man who is easily distracted by shiny, pretty things. The only thing I'm busy with right now is that I have three full kegs of beer in the bed of my truck to drop off before I can get back home to my biggest priority of all.

This girl is wasting my fucking time.

I'm five seconds away from deciding for her and putting my truck in drive and leaving her here when she finally elects to move her ass and hop inside the passenger's seat.

She shuts the door with a gentle click, and the scent of jasmine mixed with vanilla assaults my nose. It's a kryptonite mix of shyness and seduction. *Innocence and sex*. Years ago, this could've been my downfall.

Now, though, I simply look toward the road and wait for her to put on her seat belt.

But the only thing she does is start rambling.

"Again, I'm really, really sorry about all this. *Oh!* Where are my manners? Sheesh. I'm Norah, by the way. Norah Ellis."

I keep my eyes forward. It's not that I'm unfriendly; I just don't need any fucking friends. Plus, the more I think about how she got into a complete stranger's truck without any concern for her well-being, the more irritated I become.

I could be a psychopath for all she knows, and yet here she is, *willingly* sitting in my passenger's seat.

"So...I need to go to my sister's house. Josie Ellis. I don't know if you know her? She's lived in Red Bridge for a long time. She's past the center of town. Pretty sure the road is called Maple? Or is it Spruce? It's a tree name. I know that much."

A tree name? This is Vermont. There're at least fifteen streets in this town that are named after trees.

"Let me see if I'm getting any service, and I can Google it." She pulls her cell out of her purse and starts frantically tapping her fingers across the screen.

Frankly, it's a useless endeavor. Cell service doesn't get good for another mile and a half.

And I don't need Google because I know Josie Ellis. She runs CAFFEINE, the only coffee shop in town. Hell, everyone in this town knows who her sister is, but that's life in Red Bridge for you. Everyone knows everyone because most of them are nosy-as-hell and *love* to socialize.

Not to mention, she still hasn't put her seat belt on so I can start driving.

"I know where Josie lives," I tell her, thinking that's explanation enough, but she proves me wrong by opening her chatty mouth again.

"You know my sister?" she asks, turning her body in the passenger's seat to face me. "That's great news. Well, I hope it's great news. I mean, I hope you like her." Her laugh might as well be a woman named Uneasy who is trying to put on a Cool, Calm, and Collected costume. "Because it wouldn't be great if you, like, hated her and then had to drive her crazy-ass sister into town."

Her crazy-ass sister who hitchhiked a ride from a damn stranger on a back country road like it's a completely normal and safe thing to do in this day and age.

If any female in my life pulled this shit, I'd be furious.

But that doesn't explain why you're furious for her. A woman you don't even know...

Clearly, I need to get her out of my truck. The sooner, the better.

3

Norah

“Put on your seat belt so I can start driving.” His voice is eerily quiet, and I swear, his jaw ticks with each word.

“Oh. Right.” My cheeks heat with discomfort. “Sorry.”

Sheesh. Tough crowd in here.

Quickly, I buckle my seat belt, and he shifts the engine into drive and takes off toward town. The sound of the door lock engaging makes my eyes widen with a little bit of worry, but I don’t say anything. This man has, against all odds, agreed to give me a ride, and I don’t want to be rude.

Though, he’s not exactly rolling out the red carpet for me. Goodness knows, I’ve apologized at least fifty times without him offering any sort of acceptance *and* introduced myself without any response in return.

I don’t even know his name.

And yet you’re sitting in his truck...

Discreetly, I glance over toward my nameless driver and note the way his dominating, strong frame commands attention behind the wheel. My eyes flit down his prominent biceps, over the veins of his forearms, and they don’t stop until they land on where his big hands grip the steering wheel. The splotches of dried pastel-colored paint still mar his skin. But my eyes notice something else that’s etched in black ink across the skin of his left ring finger.

A tattoo. Three letters are all I can make out—S-u-m.

Sum?

Or at least that's what I think it spells out. It's hard to tell without leaning in for a closer look.

What in the heck does Sum mean? Is he obsessed with math? Or is it some kind of secret tattoo for a woman?

God bless any woman who would be able to put up with this guy.

Curiosity is a near choke hold around my neck, but I promptly clamp my mouth shut. It doesn't take a genius to understand the less I say around him, the better. Plus, it's not like he'd actually respond. He appears to be highly skilled in avoiding conversation or coming across as anything that's remotely close to friendly and amicable.

Silence stretches between us like a newborn baby waking up from a nap. And it continues for a good five minutes as he drives us toward the center of town.

Though, for all three hundred seconds of the silence, my people-pleaser mind won't stop racing with possible things I can say to thaw out the frigid quiet and make him not be so dang surly.

I come up with exactly zero things.

And as downtown Red Bridge starts to come into view, I notice his shoulders tensing out of the corner of my eye, but I don't allow myself to consider the reasons why he might be feeling so aggressive.

I mean, I—

“I guess you have no sense of self-preservation, huh?”

My head jerks toward him like a whip. “Excuse me?”

“Getting in a truck with a complete stranger and letting him lock you in without even acknowledging it? That's fucking stupid.”

“But you said—”

“I don’t care what I said or how desperate you are. You never do this again. You could’ve wound up dead or worse, you understand?”

I *hate* being lectured. It reminds me of my mother. Lecturing me about my life decisions is one of her favorite hobbies. Or at least, it was, until I turned into a runaway bride and left the man she wanted me to marry at the altar.

“Did you hear what I said?” the macho, lecture-loving grump spits, and his words might as well be the match to my flame.

What is this guy’s problem? If giving me a ride pissed him off this much, then he shouldn’t have done it. It’s not like someone was putting a gun to his head. He offered of his own volition.

“Now is when you confirm you understand hitchhiking a ride is a stupid fucking thing to do,” he adds through a clenched jaw while keeping his eyes on the road.

Okay, yeah. I’ve had enough of this guy’s bullshit.

Red-hot anger pulsates inside me until it finds its preferred exit out of my body—through my big, fat mouth.

“Listen here, bucko. I don’t need a lecture from some random muscle man!” I slap both of my hands down onto my thighs. “I need a ride to my sister’s house. So, either give it to me and shut up, or let me out here.”

On the one hand, I’m proud of myself for standing up to a bully for once. On the other, I wish I would’ve said just a little less.

Not even ten seconds later, the truck rocks to a hard stop.

His door swings open, and my suitcase hits the sidewalk before I can shove my foot any deeper into my mouth.

And all I can do is climb out willingly—scared of what my lack of cooperation might cause—and watch as he drives off in a cloud of speedy dust.

Way to go, Norah. You've officially started this new adventure in Red Bridge with a fan.

4

Norah

Apparently, when you combine embarrassment and anxiety and exhaustion and fear, time becomes a vortex.

It also doesn't help when an alphahole in a truck dumps you in the middle of town, *a good four miles from your actual destination*, because you got sassy with his broody, lecture-giving ass.

Thankfully, cell service picked up in downtown Red Bridge, and I was able to successfully GPS myself to Josie's. I know it took me just over an hour to walk to her house on Oak Street, but I have no idea how long I've been standing here since arriving. I'm drenched in sweat from the unexpected exercise, and Lil's suitcase looks like it's been involved in a hilltop battle with a conscientious cooperator named Desmond Doss.

Leaving a man at the altar, followed by a few days of couch time and violent movies with Lil at the Holiday Inn in Midtown—the whole reason I'm able to make a *Hacksaw Ridge* reference, honestly—and a journey from hell have left me feeling like I'm barely a person. But I'm here now, and that's all that matters.

If only I could get myself to lift my hand and knock.

I take inventory of my sister's house and yard again, *for what has to be the hundredth time*, but this time, it's...different. Overwhelming nostalgia hits me square in the chest. I'm in a Lana Del Rey song, and everywhere I look are things that make me feel simultaneously happy and sad.

Everything is the same. The yellow shutters. The white brick. The pink door and porch swing. Even the little yard ornaments and knickknacks in the form of fairy statues and gnomes and frogs littering the garden beds surrounding the house.

This used to be our grandmother Rose's cottage and our father's childhood home.

After our grandmother passed away, Josie moved out of the small, studio apartment above her coffee shop and started living here. And from the looks of it, the only thing she's done with the place is keep it maintained. Everything else is exactly as it was when we were kids, and that realization settles the smallest sense of relief inside my belly. I feel like I'm where I'm supposed to be.

I just hope my sister feels the same way.

I know I should've called her before I left New York—should've let her know I was coming—but Josie is stubborn as a mule, and we haven't been on speaking terms since Grandma Rose's funeral.

Truth be told, I have a fifty-fifty shot of her welcoming my presence versus pulling out a shotgun and firing it in my direction.

It's time, Norah.

I take a big, deep breath, and just as I'm lifting my suitcase up the front porch steps, my phone dings from my purse. I stop at the top and pull it out, expecting to find more angry texts from Thomas—*it's been an onslaught today*—but when I see Lillian's name on the screen, I click to open her message.

Lil: Did you make it to Red Bridge?

Me: I did.

Lillian has been by my side since I was a kid. She was the only girl at the Manhattan private school my mother enrolled me in who didn't care whether my family had money. Which, at the time, we didn't.

We've seen each other through it all. Braces, acne breakouts, high school, relationship breakups, college, Lil's first job at a marketing firm—*she is still there and thriving*—receiving family trust funds that twenty-year-old girls probably shouldn't have access to, weddings-that-didn't-happen, and losing said trust funds—*which, yeah, that one only relates to moi*.

She's my best friend, and if I miss anything about my life back in New York, it's her.

Lil: And how did Josie take it?

Me: I'm currently standing on her front porch, trying to find the courage to knock.

Lil: She's your sister, Norah. She might be a little mad, but she's not going to shove you out on the street. It's all going to be okay.

I snort, but it's not out of humor. Lil doesn't know my sister like I do. Josie had no qualms with cutting our mother out of her life when she turned eighteen. And it's not like she's been trying to make amends with me for the past five years.

Frankly, I have no idea how this is going to go down, and I start to question myself on whether I'm making the right decision. Before I know it, I'm frozen on my sister's front porch, in the middle of an internal crisis, and staring down at the screen of my phone as I scroll through text messages with Thomas. What used to be a happy couple texting each other about random, daily things quickly turns into a one-sided conversation that started the moment he realized I wasn't going to say "I do."

Thomas: Lillian said you left. What the fuck, Norah? What is going on? There are three hundred people here ready to watch us get married, and you left???

Thomas: I can't believe this is fucking happening right now. Answer your phone. Call me back.

Thomas: You seriously left me on our wedding day? Do you even realize what you've done? There are journalists here, Norah. Do you have any

idea what they're going to say about you?

Thomas: I've given you everything. EVERYTHING. And this is how you repay me?

Thomas: Do you have any idea how this looks for me? For my family?

Thomas: NORAH CALL ME BACK.

Thomas: I hope you realize you are making the biggest mistake of your life.

Thomas: Your mother is devastated. I can't believe how selfish you are right now. It's like you don't even care what you're putting everyone else through.

I don't even make it past our wedding-day-that-didn't-happen—when the messages from him started to get *really* ugly. My mother's text messages, on the other hand, are a quicker read. There are only two.

Mom: NORAH. This behavior is unacceptable. You have embarrassed yourself. Your family. Thomas. Everyone. You should be ashamed of yourself. Do you have any idea what you've done? What kind of mess you've left us all with? You are being so selfish and stupid. You were lucky to find a man like Thomas, but now, you've ruined everything.

Mom: I will never forgive you for this.

Regardless of the things I know about my mother now, the words still sting like a bitch. Being a people pleaser is ingrained in me. Thankfully, they also reinforce one thing—*coming to Red Bridge was the right choice.*

Honestly, it was the only choice.

I shove my phone back into my purse and return my attention to Josie's front door. After the world's longest inhale and exhale, I lift my fist and sound off three good knocks against the pink wood.

Instantly, I want to run away and hide in a bush, but the sounds of movement in the house are enough to tell me I wouldn't even make it off

the porch in time.

The door opens with a whoosh of air that brushes across my face, and Josie is right there, standing in front of me.

She looks exactly the same as the last time I saw her. The same curls as mine, only platinum blond instead of light brown, unchanged bright-green eyes that curl into the most perfect cat eye with her makeup, and a cute button nose. Her colorful tattoo sleeve on her right arm that I saw for the first time at our grandmother's funeral is still there, and the same J necklace at her throat—a keepsake of our sister Jezzy's that Josie's worn since the day she died—hasn't changed either. She's even sporting a similar style to the one I've always known her for, sticking to a simple tank top and jean shorts.

She looks like Josie...like my sister...and I'm both happy and terrified knowing what that means I should expect for my reception.

"Norah?" The surprise in her voice is evident.

My smile is shaky. "Hi, sis."

A million emotions flit across Josie's face. First, shock. Then, confusion. Then... *"What in the hell are you doing here?"*

Oh boy.

"Uh...I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop by and see how you're doing."

"In the neighborhood?" she retorts with narrowed eyes. "Red Bridge is nine hours away from New York."

"Okay, so I wasn't exactly in the neighborhood, but I...wanted to see you."

"You came all the way to Red Bridge because, suddenly, after five years of no contact, you wanted to see me?" Her brow furrows in skepticism. "You really expect me to believe that?"

“I did. I *do* want to see you. Five years is too long for anyone, and it’s definitely too long for us,” I respond, but when she looks down at my suitcase with hard eyes and a fixed mouth, I know I’m going to have to hit the honesty a little harder if I have any chance of swaying her. “And...I kind of...sort of...need a place to stay for a little while.”

“You want to stay here? With me?” She looks down at my suitcase again. “And you didn’t think it was a good idea to give me a heads-up?”

“I tried to call you,” I lie, and Josie’s gaze jerks back to mine.

“Bullshit.”

“Okay, so I didn’t try to call you because I had a feeling you’d strongly discourage my presence.” Not to mention, emotionally, I’ve had a lot going on.

A harsh laugh jumps from her lungs. “Very perceptive of you.”

“So...can I come in or...?”

“How about you tell me why you’re here first, and then I’ll decide.”

I push out a breath. “It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time.” She crosses her arms over her chest and leans against the doorframe. She’s settling in for the long haul, but I’m not ready to open Pandora’s box of wedding day disaster. Though, I’m going to have to find some manner of compromise with myself if I want in that door.

“I just needed a break.”

“You left New York because you needed a break?” she questions. “And why do you need a break exactly? Life getting a little hard in the penthouse?” She laughs *at* me, which stings. “Or, maybe, you’re low on maids and overwhelmed at doing your own laundry? Or, *I know*, maybe you’re distraught because Hermes won’t let you buy the latest bag?”

Typically, I, Norah Ellis, am the peacekeeper. The person who doesn’t give in to anger and who doesn’t shout or let mean words flow off her tongue.

But evidently, I am not that person today. The derision in her voice, mixed with everything I went through back in New York, burrows underneath my skin like a little parasite, and once it finds its way into my bloodstream, I can't hold back.

"I know it's probably bringing you great enjoyment to find me on your front porch like a stray cat, but I just took a nine-hour Greyhound bus ride and got dropped off in the middle of nowhere and had to hitchhike another ride from a complete stranger who also happened to be the world's grouchiest man, which ended in me walking here from the center of town, and I'd really like to just sit down. And maybe...you know...drink some water to stave off a hospital stay for dehydration." My voice breaks on an almost-cry, but I suck the urge back down into the depths of my throat. "Could you find it somewhere in your apparently cold, dead heart to let me come inside first before we get into all the tragic details of the current state of my life?"

Josie stares at me, considering. It's the last straw on my delicate hold.

"Please?" I beg, a tear breaking loose. "Show your sister some mercy?"

"It's not bringing me enjoyment to see you cry," she eventually consoles. "Not at all, but it's been over five years, Norah, and it's not like you were the nicest person to me the last time I saw you. Actually, you were a total bitch." She's referring to our grandmother's funeral, and I know she's right. I was my mother's soldier that day, doling out all the things that brought our relationship to this point. I'm not proud of my behavior back then, but in my defense, I was only twenty-one and still naïve about our mother.

"Josie, you have to admit that you weren't being nice either. You told Mom to 'get the fuck out' in the middle of a funeral. Actually, you *screamed* it. In front of everyone. It was quite the scene, if I recall."

"It's not my fault that Eleanor decided to show up somewhere she was definitely not welcome."

"*Josie.*" My eyes go wide as old habits of defending our mother die hard. "It was Grandma Rose's funeral. Pretty sure that wasn't the time or place to go off on our mother."

“I think it was the perfect time,” she refutes with two hands to her hips. “After Dad died, Mom treated Grandma Rose like shit. For *years*. The last person she would’ve wanted at her funeral was Eleanor. You and I both know that. Not to mention all the other evil shit she’s done.”

The last person I want to continue to defend right now is our mother, but today, mentally, I am spent. I don’t know how to restructure a lifetime way of thinking *and* keep myself upright and uncrying. Everything inside me breaks, and my whole body hiccups with tears.

“Josie, I know we have a lot to talk through. I know there are a lot of unsaid things that need to be said and apologies to be made. But I’ve just had the worst week of my life, and I have nowhere else to go. Do you think you could find it in you to show me some temporary compassion and let me come inside?”

When she doesn’t respond or make any move to let me step into the cottage, I go for broke and use guilt as my tactic. “You know if Grandma Rose were still alive, she’d let me come in.”

“You play dirty,” Josie mutters on a sigh. She looks me up and down one more time, but ultimately, she steps out of the doorway and gestures for me to come inside. “Fine.”

Hallelujah! I’d do a tap dance on her front porch if I had the energy, but instead, I settle for, “Thank you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she mutters with a roll of her eyes. “You can stay here, but don’t think I’m agreeing to this being some kind of permanent roommate situation,” she adds over her shoulder as she heads down the main hallway that leads into the kitchen.

I step inside, dragging my now-dusty suitcase behind me, and follow her.

This isn’t exactly being welcomed with open arms, but it’s not being kicked out on the street either. *Silver lining?*

5

Bennett

I pull up to the alleyway behind The Country Club, and Clay is already standing there, waiting for me with a pissed-off scowl on his face.

I'm not surprised. He's been expecting me to deliver the three kegs in the bed of my truck, and all thanks to a chatty woman named Norah, I'm over an hour late.

"Hi, honey," I greet with a smirk as I shut the driver's door. "I'm home."

"What the hell, man?" He ignores my cheeky greeting and lays right into the nuts and bolts of his irritation. "What took you so long?"

"Relax." I open the tailgate, and Clay helps me roll out the first keg from the bed. "I had to make a few pit stops."

"Pit stops? You said you'd be here over an hour ago," he complains, and we each take one end of the keg and start carrying it toward the back door of his bar.

"You do realize I'm here because I'm doing *you* a favor, right?" I toss back, but it doesn't deter him.

"Where were you?"

"I had to make sure Josie Ellis's sister made it to her house and get gas." After kicking her ass out of the truck, I drove to the gas station and then back in the direction of her sister's house. She may be a pain in the ass, but she's also got the street instincts of an infant. I was worried if I wasn't watching her, she'd end up getting herself killed by a real psycho.

“*What did you just say?*” He stops his momentum, which means I stop my momentum, and we’re just standing there in the middle of the alleyway behind his bar. “You were at Josie’s?”

“Not really.”

“Then why did you just say Josie’s house?”

“Her sister is in town and a complete fucking toddler. I was just making sure she didn’t get herself killed.”

“Her sister is in town, and she’s a toddler?” Clay lets go of the keg completely, and a grunt escapes my lungs as I muscle the extra weight. “How the hell do you know that? *Why* do you know that?”

“Well, technically, she’s not a toddler,” I say through another grunt because kegs are fucking heavy. “She’s a grown-ass woman with a penchant for terrible life choices.”

Clay makes no move to grab the keg again. Instead, he just stares me down.

I’ve known Clay Harris basically my whole life. We grew up together in New York, went to prep school and college together, and our families, especially our fathers, are thicker than thieves. Which is probably why we both hated them as kids.

When Clay was in his midtwenties and showing no real direction besides partying and enjoying living off his family’s money, his successful CEO of a father told him to shit out a career path or get off the pot. So, Clay took a long drive, found this small-ass town, and decided to open a bar. Though, he told his dear old dad he was opening *a Country Club*, and his father invested money, thinking his son was going to run a prestigious golf course for the rich and privileged of Vermont. To this day, he still doesn’t know the truth.

But when I hit rock bottom in New York and needed a new life a few years later, Clay and Red Bridge welcomed me with open arms. We’re as close as two grown assholes can be, but since I’ve known him since we were kids, I

also know when the vein in the center of his forehead starts popping out to say hello, he's getting pissed.

"You can take a breath," I say through a grimace because, again, kegs full of beer aren't light. "I didn't even see your ex."

I adjust the keg in my arms so I don't drop it, and when I realize he's going to keep standing there and not help, I carry the fucker inside the back door of The Country Club myself.

Clay follows me in, probably too busy thinking about his ex-wife Josie Ellis than realizing he's shit at sharing the load of work that shouldn't even be mine. It's his damn bar. I'm just helping out.

"But her sister...what happened with her, Ben?"

See what I mean?

I set the keg down behind the big mahogany bar. "On my way back into town, after picking up *your* kegs, she waved me down for a ride." I don't get into the whole "she recklessly dove in front of my truck" or "I dropped her off in the middle of the road because she's a pain in the ass" parts because it'll spur more questions from Clay, and well, I don't feel like answering more questions from Clay.

I just want to drop off the kegs and head back home. I've got way more important shit to see to than Clay's would-have-been love life.

"And what did Josie say about her sister being in town? Was she surprised? Angry?" he questions. "She doesn't have the best relationship with her family."

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, *you don't know*?"

"I didn't hang around for the family reunion," I lie on a sigh. Truthfully, I hung around long enough to see that Josie let her inside her house. "Now, are you going to help me move your last two kegs out of my truck, or should I just do it myself?"

“You’re such a dick sometimes, Ben.”

“Me?” I laugh. “The guy who drove forty minutes to pick up *your* kegs and is currently helping you move them into your bar?”

“The guy who doesn’t know shit about anything, even though he was all up in the shit today.”

I put both hands on my hips and stare back at him. “I take it we’re still talking about Josie right now?”

He just groans and gets to work on replacing the old keg with the new.

You’d think a relationship that ended in divorce—before I even got to Red Bridge—would be long past the point of affecting Clay, but I guess that’s not the case.

And since I’m not a nosy asshole, I leave him to stew in whatever it is he’s cooking up in his mind and head back to my truck to get another keg. I don’t know all the details of the Clay and Josie saga, but I know enough to know he’s not quite over it. Not over *her*.

I also know that Josie pretty much hates him.

But that’s love for you. It’s a sucker’s game, and exactly why women don’t spark anything besides apathy from me—even ones with big brown eyes, wild curls, perky tits, and no sense of self-preservation.

I *had* to cultivate indifference when I came to Red Bridge because my life was a dumpster fire, and I needed desperately to put out the flames.

Though, some might argue that ending up in the back of a cop car in handcuffs for arson qualifies as worse than a dumpster fire. My sister Breezy would certainly agree, but I don’t waste my time hanging around in the past.

I’ve moved on from that part of my life, and there isn’t anyone or anything that will get in the way of that.

My biggest, most important priority makes sure of that.

6

Tuesday, August 3rd

Norah

A dark shadow hovers over me, and every muscle in my body locks on itself as I scream. Shrill and terror-ridden, the sound of my shout could shatter bulletproof glass, but my psychotic sister responds with only a laugh.

“Chill, it’s just me.”

My breathing is erratic as she shifts to the side and into the moonlight streaming in from the window of her guest room. I’m still drowsy, body heavy with sleep, but the power of her smirk compels me. I sit up quickly, dragging the sheet up over my air-chilled chest.

“What’s wrong? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Instead of speaking, she moves from the space in front of me, silently but with purpose, and I instantly know why when the bright overhead light pierces me directly in the eyeballs. An evil sister doesn’t warn a person before she gives them an instant migraine—she just does it.

I grimace and reach down to pull the comforter over my face. “This has to be the worst wake-up call I’ve ever experienced.”

“Yeah, well, I tried to be gentle, but since you still sleep harder than a bear during hibernation, I had to take a different approach,” my sister rebukes without guilt and yanks the comforter away from my face. “Rise and shine, buttercup. You have fifteen minutes to get dressed.”

“Dressed for what? A midnight thrill? Even the sun is still sleeping.”

“Camille called off this morning. I need a barista.”

I blink several times. “What are you even saying?”

“I’m saying it’s a little after five, and since I have to get the shop opened by six, you need to get your ass in gear.”

“You want *me* to come work at your coffee shop this morning?” My jaw nearly unhinges. “You tried almost impossibly hard to turn me away three days ago, and now you *need* me?”

“I need a body. And you need a bed to continue whining about waking up in. Seems like a match made in heaven, doesn’t it?”

CAFFEINE is Josie’s life’s biggest accomplishment. Which begs the question, why would she want me anywhere near it? I always got my coffee from someone other than myself in New York, and let me tell you, there was a reason.

“Josie, I know nothing about being a barista.”

“And I know nothing about having a squatter in my house. Looks like we’re both dealing with some challenges.”

“I can’t be a squatter when you invited me in.”

“Invited you?” She cackles. “You showed up unannounced at my front door with your designer suitcase that’s worth more than my car, looking like some vagabond fashionista and begging for a place to stay.”

Technically, Lillian’s suitcase is worth more than her car. I don’t have a suitcase. I don’t really own anything anymore, truth be told. But I have a feeling now is not the time to get into that.

“You owe me. Big-time. And that starts today, with you being my barista.”

I’ve only been here a few days, and besides her showing me the guest bedroom and handing me a bowl of leftover fettuccini for dinner on the first night I was here, we’ve barely spoken two words to each other. She’s even

left the house multiple times without mentioning it to me. But before Josie's and my great divide, she was there for me more than anyone I've ever known—Jezzy, my mom, my dad, and my grandmother included.

She's right. I owe her. But taking *this* as payment is not in her best interest.

“Josie. *Seriously.*” I sit up enough to rest my back against the headboard. “I'm all for helping you out since you're helping me out, but unless you have a Keurig at your coffee shop, I am not barista material. I don't even drink coffee that often. I've always been more of a hot tea or cocoa kind of gal.”

“You were always a straight A student. You'll figure it out. *Especially* since your current place to stay is counting on it.” She flashes the kind of fake, overly sweet grin that could serve as a sugar-free substitute for the supposed coffee I'm going to be making and heads back out of the guest bedroom and into the hallway.

I run a hand over my face and groan as I snag my phone off the nightstand. It lights up with one tap of my index finger and text notifications that must have come in last night while I was asleep clutter the screen.

Thomas: We are going to talk, Norah. You can't avoid it.

The first one I see is more than enough to ruin a mood, and there are at least twenty more where that came from. But I'm not much for being a masochist at five in the morning or wasting my time on horrible human beings, so I ignore them and focus on the one message that's from a sender I like.

Lillian: I have GREAT news! I am in possession of ALL of your belongings and currently trying to make arrangements to get them to Red Bridge. Thomas is on some kind of business trip, and Donna let me inside.

Donna is Thomas's housekeeper-who-used-to-be-my-housekeeper until everything turned to shit and I left town.

After I walked out on my wedding, but before I left New York, I had to play a shell game of sorts to keep my distance from Thomas and my mother and

pretty much everyone other than Lil.

Obviously, that made it impossible for me to go back to my—Thomas's—apartment and get my stuff, so Lillian has been working on it ever since.

Lil sent the original message last night, but she gets up before dawn every morning so she can hit the gym before work, so I don't hesitate to reply.

Me: I could kiss you right now. THANK YOU.

Lillian: Oh, you'll definitely want to kiss me when you see what else I managed to get for you.

Me: What are you talking about?

Lillian: You'll see eventually. ;) And I'll let you know when I'm able to get a moving truck that's willing to make the trek to Vermont. New York movers are busier than a hooker's asshole this time of year.

Me: A moving truck???

Lillian: Yes, a moving truck. Because, as it turns out, when your ex-fiancé is a piece of shit and your friend is in charge of gathering your belongings while said piece of shit is out of town, you end up with A LOT of stuff. Some people might suggest you attempt to purge some things for top dollar, but what do I know? I'm just the woman who spent ten hours at your ex's place packing A LOT of valuable stuff.

My stomach turns. I am both grateful and terrified. Thomas is *not* going to take being essentially robbed very well. But I guess since I wouldn't take the money Lil offered directly, this is her way of forcing me to accept some help.

Lillian: PS: You can go ahead and send my Best Friend of the Year award in the mail. Queen Lillian, Master of the Universe would be the appropriate engraving.

"Ten minutes, Nore!" My sister's voice fills my ears.

Shit. I groan and let my head fall back against the headboard.

There's a *huge*, tired, psychologically drained part of me that wants to tell her to kiss my ass and go back to sleep, but when she adds, "Either meet me at the car or start packing up your suitcase!" I bite my tongue.

Josie doesn't mince words. If she says my current living situation relies on me learning how to be a barista, there's a high probability she means it. Plus, I'm zero for one in the standing up for myself with stubborn mules department—and Lillian's shoes have the wear and tear from my walk after getting kicked out of Mr. Macho's truck to prove it.

And I can only play the desperate little sister role and utilize guilt as my main talking point for so long. Grandma Rose, may she rest in peace, came through in the emotional manipulation tactic for me on Saturday, but she'd probably have to rise from the grave for that ploy to work on Josie again.

My only option is to get dressed and hope to hell I can figure out how to make fancy coffee with a flipping smile on my face.

One day, I'll be able to put on my own clothes, but today, I'm going to have to settle for a pair of Lillian's gym shoes, jeans, and a simple black T-shirt that has a Prada label etched inside.

I don't know how well Prada goes with coffee-making but looks like I'm about to find out.

7

Norah

For the first time since Josie opened the door at six, the quaint wood beams and brick walls of CAFFEINE are blissfully empty, and I am exhausted.

I don't know the official population of Red Bridge, but I'd hedge my bets that the entirety of it has been here this morning. Josie had no issues keeping up with orders and chitchatting at the same time, of course, but I was like a sinking ship in a raging storm as I tried to manage both the register and writing names on cups. A simple set of tasks, it would seem, but still, I managed to be inept.

My feet hurt in Lil's half-size too small shoes and all I want to do is sit down, but as Josie comes out of the back with another batch of cinnamon rolls, I make myself head over to the glass cabinet and help her put them on display.

Despite the effort, both of my sister's shoulders still seem remarkably cold. Honestly, I'm not sure she's ever going to get over our rift enough to look at me like a human instead of a roach she just found in her kitchen.

Josie closes the cabinet door and sets the empty baking sheet on the worktable behind us, and I head back to the register to exist in silence.

I'm nearly there when she startles me. "Okay, then. No customers, nothing else pressing to do... I'd say it's time, wouldn't you, Nore?"

"Time?" I turn around to meet her persistent gaze. "Time for what? Because I've got to tell you, sis, I don't know that I have the energy for more."

Her brows lift. "Time for you to tell me what's really going on."

I have to stop myself from letting out my frustration via an ear-piercing scream at the top of my lungs. Out of all the things we could talk about right now, explaining the monster inside me is the thing I have the *very least* energy for.

“I already told you.” I pretend to be interested in the big fancy espresso machine behind her. “I needed a break.”

She scoffs. “We both know Carlton has all sorts of houses you could go take a break in. I’m sure Mom was mad that you left the perfect man at the altar and all, but you’ve always had Stepdaddy Dearest wrapped around your finger.”

Carlton Prescott, our very rich stepdad that our mother married when I was eight and Josie was fourteen, for all his faults—getting together with our mother while he was still married and having a torrid workplace affair that ended in a divorce and speedy remarriage—is a decent human being. A friendly ally in a sea of enemies.

But he’s still our mother’s husband, and at the end of the day, I’m not ready to face him, the fancy penthouse on Central Park he put us up in, or any of the other houses he has across the globe. If he knew where I was, it’d only be a matter of time before our mother did too.

When I don’t offer my sister any sort of explanation and start organizing all the cups and lids by the register that are most definitely already organized, she lets out a humorless laugh and grips my shoulders to turn me around to face her.

“You do realize you’re going to have to tell me eventually, right? I’m not an idiot. No one takes a Greyhound bus when they have the kind of trust fund that could feed the world’s impoverished kids for a lifetime if there isn’t a reason. Plus, I’m pretty sure your boyfriend’s bank account isn’t hurting either.”

I should correct her and tell her that Thomas was my fiancé or that I’ve been completely cut off and have about eight hundred dollars to my name, but I’m not ready to get into the whole mess. I’m still trying to process it all myself.

“It’s a long story, Josie.”

“Yeah, they usually are,” she comments and hitches a hip on the counter. “But the only way it’s going to get shorter is for you to start telling it.”

My vocal cords remain frozen.

Josie lets out a sigh. “Fine. Don’t tell me now.” She takes off her CAFFEINE-embroidered green apron and tosses it on the counter. “Hold down the fort while I run over to Earl’s. I’m low on whole milk.”

“Excuse me?”

“You hold down the fort while I run to the grocery store and—”

“I heard you the first time. What I need clarification on is the fact that you’re going to leave me here. *By myself.*”

“You’ll be fine.”

My eyes go wide. “I don’t know how to make a single thing.”

Josie looks around the store with a knowing smile. “And lucky for you, there’s no one in the shop. Probably won’t be until the noon lunch rush.”

“Josie, you cannot leave me here on my own. It took me two hours to learn the register!”

“Earl’s is right up the street,” she continues like I’m not standing here having a nervous breakdown. “I won’t be long.”

“Josie!”

“You’ll be fine!” She offers a wave over her shoulder, and the bell above the door punctuates her departure with another jingle.

Did she seriously just leave me here to run her freaking coffee shop? *By myself?*

I look around the store with incredulous eyes and confirm that I am the only person inside CAFFEINE.

“Okay... Everything will be okay,” I try to reassure myself and offer up a silent prayer that no one will come in here until my sister gets back.

I stare at the clock, willing the minutes to pass like seconds. I even try to busy myself with menial tasks like wiping off the already clean counter and organizing the cups and lids for the tenth time today, but when the bell above the door rings, I instantly want to teleport myself anywhere in the universe but here because CAFFEINE’S newest customer is *him*.

The big, muscular, grumpy, still-nameless man who drove me into town and promptly kicked me out of his truck so I had to walk the rest of the way to Josie’s.

You have got to be kidding me.

Considering downtown Red Bridge is so small it only needs one stop sign and a single traffic light to keep the roads safe, I know the odds of my running into this guy, *in this little town*, are high. I just don’t think it needed to happen *right now*.

Just be cool, Norah. Just. Be. Cool.

When his eyes meet mine, I know that he recognizes me, and I swallow past the ball of nerves that’s lodged itself in my throat and try to go with an affable, customer-service approach.

“Welcome to CAFFEINE.”

“What are you doing here?” It’s the first thing he says to me when he steps up to the counter.

“I work here.” Today, anyway.

“*You* work here?” he questions like it is the most absurd thing he’s ever heard—like I have a sign on my chest that reads *World’s Biggest Dumbass*.

Despite the friendly smile I’m trying to keep on my face, my hackles start to rise beneath the surface. Sure, I don’t know jack shit about coffee or making coffee or drinking coffee or practically anything in this entire

building, but he doesn't know that yet, so I haven't earned this kind of incredulity.

"Yep. I work here," I eventually answer, pleasant smile impossible to keep intact, and nod toward the counter between us. "Hence the green apron and the fact that I'm standing on *this* side of the counter. Usually, those are telltale signs of someone's employment." I don't know if it's the fact that Josie left me here by my-freaking-self or if it's just this guy in general, but something lights a fire in my belly. A sarcastic-as-hell fire that has me adding, "And I know this might be a hard thing for you to grasp, but I'm standing right here, behind this register, to take your order."

For the briefest of moments, I swear his lips almost twitch into a smile. But before it's there, it's gone and in its place a frown the size of Texas.

Gaze to gaze, my brown eyes to his blue, I hold his stare and try not to get distracted inside the tempting swirls of gold and green and azure within his irises.

But the longer the quiet stretches between us, the more my mouth wants to move.

Just say something! I mentally shout at him. *Anything. You're the one who came in here, so you need to do the talking. Not me. I refuse.*

"I'll take a latte," he finally says, and I want to fist-pump my victory into the air.

But I don't. Understandably. Because that would be weird.

Also, I don't know how to make lattes or what a latte even contains, so I'm in serious trouble here and should not, in any way, be celebrating.

Way to go, Bravado. Way to go.

"A latte?" I ask, my voice completely accusatory, as though *he's* the problem.

"Yes," he responds, doing that gruff-I'm-about-to-lose-it-on-you voice he did right before I snapped and got kicked out of his truck. "A latte. A drink

generally offered at coffee places.”

I blow out a begrudging breath that makes a few curls move away from my face. “So...funny story, but I just started here this morning, and I haven’t quite learned the art of lattes yet. Is there something else I can get you that’s not a latte?”

“Oh yeah. You work here, all right.”

“Excuse me, what’s that supposed to mean?”

He shakes his sharp-cut jaw with something that looks awfully close to derision. “I’ll take an Americano instead.”

“An Ameri-what-o?”

“An *Americano*,” he repeats, and it still might as well be in another language. “Two shots of espresso in hot water...?”

“*Oh*. Yeah. Sure. An *Americano*. A drink that requires the *espresso* machine.” I nod like I understand but frown a little when I have to tell him the truth. “Another funny story for you, but I haven’t quite mastered the espresso machine yet.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me.”

My cheeks heat with a rush of rose-colored embarrassment.

He narrows his eyes. At me. “What *can* you make?”

“Um...hot tea? Cocoa?”

“Just give me black coffee. Or kill me if that’s easier, but for shit’s sake, please release me from this misery.”

“Look, I’m sorry! I told Josie not to leave me here alone, but she didn’t listen!”

He sighs, audibly tiring of the hysterical girl with no business barista-ing.

“Look, do you want a cookie or something? We’ve obviously gotten off on the wrong foot, and you can consider it a peace offering, so I’ll throw it in for free.”

“Just the coffee. I don’t like cookies.”

“Of course you don’t like cookies,” I mutter to myself. He probably doesn’t like rainbows and puppies either.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” I ring up his order and keep a big-ass friendly smile intact on my lips. “That’ll be \$1.85.”

I take the five-dollar bill from his outstretched hand, and as I start to cash him out, I become downright tickled over the next step in the coffee-buying process—*his name*.

Our interactions the other day were both too fast and too one-sided for me to learn it, and with the way he’s looking at me this morning, I’m not sure he would give it to me now if he didn’t have to. It shouldn’t matter, but I feel like a lone reed dancing in the wind out here in small-town Vermont, and nonsensical or not, I have a yearning, burning need to know.

“Thanks. And I just need your name for the cup.”

He glances around the shop with just his eyes. “Why do you need to write my name on my cup? I’m the only one in here.”

“Yeah, well, anyone could come in at any moment, and as you’ve seen, I’m still learning the ropes. I’d hate to get yours confused with someone else’s.”

“Oh yeah. It’d be tragic if my black coffee got mixed up with someone else’s black coffee.”

“Just give me your name!” I snap. “Josie told me to get every customer’s name, so I need a dang name, okay?”

“Norman Wallace,” he finally says, shocking me to the center of my core. He doesn’t look like a Norman at all, but I guess my mom doesn’t look like

an Eleanor either—she’s way too ritzy.

“Oh. Okay. Norman.”

He sighs. “What? You have some kind of problem with the name Norman now?”

“No,” I force myself to say with a soft voice as I write *Norman* on his cup with a Sharpie. “I...just wasn’t expecting it.”

He barks out a humorless laugh. “Yeah, well, I wasn’t expecting to see you here this morning either.”

Okay, I’ve had enough of this guy’s crap. Seriously.

“Do you hate everyone, or is it just me?” I blurt out and don’t regret a single word. “I feel like it’d be really good for me to know for future reference.”

“I don’t know you enough to hate you.”

Wow. I was expecting some kind of apology or, I don’t know, outward chagrin for having treated me the way he has, and instead, I’ve been left with...whatever this is.

“How heartwarming,” I remark with a roll of my eyes and return to the coffeepot that’s almost full of something that looks suspiciously like coffee. *Wow. Go me.* I pour some in a cup and secure it with a lid before returning to the counter and handing it over to him.

Our fingers brush for the briefest of seconds, and a trill of energy runs through my previously twisted stomach.

Funny. I didn’t think that’s what touching pure evil would feel like.

“Have a nice life, Norman.”

The shake of his head is barely there but visible, nonetheless.

“Good luck, Norah.”

There they are, the first nice words he's said to me since the moment we met, being used as goodbye.

8

Norah

“That’ll be \$1.85,” I update the older, suit-wearing gentleman as I tap the keys of the cash register. He hands me two one-dollar bills, and I make quick work of his fifteen-cent change.

I don’t know where in the hell Josie is at this point, but this is customer number two who’s slipped in the door while my MIA sister has left me to run her coffee shop all by my-freaking-self. Thankfully, his second order choice—the first being a cappuccino—is something I can handle—coffee with two sugars and a little cream.

“So, you’re new in town, huh?” he questions.

I nod. “I guess you could say that.”

“Well, as the mayor of this town, I hope everyone is treating you well.”

Everyone besides Josie and the meathead who kicked me out of his truck halfway to my sister’s house. Obviously, I don’t tell him that.

I force a smile to my lips. “Everyone’s been great. And it’s nice to meet you...uh...Mr. Mayor.”

“Oh please, we don’t need to be that formal, darling.” A hearty chuckle leaves his lips. “The name’s Norman Wallace, but you can call me Norman.”

My brain hits the brakes like it’s two seconds away from causing a fifty-car pileup on a busy interstate.

“I’m sorry, what did you say your name was?”

“Norman Wallace.” He flashes a proud smile. “Better known as the man responsible for brightening up our bridge to the tune of sunny yellow.”

I can’t focus on his bridge admission or the reality that it makes zero sense for a town called Red Bridge to have a yellow bridge. But that’s probably because I’m too busy trying to understand why this is the second Norman Wallace I’m talking to today.

“*Your* name is Norman Wallace? Like, that’s your whole name?”

“Well, technically, it’s Norman Albert Wallace, but yes. That’s my...name.” He searches my eyes like he’s wondering why I’m one crayon short of a full box.

I don’t have to be born yesterday to figure out the odds of having two Norman Wallaces in a town this small are next to zero. Instantly, my eyes dart to the door, furiously seeking out the first Norman Wallace I met all of ten minutes ago, but he’s nowhere to be found.

“You okay, darling?” the mayor asks after I’ve managed to stand here for a good ten seconds just staring out the door, and I quickly clear my throat and push a half smile to my lips.

“Peachy.” I grab an empty cup and write the name Norman on it for the second time today. “Just give me a minute, and I’ll have your coffee ready.”

His smile showcases a *what-is-happening-right-now?* uncertainty, and it makes me kick my ass into gear. Cup in hand, I fill it three-fourths of the way with coffee, but the more I think about that muscly dickhead, the more I feel irritation vibrating under my skin.

I *cannot believe* that rat bastard gave me a *fake name*. And not just any name, but the name of the freaking mayor of Red Bridge, who thinks I’m on glue because, when he told me his name, I looked at him like he’d just told me his penis recorded a duet with Mariah Carey that’ll be releasing next year.

I let out a deep exhale and add sugar and cream to the mayor's coffee, stirring it with annoyed twirls of my hand. The coffee forms a liquid tornado, and I silently curse out fake Norman Wallace for setting me up to look like a moron.

"So, you're Josie's sister?"

"I am." I force another fake smile to curl my lips and glance over my shoulder at the *real* Norman Wallace while I secure a lid over the steaming cup of coffee that's been doctored to his liking. "And I apologize again for not being able to make the cappuccino."

"That's okay," he comments with a friendly smile. "Maybe next time I come in?"

"Fingers crossed." I smile hopefully, even though my only real hope is that this isn't a regular thing. When it comes to getting back on my feet, I didn't picture working in my sister's coffee shop and disappointing customers on a daily basis as my big comeback moment.

"So, there will be a next time?" he questions as I slide the paper-sleeve-thingie over his cup so he doesn't burn his hands. "As in, you'll be staying in Red Bridge for a while?"

As I turn on my heel, the sound of the bell grabs my attention before I can answer his question *or* give him his order. And the person striding in shakes my equilibrium to the point that I have to reach out with my free hand to steady myself on the counter.

The very last person I want to see here, there, *or anywhere* is here.

Thomas.

What in the toxic Dr. Seuss is going on here? How did he find me this quickly?

Nausea curdles in my stomach like sour milk as my ex-fiancé advances to the counter and stops right beside Mayor Wallace.

“Hello, Norah,” Thomas greets, his voice barely playing at pleasant. It’s stiff and rigid and makes a shock of goose bumps roll up my spine. If we didn’t have an audience, it wouldn’t even have an edge of well-mannered, I’m sure. But, as always, Thomas is far too rehearsed not to perform the part of a politician, even when he’s talking to the woman who left him at the altar.

“W-what are you doing here?” My mouth stutters over my words, and my fingers dig deeper into the counter as I try like hell to keep myself standing. Something about how calm he is downright terrifies me.

“You gave me no choice,” he says through a tight jaw. “Since you won’t answer my calls or texts, I had to resort to other methods.”

I didn’t answer his calls or texts because I hoped I’d never have to face him again. *Or my mother, for that matter.*

“H-how did you know I was here?”

“It’s not hard to find you when Eleanor and Carlton are still footing your cell phone bill,” he retorts. His smile is a nonverbal *checkmate*.

The mayor glances between us awkwardly, and I feel as though my body has been cut open for the world to see. The invasion of privacy. The outright disregard for me. It makes me feel like I’m days’-old trash that raccoons rummage around in.

How could you have forgotten such a simple detail?

Lillian was the only person who knew where I was and where I was going. She was the only person I wanted to know. But evidently, I was too wrapped up in trying to pull myself together and keep my distance—and eventually get out of New York without having to face Thomas or my mother—that I forgot to cover *all* of my tracks.

Rookie mistake.

“What in the hell is going on, Norah?” he questions with a sharp tongue. “I have a hard time believing you left me, *left our perfect life together*, to come slum it in this shit town.”

Our *perfect* life? The only thing perfect about our life was what we showed the rest of the world. On the inside, only dirty, disgusting, appalling lies were left to fester and rot.

The mayor clears his throat, and I realize that I am in the middle of my sister's coffee shop and what is happening right now is not even close to appropriate for a business.

"Thomas, I can't do this right now. This isn't the time or place," I tell him as calmly as I can.

He laughs, but it's devoid of humor. "If you think I dropped everything, had my assistant move important meetings and rearrange my schedule, to travel all the way to the middle of fucking nowhere to *not* talk to you, you're wrong." His eyes narrow with anger, and his jaw ticks with a tightness I've never seen before. His carefully crafted façade is slipping. "I'm not leaving, Norah. Not until you explain what in the hell is going on with you."

The bell above the door jingles lightly with the mayor's unexpected exit, and the panic of being completely on my own fills me with crippling dread. My fingers squeeze around the mayor's forgotten cup of coffee, still in my hand. It collapses under the pressure, and Thomas steps back from the spray of hot liquid with a look of derision.

And I'm too terrified to feel it burn my skin as it spills from the busted cup. Somehow, I manage to drop the cup into the small trash can near my feet and wipe my hand on my apron, but the entire time, Thomas's steely gaze continues to bore holes into my skull.

There's still a counter between us, thank God, but I am frighteningly, hopelessly, alone with my aggressor.

"I have replayed that day over and over again in my mind, thought about the weeks leading up to our wedding, and I can't, for the life of me, figure out what in the hell happened," Thomas states and runs a hand through his already disheveled hair. "At the very least, you owe me an explanation."

What I should say right now, I can't say. His lawyers made sure the truth was covered with a private settlement and an ironclad NDA, and I won't

give him the ammunition to use his own despicable actions to his advantage.

“Thomas, I...I have nothing to say to you. I can’t do this right now.”

“Are you kidding me?” He slams two fists down on the counter so hard that it makes me jump back a step. “You walked out on our wedding day, and then you just disappeared! And you don’t have anything to say? Do you have any idea what you’ve done? You embarrassed yourself, me, your mother, my family! You ruined everything! Do you even know what it was like for me when you left like that? Everyone was there! Everyone witnessed me looking like a fucking schmuck!”

How does it always seem to go back to him and what he feels and what he’s going through?

I should tell him that this isn’t about me or what I’ve done; it’s about what *he* did. What he kept from me. What he lied about. The fact that he’s not the man I thought he was. But I refuse to bring this trouble to someone else’s door. Someone who pushed past their fear and told me the truth. Someone everyone else in the world has failed to protect.

“Fine, you don’t want to talk here? Then, we’ll go to my rental car.” Thomas strides around the counter until he’s all up in my personal space. “Let’s go,” he says in a stern tone of voice. “Now.”

“I’m not going anywhere. You—”

“Yes, you fucking are!” he shouts and grabs my forearm so hard I nearly slip on the spilled coffee in Lillian’s black Chanel flats.

“Thomas, what are you doing?” I implore as evenly as I can manage, hoping he’ll fall back on decorum and stop scaring me so much. “Have you lost your mind?”

“I haven’t lost my mind,” he retorts, and his fingers dig deeper into my skin. “*You’ve* lost your mind. You’re ruining your life. Can’t you see that? Do you even understand what your life is going to be like without me? I’m

here because I care about you, Norah. I want what's best for you. And this, right here, *working in a fucking coffee shop*, isn't it. You need me."

Memories crash into my head like a car accident. My mother. Thomas proposing. The wedding. The envelope. The fact that him saying I need him isn't the first time he's said that to me.

I hope the truth will set you free.

I should tell him I don't need him. I should tell him that I've *never* needed him, but something stops me from saying it.

My chest feels like someone cracked open my heart with a crowbar.

"Norah, baby, you know you need me," he whispers and moves his face closer to mine. "And it's okay. I can forgive you for all the embarrassment you've caused. I can move past that, but you need to talk to me. Tell me what is going on."

His words make my stomach churn. And I can't even bring myself to look him in the eye.

I just want to get away.

"Stop, Thomas." I yank my arm away from his hold. "Just stop. You need to go. I want you to go."

"I'm not leaving." His jaw tightens as he steps closer and grabs my forearm in his hand again, but this time, his grip is tighter, and his usually light hazel eyes look as dark as a bad thunderstorm cloud on a hot summer day. "I'm not *fucking leaving* here *without* you, Norah."

I've never seen him like this. It freezes my vocal cords. Freezes my ability to do anything but stand there. I am ice and he is fire, and any minute, I am going to melt under his scorching glare.

Normally, Thomas Conrad Michael King III is perfectly groomed in every way and the skin on his face is baby-smooth and he *always* has his most charming smile intact.

But this version of Thomas is something I've never seen before.

His white collared shirt is wrinkled. His hair is a mess. And he's angry, so angry, in a way that I didn't even know was possible for a guy like him. Thomas never looks unkempt, and he doesn't show any kind of negative emotion. But his fury is right there on the surface and showcased in every harsh line on his face.

"Get off me, Thomas." I try to shake him free, but he doesn't let go. His grip is rock solid, and with a harsh yank, he forces my feet to follow him toward the door.

The last thing I want to do is go anywhere with him, but my mind feels like it's underwater and the shock of the situation is muffling everything around me.

"Thomas, let me go. *Seriously*. This isn't okay."

He doesn't listen and his strides are quick and long, and the awkward angle at which he's holding my forearm makes it hard for me to do anything else but focus on not tripping over my own two feet.

"You heard her. Let her go," a voice that is not mine or Thomas's fills the empty space of the coffee shop, and I look up to find fake Norman Wallace standing there, blocking the door. I didn't even hear the tinkle of the bells.

"This isn't your business," Thomas spits. "Get out of the way."

"Let go of her arm." It's a command, barren of any and all room for negotiation.

Thomas doesn't, and apparently fake Norman Wallace doesn't demand respect more than twice without taking it for himself.

With one lift of his fist, he lands one hell of a punch to Thomas's face, and a sickening crunch echoes off the walls. The grip on my arm is released, and my ex crumbles to the floor like a pile of broken bricks.

Blood drips from a prostrate Thomas's nose and onto the pristine material of his white shirt and the tile floor of Josie's coffee shop, and all I can do is

stand there. Frozen in time. Unable to move.

Sheriff Peeler, a man I met during the morning rush early this morning, and the mayor come careening through the door, nearly running over me and fake Norman and Thomas and the whole sordid crime scene.

“Call the fucking cops, Norah,” Thomas shouts from the floor, his vision clouded by the blood from his nose.

“No need, son. Cops are already here,” Sheriff Peeler announces. “What’s going on, Ben?”

Ben only has one word to say. “Fuck.”

Fuck, indeed. *Fuck*, for sure. In fact, I should have fucking said it myself.

9

Bennett

This shit, right here, is exactly what I *shouldn't* be doing in Red Bridge. I back away from the asshole on the floor and cross my hands behind my head as the possible consequences of my actions spin through my mind.

They're not good, but fuck, the consequences of not doing something weren't exactly good either. With the way he had his hands on her when I first saw them through the window, I doubt it would have ended there.

"Norah? Are you okay?" Josie fusses, having just arrived to the chaos a minute ago, holding two jugs of milk.

"Y-yeah," Norah answers, but her voice is weak and barely a whisper. "I'm fine."

"I'm not fucking fine!" the bastard on the floor shouts. "He assaulted me!"

"Bennett?" Josie looks at me, and my chest tightens. *Fuck, I shouldn't be involved in this shit.*

"He punched me!" The asshole holds his nose while blood drips from both nostrils. It's already made a path down the front of his white shirt, and his hands are coated from trying to wipe the excess from his face. "I want to file a report. And I need someone to get ahold of my lawyer."

"Hold on. Let's all take a minute to calm down. What's your name, son?" Sheriff Pete Peeler asks and pulls a small notebook from the front pocket of his uniform shirt.

"Thomas Conrad Michael King III."

Of course that's his fucking name.

"Okay, Mr. King." The sheriff jots something down on the first blank page in his notebook. "Let's all talk this out, okay? Ben? Let's talk this out."

"Home health leaves in an hour," I remind Pete, and my words make guilt sit heavy in my stomach. Even though it felt like I had no choice, I shouldn't be involved in this. I should be heading home.

"I know, Ben." His answer is soft, and his face is full of contemplation before turning back to the douche with the bloodied nose and the name that sounds like he was born with a gold-fucking-spoon in his mouth. "You got any witnesses to this alleged assault?"

"Witnesses? Are you fucking kidding me?" He scoffs. "The fact that he broke my nose is all the proof you need."

"Yeah, but how do I know you didn't fall or something?" Sheriff Peeler questions, and if I weren't so busy with the anger and guilt racing through my head, I'd take the time to be impressed with the way he manages to keep his face stone-cold neutral. "People fall all the time and break their noses."

"Are you serious right now?" the prick questions, his outrage evident in his widened eyes, but Pete ignores him and looks at Norah.

"Miss Norah, did you see what happened?"

"I...I...don't know," Norah says softly, the evidence of full-blown shock visible all over her petite body. Anger fires in the pit of my stomach, almost as though Norah Ellis is an arsonist herself. I swallow hard to smother the flames.

"I wasn't here," Josie states and steps up beside her sister to wrap a comforting arm around her shoulders. "I have no idea what happened. I was at Earl's getting milk."

"I came to get you," Mayor Wallace defers, his hands up innocently.

Instead of questioning me, which I'm pretty sure he's supposed to do, the sheriff offers the man on the floor a shrug. "Sorry, son. I can't file a report if there're no witnesses."

"*What?*" the asshole shouts and gets up from the floor on two shaky feet. "What kind of cop are you?"

"I'm the sheriff of this town."

"Tell him what happened, Norah." The douche's eyes are on her now, but she doesn't say anything—to be honest, I don't think she can as she takes a few steps back to get distance from him. She's a hollow shell of the talkative pain in the ass I've been suffocated by since she got here. I hate that it spurs an uncomfortable twinge inside my chest.

"You're such a fucking bitch!" the dick shouts at a volume so violent Norah flinches in Josie's arms. Instantly, the flames are back, expanding at a rapid-fire pace, and within a millisecond, I'm completely overtaken.

I punch him. Again.

The crack of my knuckles against his jawbone reverberates off the walls of the coffee shop, and Josie's voice is the next thing that fills my ears.

"Holy shit! Bennett!" she shouts as the man named Thomas stumbles back to the floor.

"Son of a nutcracker, Benny," Sheriff Peeler laments and looks directly at me, but he doesn't need to say anything else because his eyes are doing all the talking for him.

I just made *him* a witness. All of them, really.

So much for no report.

I am officially, irrevocably involved.

10

Norah

His name is Bennett Bishop, and he punched my ex-fiancé in the face.

Twice.

I watch as Sheriff Peeler puts him in the back of his cop car in handcuffs, and Officer Felix Rice, his deputy, puts Thomas in the back of his. Thomas has been checked and released by the paramedics, and Bennett has exchanged several conversations with Sheriff Peeler that ended in Pete pulling his personal phone out of his pocket, dialing a number, and holding it to Bennett's ear while he talked.

He was too far away for me to hear what was said. But even if he'd been closer, I probably still wouldn't have because Thomas, a man I've known as nothing but dignified and controlled for the last five years, has spent the entirety of the last thirty minutes yelling.

At me. At the sheriff. At Bennett. I'm pretty sure he'd shout the whole damn town down if Officer Rice hadn't gotten fed up with him enough to put him in the car.

Always, always, always, he is the most important man in the room. And evidently, in a moment where he wasn't, being decorous and controlled wasn't going to cut it.

"Come on," Josie consoles, wrapping her arm around my shoulders as the two cruisers pull away. "Bennett gave me his keys so I can take his truck down to the station. You drive my car."

God, what a mess.

“Josie,” I say softly, my voice breaking.

“It’s going to be okay, Norah.”

I wish she was right. But nothing about any of this feels okay as I watch the back of Bennett’s head get farther and farther away in Sheriff Peeler’s cruiser.

“Bennett Bishop doesn’t know me—doesn’t even like me.” My voice is barely above a whisper. “Hell, up until forty minutes ago, I thought his name was Norman.”

“What?” Josie turns to look at me, her eyes searching mine.

I shake my head. It doesn’t matter. “He can’t go to jail for me.”

Josie’s ordinarily sharp face turns soft, and that reaction reminds me of the way she used to be with me when we were kids. It nearly makes me burst into tears. “Don’t worry about that, okay? Sheriff Pete’s an old goat, but he’s not an idiot, Nore. He could see what was going on there, just like the rest of us. He’ll manage the situation, and Bennett’ll be fine.”

If he’d only punched Thomas that one time, when no one but I was around, I might agree with her. But he punched him twice, the second occurring in front of the biggest audience that included the sheriff and the freaking mayor.

“What do you mean, Josie? What did he see going on? I mean, Thomas definitely lost it, but it’s not like he hit me or severely injured me.”

“Oh, *honey*. That’s not how domestic violence works.” Her voice is warm, and she reaches out to run a gentle index finger over the faint bruise on my arm that I didn’t even realize was there. “It’s not scaled or judged by injuries. He made you feel unsafe. He tried to force you to go to his car, even though you’d told him no. He shouted horrible things at you. Sheriff Peeler, me, Bennett, Officer Rice...we can all *see* what’s going on.”

Tears threaten, and my nose burns with the intensity it takes to hold them back. Josie reaches up and wipes my face, and I take that as confirmation that one has escaped.

“Come on, honey. Let’s go down to the station. You’re going to need to give an official statement, and Ben’s going to need his truck.”

I suck my lips into my mouth, and Josie squeezes my hand before putting her keys in it. “Drive my car, Nore. Just follow me.”

I manage a nod before turning to unlock her SUV and climb inside. My head is nothing but fog as I start the car and pull out of the space, following Bennett’s truck through the square, to the other side of town, and down two blocks to the police station. I’m barely aware as we walk inside and get escorted by a deputy, and I can hardly see my own two feet as Josie guides me inside the sheriff’s personal office.

Sheriff Peeler sits across from us in his desk chair, and it’s all I can do not to start shaking all over. The police station is small, and his office is even smaller—a tiny square box filled with a metal desk, a few chairs, an unhealthy amount of bright, fluorescent tube lighting, and loads of papers and files scattered about on shelves and cabinets. Still, it’s all very official, making the seriousness of the situation painfully obvious.

I try to focus on Sheriff Pete as he talks, but it’s hard. I’ve never been as scared as I was today.

“Lee is confident the assault charges Thomas King wants to put on Bennett Bishop will be dropped on account of self-defense, and he’ll be able to use him as a witness in your case. He wants to criminally charge Thomas King with domestic violence, so you’ll—”

“Wait...” I stop him before he can explain further. “Who is Lee?”

“Lee is the county prosecutor,” Sheriff Peeler elucidates. “Real good buddy of mine and a good man. You’ll like him.”

“He wants to criminally charge Thomas?”

“Yes, Miss Norah.” The sheriff nods. “Lee has enough evidence for the case to proceed and take this to court. But he’d need you as a witness and for you to be willing to press charges.”

Take this to court? My brain feels like it's going to explode. How did I wake up this morning thinking the worst part of my day was going to involve being a barista and end the day talking about *pressing charges*?

I stare down at my hands, pointedly avoiding the fresh bruise on my arm and try to make sense of the situation. I came to Red Bridge to move on, to put the past in the past and never see Thomas again—not to end up facing him *in court*, of all places, for probably days or weeks on end.

My chest burns with discomfort, and it's moments like this I wish my mom weren't an evil roach so I could go to her for comfort.

Josie sits beside me and reaches out with a soothing hand to place it on my knee. "Do you want to press charges?"

"I..." I pause because my voice is all shaky and weird, and it sounds nothing like me. I clear my throat. "I don't...I don't know."

Sheriff Peeler's office grows silent while they wait for me to decide. But I don't know what I should do. I don't want Bennett to face charges for stepping in to protect me when he could very well have left me to deal with it on my own—in which case, God knows what would have happened—but I don't want to go to court either.

"Pete, do you mind giving us a minute?" Josie asks, and the sheriff gets up from his desk chair without hesitation.

"Take all the time you need."

His door shuts with a soft click, confirming he's gone, and yet I still can't bring myself to look up from my feet.

"Norah, are you okay?" It's the first question Josie asks me and the last question I expect. Her eyes are reassuring and so, so patient. It's the opposite of the sister who almost told me to get the hell off her front porch three days ago.

"Honestly? I don't know what I am right now."

“Do you think you can tell me what’s really going on?” She squeezes my knee again. “Because I want to help you, but I’m really in the dark here. Why did Thomas show up here in the first place?”

I let out a deep exhale. “It’s a big mess.”

“Well, obviously,” she says through a soft laugh that ends up making me snort.

Yeah. A big, fat fucking mess. Apparently, I didn’t realize just how ugly of a person Thomas could be.

I look up to meet her eyes again, and the softness that sits within their green depths only makes the burning sensation in my chest grow more intense. Josie was more of a mom to me and Jezzy than Eleanor ever was, I’m reminded. Back then, I just didn’t understand it.

“So...Thomas is your ex-fiancé?” she asks, her voice like a feather. “As in, you were supposed to marry him?”

“We were supposed to get married, but I...couldn’t go through with it.”

“And that’s why you came to Red Bridge?”

I nod. “I didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“What about Mom?”

All I can do is shake my head. Our mother is the last person I want to talk about.

“Norah, what happened?” she asks, and there’s an edge of desperation to her voice. “You can tell me anything, I promise,” she adds quietly. “You’re my sister, Norah. My only family that I care about.”

And I want to tell her. I really do, but the words just aren’t there.

“Josie?”

“Yeah?”

“I need a breather,” I whisper.

Her eyes turn glossy with emotion at my use of something our father used to say. It was his answer any time he saw either of us looking sad or feeling stressed or in the middle of a temper tantrum. “You need a breather?” he’d ask calmly, and for some reason, it always worked. It was a silent lifeline of love.

Back when she was still living in New York and hadn’t left me for Red Bridge, Josie and I used to use that with each other all the time.

“Okay,” she whispers. “But at least let me help you figure out what you want to do about this current situation. Do you want to press charges?”

“I just want him gone, Josie,” I say, pushing past the ball of emotion that sits heavy in my throat. “I don’t want him here. I don’t want him in Red Bridge, but if the prosecutor charges him, they’re going to hold him here until the case goes to court. And if he’s here, that means his lawyer will be here, his family will be here and...” *Our mother will be here.*

I don’t know if I could mentally handle that. I came here to get away from all that. From them.

“But I definitely don’t want someone to get in trouble because they were just trying to help me,” I add, and she meets my eyes. “I don’t think Bennett should have to deal with consequences. He didn’t ask for this. Thomas made it clear he wants to charge Bennett with assault. And his family, Josie, they aren’t the kind of people who play nice. They can be so cruel.”

“I don’t think he should either,” Josie agrees. “Though, I have a hard time believing a judge is going to side with Thomas in a case like this. Even Pete said the assault charges would end up being dropped on account of self-defense, and the prosecutor plans to use him as a witness in court.”

In court. If word spread that Thomas King was in custody and awaiting trial for domestic violence, Red Bridge would be covered in journalists. The King family owns one of the biggest investment firms in the country. His father is one of the most popular voices when it comes to the stock market. He has ties to the SEC and federal commissions, and Thomas has been

following in his footsteps since before he could walk. There's no way a court case would occur without stirring up a scary amount of media. *Everyone* knows them.

My stomach roils again, but this time, it churns itself right into my having to grab the small trash can beside Sheriff Peeler's desk and puke.

"Oh, Nore," Josie comments and reaches forward to hold my hair back. "It's going to be okay. I promise."

It sure as shit doesn't feel okay. It feels like I took my trouble and doubled it—and then brought it right to the doorstep of a town that doesn't deserve it.

When the ticket vendor at the bus station asked where to, I should've said anywhere else...anywhere but here.

11

Bennett

I pull out of the police station's parking lot with the intention of heading home, but for some reason, I find myself coming to a stop in front of Clay's bar.

I cut the engine and just sit there in the driver's seat, warring with myself about what I'm even doing here. Spending the day in lockup and someone who needs me at home should be all the motivation I require to go straight there, and yet...here I am.

Phone out of my pocket, I send a quick text.

Me: Evening go okay? I might still be a while.

Not even a minute later, my phone dings with a response.

Charlie: It was a good day. And no worries.

No worries. That's not the response I needed to knock some fucking sense into my head.

Before I know it, my boots hit the concrete and my door clicks shut behind me.

The Country Club is busy as hell. Live music in the form of banjos and bluegrass filters from the stage at the back, a man who looks like the lead singer of ZZ Top yodels into the mic as a few tipsy people try their hand at line dancing, and Clay is behind the bar, serving the patrons of Red Bridge all the booze their hearts desire.

This is probably a bad idea.

I find a stool that is positioned in the middle of two empty seats and sit down. Marty Higgins, one of Clay's bartenders, slides a fresh napkin in front of me. "What can I get you, Ben?"

"The strongest bourbon you can find. And make it a double."

Marty quirks an eyebrow. "Tough day?"

"You have no idea."

Thankfully, he doesn't ask for any further explanation and gets to work on pouring a healthy dose of Woodford Reserve into a rocks glass and setting it in front of me. I lift the glass to my lips and take a long drink.

I stare down at the now half-empty glass and block out all the commotion behind me. The chatter. The music. It becomes white noise, and my mind becomes a blank canvas to paint with ponderings of repercussions.

Fuck, this could have been so bad. For me, for my career, but mostly for—

"Heard you got into a knife fight with three guys who were trying to kidnap Josie's sister."

I look up from my drink to find Clay standing in front of me, one elbow resting on the bar.

"Small-town news travels fast," I comment. "Although, it doesn't travel accurately."

"What the hell happened?"

Isn't that the question of the hour—one I'm still trying to figure out the answer to. A woman I have no personal interest in had a problem with a prick from the city who drives a black Audi, and I, somehow, found it a good idea to get involved.

You lost control.

“Norah Ellis’s ex is a motherfucker. Put his hands on her when she very clearly didn’t want them on her. I intervened with my fist.”

Clay raises one eyebrow before running a hand through his hair. “Damn, dude. You going to have legal ramifications from that?”

Any kind of legal bullshit is the last thing I need to be involved in. My sister alone would give me enough strife to last a lifetime, but the other things depending on me being let down would kill me. He knows that.

“There should’ve been. But the sheriff just called me a little bit ago to let me know Norah convinced the county prosecutor to drop criminal charges on the asshole if he gets the hell out of Red Bridge and doesn’t press charges against me. And he agreed because of a protection order for Norah. Though, I’m not entirely convinced it’s over because he doesn’t seem like the type to let shit go.”

If anything, he seems like the kind of dickhead who thinks the world revolves around him. Like more important than anyone or anything else. Even the law.

“How could you be charged with assault when you were trying to stop an already bad situation from getting ugly?”

“The first punch, I’d agree with you.” I purse my lips and shake my head. “But I punched him twice.”

“Sounds to me like he deserved it,” Clay comments and grabs the bottle of Woodford Reserve to pour himself a drink. “Cheers, brother.”

This doesn’t feel like a time for celebration, but I clink glasses with his and take another drink anyway.

“Plus, you can count your blessings because you got here after Eileen Martin left,” Clay updates with a knowing smile. “Though, something tells me you’re going to find yourself in the paper tomorrow. That little old lady was fucking amped.”

“Shit,” I mutter, and Clay reaches out to pat my shoulder with a hard hand.

“Don’t be such a downer, Ben. From what I can tell, you’re going to be painted as the hero of Red Bridge. The man who stopped a gang fight and a kidnapping with just his fist alone.”

My exasperation comes out in the form of a stilted laugh. “Great.”

Publicity and being painted as that fancy-ass woman’s hero—just what I need.

12

Norah

I stare out the window, my elbow resting on the door, and watch the brick buildings and streetlamps pass by as Josie drives us home from CAFFEINE in her SUV. Thomas's dried blood has been scrubbed from the floor, along with the spilled coffee, and the now-rotten jugs of milk we forgot to put away before going to the police station have found a home in the dumpster behind the building.

Everything is as it was first thing this morning again—all except for my sanity.

Downtown Red Bridge is quiet, only the glimmer of the streetlights providing any action as we make our way through town. At this time of night, all the businesses are closed but one—a bar called The Country Club.

A neon sign boasts the name above the door, and a soft vibration of music floats from inside the place. The lights are on, and business is altogether hopping for a Tuesday night.

When I spot a familiar truck parked out front, I sit up straight in my seat.

“Pull over,” I tell Josie. “I want to go inside.”

But Josie isn't listening. Her hands stay firmly on the wheel, and her eyes are focused back on the road.

“Josie. Please pull over.” I turn in my seat to face her. “I need to talk to Bennett. Apologize. Thank him. Something.”

“I don't think that's a good idea.”

My head snaps toward her. “What? Why not?” She doesn’t pull over, and instead, her grip tightens on the steering wheel almost imperceptibly. *Almost*. “Josie, I got that man arrested today. I really need to go in there and talk to him. It’s the right thing to do.”

She sighs, but she also makes a U-turn in the middle of the empty road and heads back toward The Country Club.

She parks and cuts the engine, hopping out before I’ve even had a chance to undo my seat belt. “Come on,” she complains through the open window on her door. “Let’s make this quick.”

I don’t know why she’s being so weird about it, but I get out of the car and follow her lead into the bar as swiftly as I can. My legs and feet are tired, my arm is sore, and my torso feels like it weighs nearly a million pounds. I’m not convinced I wouldn’t be better off if I were buried alive in actual mud.

Live music bursts from the band playing bluegrass-style music on a small stage, and at least fifty people fill the space, drinking beer and chatting and dancing.

Overall, the place has a good vibe. Colonial brick walls, hardwood floors, and a massive mahogany bar that has a shining display of liquor bottles behind it. It’s eclectic yet rustic and somehow hovers on the line of feeling like the exact kind of charming bar that would be in a small town, but also has an edge of big-city sophistication.

Whoever designed this place knew what they were doing. *And if I hadn’t let Thomas and my mother talk me into quitting school just a year short of my interior design degree, I could be doing it too.*

Josie stands beside me, her arms firmly crossed over her chest, and I do my best to locate the man I came here for at a speed she’ll find acceptable.

Luckily, he’s not hard to find, thanks to a larger-than-life presence you can’t miss. Slouched slightly, he sits with his elbows resting on the bar, his forearms cradling a glass of half-empty amber liquid in front of him. I can see the bartender’s mouth moving, his conversation directed at his brother-

in-protein, Bennett. Forget going to church, these two must worship at the altar of fifty-pound dumbbells.

If I wasn't feeling the deadline that is my sister's patience, I might take a moment to admire the view.

"I found him," I tell Josie, grabbing at her elbow to pull her with me. "He's at the bar."

She resists. "I'll wait here for you."

"You don't want to—"

"Just go, Norah. I'll wait here."

Too tired to fight her, I leave her be and head to the big wall of mahogany. I came here with the intention of speaking to Bennett Bishop, so speaking to Bennett Bishop is what I'm going to do.

As for what I'm going to say, I'll have to figure that out when I get there.

After a short shove through an imbibing crowd, I make it to my destination. From this close, it's apparent that while the bartender might have the same build as Bennett, he's shorter. Even while seated, Ben's head ends above his. The other man's hair is also darker, and instead of blue, his eyes are this interesting shade of golden brown that reminds me of honeycombs. He's handsome—devastatingly so.

When I come to a stop right beside where Bennett sits, the good-looking bartender is the first to notice me. His eyes look once, then twice, then search my face as if he recognizes me, even though I've never seen him in my life.

Something catches in his face—like a jolt of understanding just flew in and landed there—and he flicks out the towel in his hand to smack Bennett on the arm. "I think someone's here to see you."

Bennett meets my eyes, and immediately, my heart starts to race and my palms turn clammy. You'd think I had to tell him his dog was dead or that

I'd wrecked his truck or something, with how intense I feel—and all I'm trying to do is apologize.

“Uh...hi,” I greet, but he doesn't do anything but reach out for the glass in front of him and take a long swallow.

“Clay, this is Josie's sister, Norah Ellis,” Bennett acknowledges on a half mumble, almost like it's too much effort for him to speak in discernible sentences. Like I'm some kind of pariah.

“Kinda figured that, Ben,” Clay—evidently—replies with a sly smile. He reaches a hand over the bar after wiping it on his towel, and I offer mine in response. “Nice to meet you, Norah. Heard you had a day. Glad to see you're okay.”

I smile lightly, hoping it looks less stilted than it feels, when Clay pauses in his release of my hand, studying the bruise on my arm. His jaw hardens. “Shoulda made it three, Ben.”

My eyebrows pull together, losing track of the conversation. “Excuse me?”

“Nothin', darlin'.” Clay's smile is...soft. Tender, even. “Just glad you're all right.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.” I glance between Bennett and Clay, and suddenly, having an audience for this conversation feels akin to skinning myself alive. “Would you...do you mind giving me a minute with Bennett? Just the two of us?”

He nods. “Of course.”

“Thanks. I'll only be a minute, I swear. My sister is waiting for me anyway.”

Clay's olive face fades to stone white in a flash. “Josie's here?”

“Yeah. By the door. She—” I don't even finish the sentence before he's on the move, throwing down his towel on the bar top and heading in my sister's direction, practically shoving patrons out of the way as he goes.

“That was weird,” I find myself remarking aloud.

“History always repeats itself,” Ben replies, taking another swig of amber from his glass.

“What?” I ask, unsure if I heard him right. He turns to face me, and for the first time, I see how bloodied and cut up the knuckles of his right hand are. “Oh my God,” I gasp, grabbing for the offending limb without permission. “I’m so sorry.” Tears threaten as I inspect the wounds, and I have to fight for my life not to break down in front of him. Instead, I take my mouth on a marathon run as fast and far in the opposite direction of tears as I can. “This is why I came in here tonight! To apologize. For the trouble and the knuckles and for...*Thomas*. I’m so sorry you ended up getting involved and hurt in the process.”

“I don’t need an apology from you, Norah,” he says as he pulls his hand away from mine. “I don’t need anything other than to be left alone.”

Okay, *ouch*.

I know my face falls, I can feel it, and he shocks the hell out of me by... well, caring.

“Shit. Don’t take it personal, okay? I just need a breather. Punching assholes in the face is the absolute last thing I should be doing, and still, I did it anyway.”

I just need a breather. Oh hell. That certainly hits right in the chest.

I fidget on my feet, just standing here awkwardly, while I silently try to calm my pounding heart from hearing my dad’s words fall from his lips.

And he turns back to the bar and shakes his head at himself. “Fuck.”

Silence stretches between us for several painfully long moments, and when he doesn’t say anything or look back at me, I reach a point of climax. I have to do something, say something—*anything*, or I’ll expire right here on the spot.

“*The Broken Circle Breakdown*,” I blurt out, and his powerful blue gaze returns to me. He has no flipping clue what I’m talking about. “The song they’re playing.” I nod toward the bluegrass band onstage. “It’s from a movie called *The Broken Circle Breakdown*.”

“Never seen it.”

“You should,” I comment. “It’s the most beautifully heartbreaking thing you’ll ever watch. It will make you feel every possible emotion in the span of two hours.”

He looks at me closely—silently—and I start to feel like the biggest idiot on the planet. *What am I even saying right now? He wants nothing to do with me, and I’m trying to give him movie recommendations?*

I dig my teeth into my bottom lip and silently wish I could just have a normal conversation with this guy. It feels like I’m either apologizing, trying to navigate his gruff demeanor, snapping at him for something he said, or wading in our deep pool of uncomfortable silence.

My eyes dart around the bar, mentally seeking something to say that would actually encourage normality. But all I come up with are liquor bottles and beer and drunk townspeople. Not exactly great conversation starters. Eventually, my gaze makes its way back over to him where he sits at the bar, eyes forward and mouth set in a firm line.

When he lifts his glass of amber-colored liquor to his lips for a drink, I catch sight of the *Sum* tattoo on his left hand. But this time, I spot an additional three letters that wrap around his finger.

S-u-m-m-e-r.

Summer.

Summer?

Surely this is a woman’s name. I mean, a man like Bennett—grumpy, broody, ill-tempered—is most certainly a winter. Not to mention, his tattoo isn’t on just any finger. It’s on his *wedding ring* finger.

Right then, it hits me. His sullen mood. His “I need a breather.”

I’m such a fool.

“Is your...uh...” I pause and shift a little on my feet. “Is your wife mad about today?”

“My wife?” He jerks his head back as his eyes meet mine again. “I don’t have a wife.”

“Oh. Then your fiancée?” I say, but it’s more of a question, and when he furrows his brow, I add, “Or...your...uh...girlfriend?”

He shakes his head, and his brow line only creases more with confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“I...” My gaze makes its way to my shoes. If he doesn’t have a wife or a fiancée or a girlfriend, then what in the hell is that tattoo for? I have a hard time believing it’s because he has an obsession with flip-flops and beach vacations.

“Is this your way of trying to see if I’m single?” he asks, and I swear one corner of his mouth twitches into a smirk, but it can’t last more than a split second. “Because I’m not interested, sweetheart.”

“What?” My jaw gapes open like a fish that just got yanked from the water.

“I don’t date. Ever.”

“Wait. You think *I’m* interested in *you*?” A shocked laugh jolts from my lungs. “Um, *no*. No thank you. I noticed the tattoo on your finger and figured Summer was—”

“My tattoo is none of your business,” he cuts me off with a gruff snap and pointedly covers that very tattoo with his other hand.

Talk about cryptic.

Like you should talk, Ms. I Came to Red Bridge to Escape My Own Secrets.

Bennett proceeds to avert his attention from me entirely, and I'm left standing there wondering how every interaction I have with this guy ends up here. If we were in his truck right now, this would be the point in the night when he'd hit the brakes and kick me out.

Something inside me wants to find a way to take a detour. To end up at a destination that doesn't end in a crash on Bad Temper Road.

Maybe you should try not to be so damn nosy? Especially on the same day he ended up in handcuffs because of you...

"Look, I...I really wasn't trying to pry. I'm sorry. Sometimes curiosity just gets the best of me."

His eyes peer into mine, searching for what, I'm not sure, until he lifts his glass and says, "Water under the bridge" before finishing off the rest of his drink.

His response is probably the best-case scenario for a man like him. Honestly, I figured I had a less than one percent chance of him answering me with actual words.

"Bennett, I—"

"Norah, we need to go." Josie startles me with a persistent hand gripping my shoulder, her voice a mix of impatience and annoyance. "Now."

I glance behind her to see Clay heading straight in our direction—or, should I say, *Josie's* direction—fire, once again, licking at his heels.

"By the way, Bennett, I really appreciate what you did for my sister today. Thank you," Josie interjects on a rush, not even giving Bennett time to respond before quickly turning back to me. "Let's get out of here."

"C'mon, Josie," Clay states as soon as he arrives, his golden-brown eyes locked on my sister. "Just talk to me for a minute."

"No." That's all she says.

“You’re in my bar, babe,” he comments with a little smile. “And you never come into my bar.”

“I’m only here because of my sister. Not you.”

“Are you sure about that?” Clay questions and places two hands to his hips. “If I recall, you said you’d never step foot in this bar again. Not for any fucking reason.”

“Sometimes we have to make exceptions and do things we absolutely don’t want to do because it’s for the people we love,” Josie retorts and grabs my hand. “Let’s go, Norah.” Between one second and the next, we’re on our way out the door, Bennett Bishop and Bartender Clay nothing more than a memory.

Well, well. *Seems to me I might not be the only one keeping secrets in this family. Or in Red Bridge, for that matter.*

13

Saturday, August 7th

Bennett

Nine Inch Nails pounds from the speakers hung discreetly around my studio, and Trent Reznor sings about how nothing really matters anymore.

I wish I could agree with him.

I push and pull my brush across the wall-sized canvas before stepping back to get a vision of the piece as a whole. An abstract vision of yellows and blues and reds and greens stares back at me. The work is undefinable, but at the same time recognizable.

It's exactly what it should be.

I've never been the kind of artist who stays boxed into a certain style. I've dabbled in impressionism and surrealist-style portraits with a raw edge. I even spent a year doing purely conceptual art that was meant to shock my audience.

But for the past two years, I've been immersed in the abstract, my intention focused on creating a picture, a painting, that I haven't planned. That might seem arbitrary and even a little destructive, and truthfully, it is, but what it isn't is predetermined—because life isn't either.

The beauty in this, I'm finding, is that even though nothing I'm creating is preset or even visually something tangible, the human brain will still want to associate it with something we're already familiar with because it craves logic and comfort.

I inspect the edges and the center, and I run my fingers across a part where I know the paint has yet to dry. Indentations that mirror the size and shape of my thumb and index finger imprint themselves into the wet paint, serving as a signature that I was here.

Three weeks of work, finally done.

My sister Breezy will want to sell it to the highest bidder. I kind of want to burn it.

My oldest brother Logan used to call my destructive impulse with my creations “madness.” But he’d also light the match and watch it burn with me. Looking back, that’s probably a good metaphor for why our relationship ended up the way it has.

I turn my back on the canvas and head over to the sink to wash my hands. When I turn around, it’s still there, staring back at me, a talisman of my demons.

Maybe a bonfire is a good idea tonight.

Disgusted with my own predictability, I shut off the music and head out of my studio and back into the main house to distract myself with coffee.

Unfortunately, my cell phone rings before I can even make it inside. There are only a handful of people who utilize this number—who even have this number—and I already know who the caller will be before I answer. I finished a painting and, somehow, she knows it. I swear she’s got to have a hidden camera in my studio at this point.

“What do you want, Breezy?” I question the instant I put the phone to my ear.

“A simple hello, how are you, sis, would be nice, you know?” She lets out a sarcastic laugh. “But I guess I should just be thankful you at least answered your damn phone.”

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this call, sis?” I ask, cutting to the chase. I may be an asshole who doesn’t answer, but Breezy doesn’t call without business.

“You know, I read the most interesting article today in a small-town newspaper. It showcased a hero of sorts. A hero who apparently punched some guy in the face and ended up in handcuffs a few days ago.”

Fucking Eileen Martin. Clay made sure he stopped by my place the day the article came out in the Red Bridge newspaper. Although only first names of the people involved were published, Eileen made sure she got a good photo of me in the back of Sheriff Peeler’s car.

“Sounds like an interesting read,” I comment as I step into the kitchen. Cold coffee from this morning still in the pot, I grab a mug from the cabinet beside the sink, fill it up, and pop it into the microwave while she’s talking.

“Oh, it was *very* interesting,” she agrees, and the snippy tone of her voice does not hide her anger. “Bennett, what in the hell happened?”

Beatrice Bishop—*aka my sister Breezy*—is three years older than me and a total shark when it comes to business. Nothing gets by her. And when I say nothing, I truly mean *nothing*.

“I think the bigger question here is how did you get a Red Bridge newspaper?”

I know for a fact that Eileen Martin still hasn’t managed to get it online. Apparently, it’s something she’s been working on for a few years now with no success, and because the woman is a stubborn old mule, she refuses help from anyone, even if that means her precious newspaper is stuck in the Stone Ages of delivery.

“Nope,” she refutes. “That is definitely not the bigger question. Seriously. What happened, Ben?”

“Don’t stress,” I tell her as the microwave beeps. “I’m not in any legal trouble. No criminal charges. My record is still squeaky clean in Red Bridge.”

“I’d like to remind you that you moved to Red Bridge to stay out of trouble.”

“And I am.” *Mostly*. I’ve sworn myself away from CAFFEINE and anything else that could have anything to do with Norah Ellis for the foreseeable future, so I don’t see any reason why I’d find myself in trouble again.

“You promise this isn’t anything I should be concerned about?”

“Breeze, I stepped in to help a woman out of an ugly situation. That’s it.”

Anyone else, and I would tell them to fuck off. But Breezy was the one person I was able to count on during the roughest part of my life, and I know she doesn’t want me to hit rock bottom again—knows I can’t afford to. For that, I’ll be forever grateful to her, even though most days she is a total pain in my ass.

“All right. But just know I get the paper mailed to me, so I’ll know if there are any more crime-ridden heroics.”

I snort.

“Now, for the real reason I called.”

“Oh boy. Here it comes...”

“You need to get an assistant.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t need an assistant, Breeze.”

“Yes. You. Do,” she states firmly. “Trust me, Bennett, I love being your agent and I’ll always be your agent, but my real job is to run our family’s galleries. And if you recall, that’s quite a big task. So, I need you to get an assistant because I can no longer do all of your dirty work.”

Bishop Galleries has been our family’s business since our grandfather founded it sixty-five years ago in Uptown Manhattan. After starting as a single location, Bishop Galleries has since expanded to two other New York spots, one in Chelsea and one in Brooklyn, and has dabbled in the Chicago, Miami, and Paris markets as well.

If my family's gallery chooses to represent you as an artist, it will undoubtedly certify your success.

All things I should probably be thankful for, being an artist myself.

Eight years ago, with our grandfather having passed away, our parents went through a nasty divorce and switched their priorities from business to one-upping each other with younger and younger spouses.

Our mom is now on her third marriage and currently living with some twenty-eight-year-old surfer in the Bahamas. And our father is still based in New York but spends a lot of time jet-setting around the world with his twenty-five-year-old supermodel trophy wife.

Saying our family has turned into a dysfunctional mess would be the understatement of the century.

Knowing there was a desperate need for actual leadership, Breezy took over.

"If I do recall, you're the one who wanted to be my agent," I interject. *"And I also recall you making a shitload of money in commission doing it."*

"But that was when our parents were still capable of running the galleries and you were willing to sell your art," she claps back. *"You haven't sold a piece for over two years, Ben. At this point, I'm doing my job for free."*

I start to open my mouth to remind her that my priorities are way more important than selling fucking paintings to rich assholes, but her voice is in my ear again.

"And so are you."

"Breezy—"

"I know you're going to say you don't need the money, but you do," she says gently, interrupting me. *"The medical bills pile up every month. Your savings and investments are getting smaller by the day. And your insurance stopped covering home health six months ago."*

“Breezy, my finances are fine.” Sort of.

“Ben, you know as well as I do that now is the time to get as much financial security as you possibly can. Or else...”

“Or else what?” I question. “I will never let her be put in some fucking facility—”

“And neither will I, you idiot,” Breezy chastises. “I would never even think about letting that happen, and you know it. But I *am* suggesting that you sell a painting or two. It’s not like you don’t spend every waking moment, besides the ones you spend with Summer and mysteriously rescuing women in trouble, in your studio. Get *paid* for it. And hire a damn assistant!”

“I’ve been trying to find one,” I hedge.

This assistant conversation started a year ago, and I *sort of* attempted to follow through. Though, I wouldn’t say I’ve kept up any sort of effort since. It’s not my fault everyone I interviewed was insufferable.

“Putting up some stupid flyer and making people go through the strangest interview process I’ve ever heard of doesn’t count as trying,” she counters on a sigh. “You and I both know you haven’t hired anyone because you don’t want to. Which is why you don’t have to do anything now, because I’m sending you someone. Fully vetted. Ready to go.”

“What?”

“His name is Paul. He’s a graduate from Harvard and has his master’s in Art History. He is the perfect candidate.”

I furrow my brow. “He sounds boring.”

“Well, you’re not going to be paying him to entertain you. He’s there to do all of your *boring* work shit that I no longer have time to do. Sounds like a match made in heaven to me,” she continues championing Paul like he’s some kind of golden-assistant-man-boy. “Plus, he’s willing to move to Red Bridge—”

“No. That is not going to work. I’m not having some bumbling stranger lurking around my house...around Summer. No way.”

“I’m not sure if you know this, but in order for an assistant to assist you, they have to be with you.”

“I don’t give a shit. It’s not happening, Breeze. Find another solution.”

“There are no other options. You need an assistant. You need someone who can handle all the daily calls that come in related to your work. Someone who can manage your email. Someone who can continue your online presence.”

“What online presence?”

“Your website and Instagram and—”

“What the fuck? I have an *Instagram*?”

“God, you are so clueless.” She sighs. “Thankfully, Paul isn’t. He’ll be there—”

“Nope,” I cut her off before she can try to finalize this crazy bullshit. “Not happening. If you’re so hell-bent on me having an assistant, then I’ll hire one myself.”

“We already tried that route.”

“Yeah, well, we’re going to try it again.” The line goes quiet. “Do not send anyone here, Breezy,” I add. “I mean it. I won’t play nice.”

“You are so frustrating!” she bellows on a groan.

“Tell me something I don’t already know.”

She huffs and puffs her irritation into the phone. “Fine. But this is on a short timeline, and if nothing happens, I’m sending Paul.”

“Breezy, enough.”

There's a small pause—just long enough for her to consider my tone of voice and the seriousness in it before moving on. “Yesterday, I had a phone call with the curator for MoMA. They want to showcase some of your pieces, but they need your permission.”

“Well, they're not going to get it.”

“*Bennett.*” She sighs again. “You can't spend the rest of your life creating art that you don't show to anyone.”

“Says who?”

“Says *everyone*,” she responds with a tight edge to her voice. “Every day, I'm fielding calls from people who are desperate to get a Bennett Bishop hanging on their wall, and yet I can't sell them anything, even though our gallery represents you, because you're on some kind of small-town sabbatical and have become absolutely impossible.”

“A sabbatical insinuates that I'm planning to come back. And I am. I just need time.”

She lets out an irritated breath. “Are you really going to sit here and tell me to tell the curator from MoMA that you refuse permission to showcase your art in one of the world's most coveted museums?”

“Yes. Plus, I'd like to remind you they already have some of my pieces on display,” I answer. “Now, if you don't mind, I have errands to run, shit to do.”

“This is exactly why you need an assistant.”

“Breeze, if I'm going to hire an assistant, I'm going to find someone who can challenge me. Someone who can provide an edge. Someone who can be a true asset to my creativity. Someone I can trust. What I don't need is some gopher to get my groceries and make me coffee. I can handle that shit on my own.”

“I'm not telling the curator from MoMA no.”

“You want me to tell him?”

“No, I want you to get your head out of your ass and realize you’re being stupid.”

“Bye, Breezy.”

“Bennett! Don’t you dare—”

I hang up the phone before she can say anything else.

Though, I’m not surprised when two texts chime in a few seconds later.

Breezy: YOU ARE IMPOSSIBLE.

Breezy: And since you’re RUDE AS HELL and ended the call before I was able to tell you everything, Logan called me this morning. He was asking about you. Wondering what you’re up to and how you’re doing. He’s in New York for some kind of movie premiere.

My response is instant.

Me: You can tell Logan to fuck right off.

Breezy: Yeah, that’s pretty much how I expected you to respond.

My older brother is a self-involved, narcissistic snake. He’s also a pretty popular Hollywood actor, and the only thing we have in common is our last name and that we slept with the same woman—who just so happened to be my girlfriend at the time.

Out of nowhere, I hear the words Josie told Clay Tuesday night at the bar. “Sometimes we have to make exceptions and do things we absolutely don’t want to do because it’s for the people we love.” Words I know I need to hear myself. For Summer and for Breezy.

Before I can overthink it, I type a text onto the screen and hit send.

Me: I have a finished painting you can sell. Large. Abstract. I’ll send you a photo by the end of today. And you can tell MoMA yes.

Ready to think about something else, *anything* else, I shove that conversation out of my head at the same time I shove my phone into my

jeans pocket and start looking inside my fridge to see what else I might need from Earl's.

It just so happens, the front of the grocery store is where the town keeps the board for employment ads. I can get groceries and take the first step to finding someone other than fucking Paul.

Sometimes, small-town life isn't so bad.

14

Norah

With guilt hanging over me like a poncho since “the incident,” I’ve been trying my best to make up for the clusterfuck of an arrival I made to Red Bridge.

I wake myself up, before Josie’s alarm even goes off, get ready for work, and pack a little snack bag for Josie along with my own every day. When we get to CAFFEINE, I try my best to watch and listen and learn everything I can, but I’m sad to report, it’s still not going well.

Wednesday, I forgot about the cookies in the oven and nearly smoked out the coffee shop. Sheriff Pete called the volunteer fire department and made us evacuate the building until they arrived.

Thursday, I tried my hand at the espresso machine, only to cause a death rattle even the manufacturer isn’t sure how to fix. It still works, technically, but it’s much slower, causing even Josie, Todd, and Camilla—who are all experienced baristas—to turn down making some drinks when customers request them.

Friday, I didn’t break anything, but I forgot to put the lid on the trash cans behind the building, and we came in this morning to an alley full of raccoons chomping on leftover muffins and expired fruit.

Which is why I’m currently cleaning up soggy trash.

I blow my hair out of my face and pick up the final scraps of mangled fruit. I toss them into the third trash bag I’ve filled since Josie put me on cleanup

duty, set the bag in the garbage, and secure the lid. You know, like I should have done last night.

As I head through the back doors, I snap off the elbow-high yellow rubber gloves and toss them into the sink to clean later. Once I give my hands a good wash and scrub, I make my way to the front of the coffee shop and find Josie rearranging the glass cabinet with fresh cookies and muffins.

“Do you need me to do anything?”

Her answer comes quicker than a sprinter out of the blocks. “Nope.”

It doesn’t take a genius to deduce why less and less is being required of me as minutes tick by. I’ve tried to make myself useful by placing small Gerbera daisy centerpieces on the tables and switching the lightbulbs out to create a warmer glow, but I’m getting the overwhelming sense that while not annoying to my sister per se, these actions still feel like an encroachment on her personal space. Which I get. Working together all day and living together at night is not for the faint of heart.

Needless to say, I’m going to need to find a job soon. One that pays me actual money so I can contribute to living costs and, eventually, find my own place.

I haven’t heard from Thomas since he left town—thank God—and I’m hoping with the help of the protection order against him, it’ll stay that way. I also got a new phone number and plan at the only cell provider in town—keeping the same phone because *help me, I’m poor*—and at some point, in the distant future, I’m hoping I might actually go long enough without causing a disaster that I can make some friends.

Lord knows, at this point, my sister and I both are emotionally locked up tighter than a billionaire’s vault. I need someone to gab and share feelings with.

Josie comes over by me, putting some tip money in the tip slot of the cash drawer and closing it up, clearly intending to get back to the real work. But something about the moment makes me blurt out words I’ve been wanting to say since Tuesday night.

“All right, I have to know. How do you know that bartender Clay?”

The exhale she lets out could be its own wind turbine and power half the town. “He’s the owner, actually, of The Country Club. Before last week, I hadn’t been there in a long-ass time.”

“Okay...but how do you know him?” I push with a teasing lilt. “Ex-lovers?”

She sighs. Looks over at me before her eyes become fixated on the floor, and another sigh escapes her lungs. “He’s my ex-husband.”

A bomb may as well have exploded above us.

“*What? He’s your ex-husband?*” The shock I feel is so consuming that I slap both of my hands down on the cash register, and it starts flipping out. Ringing and clinking and even spinning the numbers on its old-fashioned dial.

With wide eyes, I step back with my hands up, and Josie jumps in, slapping the noisy thing like it’s an angry alligator.

“I’m sorry!” I shout over the chaos, feeling so small you could fit me in your pocket. *When am I going to stop messing crap up?*

Still...this is huge!

“Are you telling me you were married?” I scream, just as the cash register stops wiggling out and shuts up completely.

Camilla and Todd both suck their lips into their mouths and tiptoe into the kitchen and away from us.

“Yes,” Josie answers, her patience for me already depleted. “I was married. And now I’m divorced. Can we move on?”

My brain wants to self-implode.

“You. Got. Married?” My voice rises with each word. “*You got married?*” I gesticulate my hands wildly in front of me, and Josie puts herself between me and the glass counter defensively. “My sister got married, and then she

went through a divorce, and I didn't know anything about it? Why, Josie? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't know, Norah." She places two hands on her hips. "Probably for the same reasons I don't know anything about *your ex* other than his propensity for bleeding. In fact, why are you in Red Bridge at all? Why did he come looking for you? What *exactly* is going on?"

Well, *shit*. This conversation took a hard left into a place I am not equipped to handle.

"You know what? I'm going to run down to Earl's for a bit. I'll be back shortly," I redirect, taking off my apron and trying not to get trapped in Josie's now smugger-than-smug smile.

"Uh-huh. That's what I thought," she says, and even though I'm not looking at her as I grab my purse and keys, I can hear her "Checkmate" smile in her voice. "We need whole milk again, so you might as well make yourself useful and grab two gallons. Oh, and while you're there, get a gallon of oat, almond, and 2%, too."

"Aye-aye, Captain." I salute her like a diligent soldier and slip through the front door faster than a cat on the nip. She's obviously not ready to air out *all* of her dirty laundry, and quite frankly, neither am I. Our secrets will live to see another day.

I keep my head down on the short walk across the square, lest I draw some kind of unwanted attention from townspeople after the article about my ex-fiancé's grand visit to Red Bridge in the paper this past week, and pull my hair over my earbuds to make a curtain around my face.

The automatic doors to Earl's Grocery open, and I step inside with Carly Simon reverberating through my ears. She sings about some guy and how vain he is, and I almost hate how much I can relate to this song and the fact that it makes me think of Thomas.

There's a large, far-too-curious part of me that wonders how things went for him after he left Red Bridge with a protection order to leave me the hell alone. A man like Thomas King is used to getting what he wants and things

going his way...all the time. His experience in this small town was the complete opposite of that. It goes without saying that it got under his skin. But the consequences of that? I don't know.

Did he tell his father?

Does my mother know about what happened?

Is he actually going to leave me alone?

So many questions that I wish I didn't have.

I pull my cell phone out of my pocket and purposefully change the song from Carly Simon to Lesley Gore and some lyrics with the empowering vibe I need.

No one owns me. Not Thomas. Not my mother. No one.

And no one is going to tell me what to do or say or think or feel. I am my own woman, dammit, and I'm going to create my own life where I get to make all the decisions and live the way I want.

Lesley is the perfect wingwoman, and I stroll through the grocery store mentally singing along with her. The refrigerator section is in the back, and I take my time getting there, winding through the aisles and even stopping in the magazine aisle to peruse a little.

It's going extremely well...until it isn't.

Right there, on the tabloid next to *People* magazine, is the only face I've ever been able to forget. Except now, it's noticeably bruised.

I snatch the shiny paper off the shelf, turn to the page it suggests, and start reading.

Thomas King's Mysterious Black Eyes

The young heir to King Financial was seen at Tavern on the Green last night, enjoying dinner and drinks with friends. Though, no one could miss the prominent black eyes and swollen nose on his face.

Which leaves all of us wondering—*what happened to Thomas King?*

“Ever since Norah Ellis left him at the altar, Thomas has been having a really rough time,” one inside source revealed. “And this just proves that nothing is right in his world. Honestly, I feel bad for the guy. First, the love of your life leaves you for another man, and then, you get in some kind of fight? It’s horrible.”

Left him for another man?

What a boot-licking, ass-kissing, tale-telling asshole.

Frustrated, I slam the tabloid back on the shelf and take off for the front of the store. I’m almost out the door when I see the want ads bulletin board for all the job postings in town.

With an even hotter fire burning inside me to make something of myself on my own and leave Thomas and my mother and stupid New York in the past, I scan through the push-pinned papers with fast eyes.

Shearing sheep on Tad Hanson’s farm, a teller at the Red Bridge bank, and an assistant manager at Earl’s—none of it is speaking to me.

I frown and pick through the other papers on the board until I finally find one that stands out as interesting.

A simple sheet of white paper with printed black letters—**Artist’s Assistant Needed. Open Interviews Every Tuesday at 12 p.m.**

No phone number. No name. Just an address.

Without hesitation, I pull my phone out of my back pocket and snap a quick picture of the flyer.

I’ll have to wait for Tuesday to check it out, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to spend even another minute thinking about Thomas King.

I turn to leave, but when I see a woman heading out the doors with a cart full of bagged groceries, I realize I’ve forgotten Josie’s request for milk of

all kinds. And I can't go back there empty-handed—she'll kill me. Or, you know, at least try to interrogate me some more.

Quickly, I snag a cart from the row by the door and make a beeline for the back of the store. My music is still playing—"Another Day in Paradise" by Phil Collins.

It's an oldie but a goodie, and I choose to embrace the vibe as I swing open the fridge door to grab the milk Josie requested. I even find myself shaking my hips a little when the chorus hits. I quickly check the expiration stamps on the whole milk and choose the two with the furthest out, before swinging them off the fridge shelf and down at my side.

I lift my foot to tap the door shut, but when I look up and see someone standing beside me, *someone I definitely know*, the balancing act of being on one leg with two gallons of milk hanging at my sides becomes impossible to juggle.

I start to fall forward, and the only way to stop myself from crashing to the floor is to grab the cart with my hand and steady myself. Alas, one jug of milk doesn't make it in that scenario and hits the floor with a hard glug.

White liquid splatters out of the now-cracked plastic like a rushing wave on a flooded river and makes its way across the floor and right onto Bennett Bishop's shoes.

Oy vey.

15

Bennett

Milky white liquid gushes across the tile floor of Earl's grocery store and surrounds my brown leather boots until the soles are no longer visible.

I look at my boots and then back up at the horrified expression on Norah Ellis's face.

"Oh my God!" she cries so loudly it makes my ears ring. "I'm so sorry!" she keeps shouting while she puts the one jug of milk she managed to keep off the floor into her cart.

Why on earth is she screaming? When I realize she has earbuds in, I point toward her ears. "How about you take those out, yeah?"

Her cheeks turn an impressive shade of pink as she fumbles with the headphone cords until she has them removed from her ears and in her pocket.

"Seriously, I'm so sorry. I think I ruined your boots."

I almost want to laugh at how much time this woman has spent apologizing to me in the last week and a half. *Someone better get Guinness on the line because she has to have reached a record by now.*

Since I don't have a cart of my own, I put my carton of eggs and Summer's Danimals Smoothies in Norah's cart and head for the front of the store to find Earl. He's behind one of the registers, just like normal on Saturdays since he's usually short-staffed.

“Hey, Earl,” I call out and successfully grab his attention. “Where are the mops?”

“Mops?” he questions as he runs a loaf of bread over the scanner for an older gentleman named Harold Metcalf, the owner of the diner on Main Street. I’m pretty good at recognizing everyone after being in Red Bridge for so long, but Harold with his distinct comb-over and handlebar moustache is hard to miss.

“I need to clean up a little spill.”

“Where at?”

“Refrigerator section. Just some milk.”

Instead of telling me where the mops are, he grabs the microphone beside his register. “Cleanup on aisle two!” His voice screeches and crackles through the speakers of the grocery store. “I repeat, cleanup on aisle two!”

For fuck’s sake.

“I can do it,” I urge, and he shakes his head.

“I don’t pay Lance to sit around and play on his damn phone. He’ll do it.”

Lance just turned eighteen and has been working at Earl’s for as long as I can remember. He’s also lazy as fuck and rivals Houdini whenever there’s work to be done. I once watched Earl shout for Lance to come help at checkout for a good ten minutes while I stood in line behind five other customers, only to find out he’d excused himself to Bear Lake with some friends twenty minutes prior.

As I head back toward the refrigerator section, I hear “Cleanup on aisle two, Lance!” another five times before I make it to where Norah stands in front of the milk spill.

Her cheeks are cherry red now, and there’s a part of me that would find that level of embarrassment over spilled milk adorable if I thought about it too much.

“Earl is handling the mop situation.”

“Yeah, I think everyone in the store is aware of that.” Irritation dances around the edges of her voice. “Did you really have to make such a thing of it?”

“It’s not a big thing. I tried to get a mop, but Earl insisted that one of his employees needed to do it.”

“Dammit, Lance!” Earl’s voice is in the speakers again. “Get off your butt and head to aisle two! It’s an emergency!”

Norah groans and rubs a hand down her face. “Holy hell, this is not an emergency.”

“It’s no big deal,” I tell her, and she looks up at me with narrowed eyes.

“Everyone in the store is looking.”

I glance over my shoulder and see that she’s not wrong. At least six people have walked toward the fridge section to see what all the aisle two fuss is about.

“Lance! Aisle two! *Now!* Emergency!”

Her true emotions are on full display now, and she flashes a glare in my direction. “Because of you, the Red Bridge firemen are going to end up getting called out again.”

“Because of me?” I question on a humorless laugh.

“Yeah. You. The mop emergency alarm-sounder.”

“Sweetheart, I’m not the one who dropped an entire gallon of milk on the floor just trying to turn around. If you’re going to point fingers at someone, you’d better do it at yourself.”

Narrowed eyes whip back to my face, and her pretty mouth parts in disgust.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be such a grumpy jerk, you know?” She glances down at my stuff in her cart and scoffs. “What kind of grown-ass man buys

Danimals anyway?”

Lance chooses that exact time to show up, sleep in his eyes and a mop not much skinnier than him in his lanky hand, saving me from having to make up some line of bullshit. “What happened back here?” he grumbles, his voice raspy like he just woke up from a nap.

“I accidentally dropped the milk,” Norah admits. “I’m really sorry.”

“This is a mess,” Lance complains, and her cheeks go back to that pinkish-red hue again.

If it were me, I would tell Lance to fuck right off, but that’s not what Norah does.

“I know.” She grimaces and holds her hands together like she’s praying. “I’m so, so sorry.”

She’s back to the apologies. Back to polite. I can’t stop myself from poking at the flaw.

“You think I should line up everyone in the grocery store so you can start your apology tour?” I ask, and Norah’s gaze swings back toward me. “Probably’ll make it easier for you to get through them, you know?”

“Excuse me?”

“Apologizing. It’s your thing,” I answer with a shrug. “Figured I could save you some time by rallying everyone up while Lance finishes mopping.”

Her mouth drops open so far, I can see all of her pearly white teeth.

“What?” I question. “You can’t deny it’s your thing. *Miss Apologies*. Even when it’s not your fault, you say sorry for it. And whenever I think you’ll get tired of always apologizing, another assurance slips from your mouth.”

She is appalled. “I can’t believe you just said that to me.”

“Well, I did.” I offer one nonchalant lift of my shoulder. “You know why? Because it’s the truth.”

Her eyes narrow like they have the power to crush me in the process. “You know what your thing is?”

“What’s that?”

“Being the world’s biggest dick,” she snaps, finally showing some backbone again.

“Having the biggest dick or being the biggest dick?” I question with a smirk. “Just want to clarify since I’ve heard the first on more than one occasion.”

“You know, one moment, I think you might actually be a nice guy beneath that cold, hard, grouchy surface of yours, but then, you prove me wrong by being an asshole.”

“And asshole and a dick? Don’t hold back on my account, sweetheart. Please. Tell me what else I am since you seem to know so much about me.”

She opens her mouth to say something, but then quickly closes it. She even does that two more times before she lets out a deep exhale of air and turns back to Lance. “I’m really sorry about this. Thank you for cleaning it up.”

“Whatever,” the teenage grocery employee mutters as he halfheartedly finishes mopping. Ten bucks says the next person through this aisle eats it.

Without another word or glance in my direction, Norah finishes grabbing several more gallons of varying milks, carefully puts them in her cart, and heads for the front of the store like I never existed, my eggs and Danimals going with her.

I guess it’s safe to say I pissed her off.

Whatever. I don’t have the time or energy to let myself care. I have way more important stuff to worry about.

Quickly, since I’m starting over, I go back to my list and gather the things I need before stopping at the pharmacy to pick up Summer’s prescription and heading for the checkout myself.

Earl blathers about this year's high school football team, and I pretend to listen as he scans my stuff and bags it for me.

"Later, Earl," I call as I move through the automatic front door and head in the direction of my truck.

The sun is strong and bright today, and I can barely see for the reflection of light coming off the pavement. That's probably why I make it all the way to my truck and unlock the driver's side door before realizing I'm being accosted again.

"What the hell is your problem?" Norah yells from the passenger's side of my truck, and I groan.

"Good grief, you're like mold, you know that? I can't seem to get rid of you."

"God, you are so infuriating!" She slaps her palms against the sides of her thighs. "When I realized I bought your groceries, I stayed in an effort to mend fences. I thought you might need them, but maybe I'll just egg your truck instead!"

"You do that, and you're going to find yourself in a whole shitload of trouble, sweetheart," I growl, rounding the truck to snag the bag from her before she can follow through.

I grab at the plastic, and she pulls it back, devolving us into a ridiculous game of grocery bag tug-of-war. When I inevitably win, her fists ball up at her sides in anger, and then suddenly, without any warning, the flat of her palm lands on my cheek in a cracking blow.

When she lifts her hand again, clearly ready to give me another strike, I step forward to grab her by the arms, to calm her down and stop my racing heart while I'm at it, but for some dumb, inconceivable reason, my lips end up on hers.

I kiss her. And she kisses me right back.

I take and taste and delve my tongue along the side of hers, and she lets out a needy little gasp into my open mouth. I slide my hands into the soft waves

of her hair, and the movement presses our bodies tight against each other. I'm breathing heavily and so is she, and I'm no more than two point five seconds away from ripping our clothes off and pushing our bodies together in a way I *know* we would fit.

Call it intuition from years of stupidity, but this is the kind of passion I fucking know would translate into the bedroom.

It takes every ounce of control I have left, but so did starting my life over... I can do this.

I set her away punitively, as though she's the one to blame, even though we both know that's not the case.

But my eyes home in on her mouth. It's pink and swollen from the kiss, and I witness her top teeth dig into the plush flesh of her bottom lip.

Her brown eyes are huge as they stare up and into mine. Big and beautiful and fucking tempting me to make them fall closed again.

I want to hear the way her breath escapes her lungs on a needy gasp again. I want to feel the way her lips meld perfectly to mine. I want to dive my tongue back into her mouth and taste her.

I want to feel all of her perfect curves with my big hands.

I want to know what Norah Ellis looks like when she really comes undone. I want to know what she feels like, sounds like, when she's too busy chasing her pleasure to run that rambling little mouth of hers.

Fuck.

It takes everything inside me not to kiss her again.

"Get out of here, Norah." My words come out like a harsh demand, but deep down, I'm begging her to get the hell out of here so I don't lose control.

"Bennett—"

“Leave,” I snap, effectively sending her away to her pile of bagged milk and down the sidewalk in a hurry.

A stupid kiss and even stupider reaction.

I guess, no matter how hard I try, I’m never going to grow out of being a dumbass.

16

Tuesday, August 10th

Norah

For three days, I've thought of nothing but the kiss.

The way it felt, the way I gave in to it so quickly despite my very complicated life, the way it ended—and how every part of all three of those is a recipe for devastation.

I don't need some macho, grumpy man who hates me riling me up and stealing kisses in parking lots. I don't need to throw my life into another man and another disaster when I've not fully escaped the last. I *don't need* to be feeling the things I'm feeling or wondering how to decode Bennett Bishop's mystery.

I need to focus on me. I need a job. I need a purpose. And I need all those things pronto.

As such, begging Josie to have the morning off today so I could pursue other employment seemed like the most logical choice, and now, as I drive toward a random address outside of town in Josie's old Civic I got started by some miracle, I'm starting to feel like I can breathe.

An artist's assistant.

It's the perfect outlet for my creativity and design, and much better than bagging groceries at Earl's or shearing sheep for the supposedly hot Farmer Tad, as Josie refers to him, or even breaking all of my sister's hard-earned equipment at CAFFEINE.

And I think Josie is coming to that realization too. The gusto she used to agree to my morning off to job hunt—even though she had a meeting with Eileen Martin scheduled about running coupons in the paper that meant she wouldn't be working either—proves it.

Dressed in the only pair of business casual clothes I have with me—*all from Lillian, of course*—I drive along a winding road that Google Maps is confident leads to 33 Maple Avenue.

It's not long before I spot a mailbox holding court in front of a gravel driveway that verifies the right address. I take a right and head down the curvy path until the real-life vision of a large barn stares back at me through the windshield. In the distance, a big white house sits up on a hill.

The brakes squeal like rusted metal and the tires crunch over the gravel as I come to a stop at the edge of the driveway.

I cut the engine and start to look around at my surroundings.

Open grass fields highlighted by lush forest and a white barn with two large red doors.

It's No-Man's-Land—the opposite of New York City. As a self-proclaimed fancy girl who's used to urban hustle and bustle, I can't believe how good it feels.

I check my hair and makeup one last time in the visor mirror and step out of the driver's side door at 11:58 a.m., two minutes to spare before the interview starts. I'm so proud of myself for managing my time well enough—even the extra fifteen minutes it took to get the Civic running—not to be late.

Now, all I need to do is nail this interview, and I'll be well on my way.

New life, here I come.

The walk to the barn is a real test on my heels, but I manage to trudge through the grass without breaking a stiletto or falling on my face. Maybe business casual wasn't the way to go, but on the off chance the person interviewing me has, I don't know, seen me in the paper or happens to be a

member of the volunteer fire department, I wanted to bolster my chances of convincing them I'm a professional. I look around for a bell or something to announce my arrival by the red doors, but with nothing in sight, I settle for knocking on the weather-roughened entrance.

When there's no response, I increase my knock to a closed-fist pound and calmly call out, "Hello? I'm here for the interview...?"

Nothing.

Carefully, I tug on one of the big brass handles. The right barn door squeaks and groans as it cracks a smidge, and I have to use a decent amount of muscle to get it to open wide enough for me to step inside.

"Hello?" I call out as the big barn door slams shut behind me.

The barn is completely empty. Four massive white walls and a dirt floor with scraps of hay bely the existence of an artist at all. *How long has it been since they painted anything in here?*

Hesitantly creeping into the room a little farther, I check for secret doors or passages or any signs of psycho activity—you know, saws, chains, machetes, hidden jail cells, that kind of thing.

"Hello?" I call again as I reach the center of the room and spin in a circle of confusion. It's only then that I spot something else in the shadows, in the very corner of the room where one white wall meets the other. Cans of paint and a clear plastic bin with paintbrushes inside pique every fiber of my curiosity.

Quickly, I shuffle to the corner and look it over, finding a handwritten note sitting on top of one of the paint cans.

Paint the wall.

Besides leaving a little spot to write my name and phone number down, that's all it says—*paint the wall*.

I scrunch up my nose.

This is the interview? No person to impress, no questions to be answered, no judgment on my etiquette. Just some cans of paint and a blank wall.

It's either the most brilliant, freedom-giving interview I've ever seen, or the beginning of an episode of *Dateline*.

I choose to believe the first because, to be honest, I'm running out of other options.

Shedding Lillian's Chanel jacket and setting it aside carefully, I roll up the hem of my pants as much as I can and kick off Lil's Versace heels too. They're not the kind of clothes you paint in, especially if you're only wearing them on loan.

Now physically ready, I stand in front of the empty wall and try to wrap my mind around how to get mentally ready.

So...paint the wall?

Right.

Come on, Norah. Just paint the shit out of this thing.

Each can's lid has a small swatch of the color that's inside, and I have no shortage of colors to choose from. White, black, blue, hues of yellow and gold, pastel pink, army green, prison-jumpsuit orange, and shades of purple and brown. There must be at least thirty colors here, obviously more if I mix them.

I choose one color, a soft pinkish and orangish peach that reminds me of the kind of Red Bridge sunsets I used to witness when I was a kid.

And I paint the wall, blending in yellow and even red closer to the top and bottom.

At first, I start with a little paintbrush, but when I realize it will take me hours upon hours to paint this entire wall, I locate a paint roller that only requires a little setup and allows me to reach the top without getting on a ladder.

After that, my pace speeds up tenfold.

After a few hours of mind-quieting activity, I put the last coat on the bottom corner and step back to admire my work. It's pretty—and makes me feel good—but I have no clue if it's what the artist is looking for.

All I can do is give myself the permission to be okay if it's not. This doesn't have the stain of my failure to recognize the evil in people or the unyielding need to please someone who doesn't care anything about me.

This is me starting over at twenty-six, and surprisingly enough, I think I'm okay with it.

Glancing down at the mess of brushes and paint cans, it occurs to me that cleaning up after myself might be part of the interview—like, *that's* what I'd be looking for if I were an artist needing an assistant.

Without delay, I seal back up the paint cans I used and gather my brushes and roller to take outside. I'm not sure where, but I imagine there has to be a water spigot somewhere that I can use to clean and rinse them.

Walking cautiously on bare feet, I circle the barn all the way to the back before finding what I'm looking for—a standing spigot with a blue handle about halfway up toward the house on the property, in the middle of a pasture. The sun warms my shoulders thanks to the tank top I chose to wear under Lil's jacket, and butterflies flutter on floral grass. It's like a scene out of a movie or a storybook, and I find myself tipping my face up into the warm sunlight as I walk.

Growing up in New York, I felt like my life was the equivalent of running full speed on a treadmill. My mother dragged me from one after-school activity to the next and then to whatever social engagements she'd scheduled after that. We dined and we mingled, and we bent ourselves over backward to find “the right people.” When I was in college, we met Thomas, and unfortunately, I was naïve enough to think that meant we'd succeeded. But the truth is, there is no finish line when you're obsessed with being the best.

Out here, like this, I feel like I can hear myself think. Like there is no world outside of whatever I choose to create for myself, no goal to be achieved. Rather, it's this and these little perfect moments that are worth striving for, and even better than that, there's no finish at all—just infinite opportunity.

Fingers crossed that all of that opportunity starts with me getting the job.

17

Wednesday, August 11th

Bennett

“Jeez, Daddy. Hurry up!” A sigh follows that mouthful of sass, leaving the lips of the most beautiful girl I’ve ever laid eyes on.

Even though she’s rarely ever on her own two feet, she’s a tiny thing, standing at only three foot five. She loves girly stuff and sparkles and reality television. Her birth certificate reads Summer Beatrice Bishop, but to me, she’ll always be my Summlebee.

This little girl right here was love at first sight for me. And the past seven years have only made me love her more. *Love her more than I love myself.*

“I’m moving as fast as I can, Bossy Pants.” I roll my eyes at the annoyed purse of her lips, but I laugh a little at the same time as I unclick her custom-made mobility seat from her wheelchair and lift her up with the carefulness I’d use to carry around an egg made of glass.

God, I hate that she feels lighter in my arms than she did a few weeks ago.

As I walk us from the living room toward the front door, I never once take my eyes off her face, watching like a hawk for the first sign of discomfort.

Once we’re on the porch, the warm wind brushes through her blond ringlets, and her bright blue eyes stare up at me. A cute little pirate’s smile follows, crinkling her nose, and my heart expands inside my chest.

“You’re a total slow-mo today, Daddy,” she teases, her sweet, melodic voice filling my ears as I reach the golf cart I parked near the bottom of the porch.

“I’m a slow-mo?” I question on a chuckle.

“Yeah.” She giggles. “You’re takin’ forevah!”

With cautious movements, I set Summer down into the passenger’s seat of the golf cart, clicking her into the specially made apparatus I had installed a few years ago. She rolls her pretty little eyes at me when I double- and triple-check her safety straps, but it only makes me smile.

“You all set?” I ask, gently kissing her on the forehead.

“Actually, no,” she responds and dramatically blinks her eyelashes toward me. “You see anything we’re missing?” When I stare down at her, confused, she adds, “Perhaps a pair of the prettiest sunglasses you’ve ever seen in your whole life?”

Shit. Seeing as those are one of Summer’s favorite belongings—and something she rarely gets the chance to wear—this is a huge dad fail.

“Sit tight, honey,” I tell her and head back into the house on a jog.

It only takes a minute for me to locate them on the dresser in her room and another minute for me to get back to the golf cart and set them gently on her face.

“Looking good, Summblebee.”

Immediately, a little girl with her favorite pair of heart-shaped pink sunglasses looks up at me with a smile and a giggle. “Thanks, Daddy.”

The sunglasses are still too big for her face, but Summer doesn’t care. She’s been in love with these lenses since she saw them in a magazine and begged me to get her a pair. And since she’s had me wrapped around her finger since the moment I held her in my arms, I scoured the internet for hours until I found an exact replica.

“Now are we all set? Or do you want me to run back in the house—”

“No!” she exclaims. “Let’s go!”

Without delay and before receiving any more eye rolls from Sassafras, I round the golf cart to climb in on the other side. Once I hit the gas, my ears are blessed with the sounds of her excited giggles as we slowly take off.

There is nothing I love more than the sound of her laughter.

Away from the main house, I drive us toward the barn on the other side of the pasture. Summer's face is the picture of peace and joy, everything I'd want it to be, but I'm terrified like never before.

Yesterday, we went to Burlington for her monthly scans. It's an important part of her treatment and care, but it is undoubtedly the single most devastating day of the month for me. That's why I always did the assistant interviews on Tuesdays—I knew we'd be gone, and I knew we'd need something to look forward to on the day after.

It's been over a year since someone's attempted to apply for the job, but the sentiments are the same. Summer and I need cheering up.

Two broken ribs, a fractured clavicle, and a severely deteriorating patella are just the tip of the iceberg in the latest complications of my miracle girl's battle with Osteogenesis Imperfecta Type III. For weeks, she hasn't even left the damned house. She's also been tired and in pain, and I swear, it's getting harder and harder for her to breathe. Just like the season, my sweet Summer is starting to dim.

The doctors have been preparing me for so long—reminding me the time would come—but even the thought of it really happening makes my heart feel like it's ripping in two.

“You okay, Summlebee?” I ask, even though I already know the answer. For me, knowing how rough these rides are on her body, every time we venture on the golf cart, I'm tortured. For Summer, it's her joy.

“This is...the best...ever!” she shouts into the wind, her only way of expressing herself since her limbs are all secured.

Despite my misery, I smile. “Guess what, baby girl? I have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise?” Her eyes widen even further with joy. “What is it? Tell me. Tell me. Tell me!”

“Mr. Doug said someone came and painted the barn yesterday, so I thought we’d go see it.” Every week, my groundskeeper Doug checks the barn and lets me know if anyone has come. It’s been a long time since they actually have—so long, in fact, that Doug was nearly out of breath with excitement when he told me this morning.

“Yay!” she cheers. “No one has painted in forever!”

I don’t bother mentioning why they haven’t, or that it’s my fault since I only just bothered to repost the opening for the position on Earl’s board, when I know the other posting has been missing for a year. Instead, I focus on her and the way she lights up when she sees other people’s creations, no matter their skill level.

“I thought you might be excited.”

“Are you kidding? Paint days are my favorite! I wonder what colors they used! I hope it’s pink!”

Pink is Summer’s absolute favorite color. Truthfully, it’s the *only* color in her eyes. All the other colors don’t stand a chance or ever get selected if Summer has the choice.

I shake my head with a small laugh. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Because who wouldn’t hope for pink? Pink is the best!”

“Okay, Summle. You’re right. I hope it’s pink too.”

She giggles again, her eyes rolling back toward the sky, she’s doing it so hard. We’ve always had to be careful since she was born with the worst and most progressive type of brittle bone that a baby can actually survive, but I can’t imagine how she must feel these days, practically—purposely—paralyzed for her own good. When it comes to Summer’s disease, even the simplest of movements can cause a bone fracture. Hell, sometimes—lately, *a lot* of times—her bones fracture for no reason at all.

She cheers as I pull to a stop right in front of the red barn doors and push the brake pedal to its locked position to keep the cart from rolling at all. I grab her mobility stroller from the back and gingerly lift her—while she’s still strapped into her seat—out of the golf cart and secure her in place.

“Come on, Dad,” she complains when I start doing my usual double- and triple-check thing. “I want to see the wall.”

“Hold your horses,” I chastise with a chuckle. “This isn’t a race.”

“It should be,” she argues. For as long as I can remember, Summer’s been in a hurry. She’s eager and voracious and demanding of both excitement and affection, and because of all those things, she’s impossible to placate. She wants what she wants, and if I’m completely honest, I’ve never even tried not to give any of it to her.

Seven years ago, her mom skipped out as soon as she had her, too selfish to be weighed down by a daughter, especially one in need of extra care, and I did the only thing I could do—turn my life around in a hurry. I cut ties with everyone of questionable influence and moved the two of us to Red Bridge, swearing to myself that nothing—and no one—would ever come between me and what my daughter needed.

Even damsels in seeming distress like Norah Ellis.

I slide open the big red doors and step inside the vacant barn, pushing Summer ahead of me. The sun shines through one of the upper windows and lands right on the wall that is no longer white. Instead, a beautiful shade of pastel pink with hues of orange and yellow and red is now front and center.

I take off her sunglasses, and Summer’s reaction is instantaneous. Mine lingers in my gut like it’s been punched.

“Oh my gosh, Daddy! I love it so much! This is the one! It looks just like the sunset we saw last week on the back porch! Right?”

It does. I wasn’t sure Summer would notice, but now that she has, my stomach churns ten times harder. Every sunset we share together feels like

one fewer is left.

Leaving Summer there to admire the wall with excitement, I walk over to the neatly sorted paint cans and clean brushes to see if the paper is there. I barely even glance at it before I'm shocked by a name—**Norah Ellis**.

Her phone number sits right below it in the same delicate, feminine handwriting.

Holy shit.

I have to blink several times before my brain can fully comprehend how to feel about the revelation.

She's a pain in the ass, weighed down by complicated baggage, and she makes me do stupid things. In a week's time, her presence has had me both punching strangers and engaging in the best kiss I've ever had.

Norah Ellis is the very last person I need working for me.

"Dad, you have to leave this one up," Summer continues, her exuberance temporarily knocking me out of my confused stupor. "This way, we can come out here and see that sunset all the time!"

Even though I wish I could erase Norah Ellis and everything related to her from my life, there's no way in hell I can say no. "Okay, baby. We'll leave it."

"Forever?" she asks.

Fuck. "Forever."

I feel slightly sick as we leave the barn to finish our ride around the property, and by the time we get back to the house for Summer's daily bathing and evening medications, I'm ready to come out of my skin.

I don't know what to do. I don't know how to worry about hiring an assistant while I have so many bigger things to worry about, and how to reconcile that Norah Ellis is the assistant in question.

I want to do right by my sister and my daughter, and I want to be able to afford the care Summer so desperately needs. And for the love of God, I want to stop thinking about that fucking kiss.

In need of distraction, I grab my keys and give a heads-up to Summer and her nurse before taking off for town in my truck.

Less than ten minutes later, gravel crunches beneath my tires as I park in front of The Country Club. It's not busy, thank fuck, so I know I'll have immediate access to a stool and a glass of bourbon.

Unfortunately, since this is the only bar in town, I'll also have a nosy-ass Clay getting in my business. But since I don't keep booze in my house anymore, if I want a drink, this is what I have to do.

Hawkeyes engaged, the busybody spots me the second I step through his door and makes a dramatic showing of stepping away from the customer and setting his hands on his hips.

"My God. What in the world's going on? Bennett Bishop in my bar on a Wednesday evening? Must be the apocalypse."

I roll my eyes and take my seat on a stool at the far end of the bar where no one else is sitting, and Clay doesn't waste any time trotting over to me.

I swear, he is such a pain in the ass sometimes.

"Well, howdy there, good buddy. What brings you in this time? Get in another shootout with some out-of-towner and spend the day in holding?"

"Give me a glass of bourbon, Clay," I reply rather than dignifying his stupid shit.

"Wowee, okay, then. Not in the mood for teasing, I see."

I breathe deeply, and he stands there, waiting.

"Clay. Bourbon, please. Then I'll consider talking."

Finally motivated, he obliges, setting a glass in front of me and filling it nearly to the brim with ice and amber liquid. I take one sip, and then

another, and that gives me a reason to blame the burn in my throat on something other than Norah Ellis.

Clay is uncharacteristically quiet as I indulge some more, and for some reason, the new strategy proves effective. I start to talk.

“Breezy’s been on my ass about finding an assistant again. Says the bills are piling up, and I need to start selling shit so I can keep Summer at home and give her the care she needs.”

Clay nods just once.

“So I put that old ad up at Earl’s again, and someone actually found the damn thing and came to paint the barn yesterday. Summer and I took a ride down there to see it, and for once, someone actually did something worthwhile.”

“Great.”

“Yeah,” I scoff. “Except the someone is Norah fucking Ellis.”

“And?”

“*And?* We’ve had a lot of shit between us in the short time she’s been here, Clay, and not one piece of it is good. You think it’s a good idea I hire her, make her a permanent fixture in my life? In Summer’s?” I shake my head. It’s the worst fucking idea I’ve ever heard, especially because there was something good—something explosive—in that stupid-as-shit kiss I have no intention of sharing with Clay if the town hasn’t been yapping about it already.

He considers me for long moments that cross into minutes, and I consider nothing but my glass—the condensation that was quick to form on the outside and the taste of the liquor inside.

Visuals of that stupid barn wall and the way Summer’s face lit up when she first saw it dance inside my head. She begged me to keep it forever, and I felt like my heart was cracked in two because of what it symbolized for me.

There's nothing I want more than to give her everything she wants, and there's nothing I want less than to feel like I have to because time is running out.

Truth is, some days, I can barely breathe.

"You're afraid Summer is going to like her, aren't you?" Clay finally asks, cutting me so deep it bleeds.

I roll my eyes before admitting, "Are you kidding? All that fanciness? She'll fall in love."

"Maybe...I don't know, Ben," Clay says as softly and as gently as he can in a loud bar. "Maybe that's not a bad thing, you know? Maybe a little Norah Ellis in your lives is exactly what you need."

My stomach burns, and my throat feels like it's closing in on itself.

Maybe a little Norah Ellis in your lives is exactly what you need.

That's what I'm afraid of.

18

Tuesday, August 17th

Norah

Another week of working at CAFFEINE and messing up everything I touch. Another week of depending on Josie for simple necessities and a place to stay. Another week of feeling like I'm in limbo, waiting for the world to crash down around me.

And one full week of waiting to hear about the interview with nothing to show for it—and unfortunately, I really got my hopes up.

Agitation stirs inside me as Josie cleans the used grinds out of the espresso machine—that she finally got working again—and makes two customers' drinks all at once.

The whole scene makes the writing on the wall more obvious—I'm useless here. And that stark reality only makes me think more about the one and only interview I attempted. Sure, it was entirely strange, and I didn't actually talk to anyone, but painting that wall made me feel more like myself than I have in, well, forever.

Decorum tells me I should let it go. Try something else. Interview to shear sheep for Tad or settle for bagging groceries at Earl's. But I've spent my whole life being the perfect little girl who does what other people expect of her, and now, every burning sensation in my body is rebelling against being that girl.

I watch Josie juggle two more orders and decide I can't watch anymore. I can't sit by and let life happen *to* me. It's time I make life happen *for* me.

Screw this. I'm getting that job.

On a huff, I shove away from the counter, unwrap the tie on my green apron, and slam it down on the counter. The aggressive display causes several customers to look in my direction, all pairs of eyes wide and confused. And I'm not surprised that my unhinged, unexplained outburst has Josie scowling toward me.

Shit.

"Sorry." I pick up the apron with apology in my eyes, and Josie goes back to making whatever fancy drink has her spraying a mound of whipped cream on top of cold coffee.

I hesitate for a long moment, a small part of me tempted to ask her if she knows anything about the mystery artist I still have no information on, but I decide I'm too vulnerable for that. I can't risk other people's opinions or the possibility that my only current hope balloon might get popped.

I need this hope. And I need to see it all the way through. On my own.

"Josie, I have to go somewhere. I...I can't stay here and be useless and—"

"Okay," Josie agrees without a second thought, without even looking up to meet my eyes. Frankly, I'm shocked. I figured she'd ask me questions. Interrogate me about where I needed to go. *Something.*

"Okay?"

"Okay." She nods. "Just do me a favor, Hulk, and go easy on the equipment on your way out."

Dramatically, I hang my apron on the hook by the door to the back kitchen and tiptoe my way around the counter. Josie has the decency to smile, and I'm almost laughing by the time I step out into the drizzle.

It's a nasty day, one that makes me long for the hot stench of real summer, and I pull the hood of Lil's Prada hoodie over my head and run for Josie's old Civic like the water will melt me.

By the time I plop down in the driver's seat, I'm breathing hard and silently cursing the mystery artist for making me go to so much trouble.

Good. Lord knows I'm going to need a bit of seething anger to bolster my confidence. I need backbone and determination and a "don't take no for an answer" attitude, none of which are in my wheelhouse.

I crank the engine, which thankfully fires on the first turn of the key, strap on my seat belt, and take off down the road toward the outside of town. I don't need directions this time; the route is burned into my brain.

When I turn onto Maple Avenue, which happens to be comprised of nothing more than dirt and gravel that's now slickened by rain, the Civic fishtails so hard I end up spinning and facing the other direction. My heart throbs inside my rib cage, a mix of fear and resolve elevating my adrenaline to an eleven out of ten.

It's raining harder now, coming in driving sheets that move from right to left instead of straight down, but I'm so far gone with determination, not even that can stop me.

I lift the hood of Lil's hoodie back over my head and jump out of the car, abandoning it completely. In the distance, the big white house sits up on the hill, and I run the rest of the way to it, past the barn and up the drive until I reach the door.

I don't wait to catch my breath, and I don't even consider the fact that I have no idea who's going to be on the other side. I need answers, and I need them now.

I want this job. Badly.

Scratch that. I *need* it. I'm not walking away from this with "No" as an answer. I can't.

Fully soaked and shaking with the chill, I lift my hand to knock on the front door and pound until the light comes on in the hall. I can't see anything clearly, thanks to the thin white curtains in the sidelight windows, but I know someone's home.

Mustering every fiber of bravery I have, I knock harder, willing myself to take breaths as pounding footsteps sound on the other side of the deep blue door.

They're getting closer and harsher, and *holy shit, what if it's an angry, scary man on the other side?*

Immediately, I pull my knuckles away, and my throat seizes around a ball of panic.

Gah, Norah. Way to think this through!

My legs twist on themselves as I turn to leave, but it's too late, I can tell by the sound of the door whipping open behind me.

"What in the hell is going—*Norah?*"

For as scary a scenario as I pictured of a stranger with a gun or a knife or a will to kill, the voice I hear behind me is infinitely more terrifying.

Oh my God. Don't tell me that voice belongs to who I think it belongs to.

Slowly, I turn around, trying to catch my breath as I do, but it doesn't get any better when I see his grumpy, gorgeous face. Bennett stands there, staring at me with bewilderment in his eyes and irritation on his lips.

"Hi, Bennett," I say with forced dignity—like I'm not at all surprised to find him here. Like I'm not utterly floored that he's the mystery artist. "Sorry to bother you at home." I steady myself, refusing to shake my head at my stupid apology. "But I was wondering if you could find a minute to tell me whether I got the job or not."

My skin feels clammy, and my heart may actually be seconds away from an explosion, but I steel my spine and roll my shoulders back like I'm not on the brink of demise from finding out that Bennett Bishop himself is the artist I interviewed to work for.

"I know you're a busy guy and all, but I'm kind of trying to get my life started over here. And in order to *start* starting over, I need to *know* if I got the job. So do I have the job, or don't I?"

He stares at me for what feels like an eternity. Seriously. I fear I might reach my deathbed before he responds, but then, he runs a harsh hand through his hair, lets out a deep sigh, and shocks the ever-loving shit out of me.

“You’re hired.”

Evidently, I’ve lost it, because I swear I just heard Bennett say I’m hired even though I’m standing on his doorstep uninvited, demanding answers while looking like a wet sewer rat. I’m pretty sure a psychologist would call these auditory hallucinations, and that would warrant an inpatient hospital stay.

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve answered your question, and this is the part where you tell me your decision,” he states, his gaze locked with mine.

“What?” It’s all I can say.

“I just offered you the job. Now, you need—”

“You want to hire me?” I question, completely ignoring that he had more to say. “You want to offer me the job?”

He sighs again, but he also nods. A silent yes, but still, a yes.

“But why?” I don’t even think he likes me, and I know today’s behavior is completely outside of what he’s looking for more of in his life. But he’s offering me a job? Where he’ll have to see me every day? I don’t get it.

“You have an intuition with color, Norah,” he answers, and his voice is matter-of-fact. “A tangible ability to connect reality with the abstract. The wall you painted? It was from memory of a sunset last week, right?”

His words are a shock to my system. They are a one-thousand-piece puzzle, and I feel like I’m missing half of the pieces.

“I... How do you know that?”

His answering smile isn’t happy—it’s edgy. I wish I understood it. I wish I understood Bennett Bishop at all.

God, maybe this isn't such a good idea. I mean, I really want the job—need the job—but working for him sounds like one of the worst notions I've ever had.

“Look, I don't know if this is going to work,” I say, my voice devoid of any and all confidence I had on my way over here. “You and me together, every da—”

“Dad!” a young but strong voice calls, completely interrupting not only my sentence, but my very ability to breathe. “Daddy!”

Daddy?

Bennett whips around quickly, just as the small girl appears at the mouth of the hallway. She's walking slowly in a long, pink nightgown, seemingly holding on to the wall for support. She's a beautiful little thing, but she's also small and frail, and it seems like each of her movements takes a Herculean effort. Like the simple task of walking isn't a simple task at all.

“Summer!” Bennett shouts, panic lining every single note of his words. “What are you doing out of your chair? Where's Charlie?”

“Who's that?” the little girl asks, staring at me with familiar blue eyes, wild, curly blond hair, and a megawatt smile. She ignores Bennett completely. “Who are you?”

“Summer—”

“Tell me who she is, and I'll let you get my chair.”

“Summer.”

Her name on his lips makes my eyes dart down to his left hand, noting the visible *S-u-m* on top of his ring finger. *Holy hell.* My jaw wants to go unhinged at the revelation, while something I don't know how to explain comes over me. All I know is that I step up and inside the door without invitation. “Hi, I'm Norah,” I call out. “Norah Ellis.”

It's so not my place and breaches a million and one boundaries, but the fragility of the little girl's body and Bennett's panic about her chair—

whatever that means—is enough to make me trample over it all. “And I guess you’re Summer, right? What a pretty name.”

She smiles again, bigger this time, and the small features of what I know would be the same on Bennett if he ever bothered to smile hit me square in the gut.

Bennett Bishop is someone’s daddy.

Bennett’s voice is careful but forceful as he calls out, “Charlie!” into the back of the house. Ten seconds later, a petite woman with shoulder-length blond hair and rugged facial features, wearing deep-purple medical scrubs, appears. When she spots Summer, her eyes widen and quickly turn to terror just like Bennett’s.

“Get her chair,” Bennett orders, and Charlie takes off without so much as a nod.

Tentatively, I move down the hallway toward them, inserting myself fully into a situation I know I have no business in. I don’t say anything, though, because for as gentle as Bennett is being on the outside, I can tell he’s a loaded powder keg on the inside.

Charlie returns with a small wheelchair in no time, and Bennett stands at Summer’s side as she lowers herself into the seat and places her feet on the footrests. He doesn’t, I note with some curiosity, touch her at all.

Crouching in front of her instead, he lowers his voice, “You can’t scare me like that, Summlebee.”

Summlebee. His gentle voice and the tenderness in his eyes urge a ball of emotion to fill my throat. Tears sit just behind my eyes, but I claw against them with absolutely everything I have.

“I know it’s hard, so hard, being confined to your chair, but the doctors said the bones are too weak to handle your own weight now,” he tells her with the kind of tenderness I didn’t even know Bennett Bishop was capable of. “I don’t want you to get hurt—I don’t want you *to hurt* any more than you already are.”

“I know, Daddy. But Charlie was in the bathroom, and I heard someone’s voice out here, and I wanted to see who it was.” Her eyes move to me. “Norah, are you a friend of my dad’s?”

Bennett’s head turns to me, and I try not to shrivel under the glare. It’s concern for his daughter, not ire with me—at least, I think.

Am I a friend of her dad’s? I might laugh at that question if this entire situation didn’t feel so heavy.

“Actually, I think I’m going to be your dad’s new assistant.” The words just fall out of my mouth before I think them through.

“*You* painted the sunset?” she asks excitedly, the corners of her mouth shooting up again.

I nod. “I did.”

“Oh my gosh! I *loved* it! Dad wasn’t crazy about all the pink at first, but he’s a boy, you know?”

I smile conspiratorially. I can imagine that pink wouldn’t be a macho tough guy like Bennett’s favorite color. Though, I suppose he is an artist, so it’s at least got to be somewhere in his palette.

“Boys,” I say with a roll of my eyes and a little laugh that makes her giggle.

“Come on, Summer, sweetheart,” Charlie cuts in gently. “Let’s go do your bath, okay?”

Summer agrees with a nod but shoots a grimace in my direction that makes me have to swallow a laugh to avoid exposing myself. I’m more than certain Bennett is not in the mood for me to cut it up with his kid right now.

When Summer and Charlie are out of earshot, I ask what I think is the only obvious question. “So...does the job offer still stand?”

I know better than anyone that privacy is precious, and unknowingly, I just battered through his with a ram. His home, his career, his daughter—he’s obviously kept them all a secret for a reason. And by showing up here

uninvited, I completely robbed him of his right to keep it that way. I don't need to ask questions about his life—though I am obviously curious in every way. I need to ask if he can forgive me enough to still consider the offer valid.

“The salary is seventy-five thousand a year,” he replies, and his tone is surprisingly neutral.

Instantly, my stomach turns over in shock at both the offer still being on the table and the number that accompanies it. I've never really made any money on my own, and he's offering me that much right out of the gate?

“Seventy-five thousand a year?”

“Fine.” He shrugs. “Make it eighty.”

Eighty thousand a year? I was just hoping for a job that paid minimum wage. I think I'm going to faint.

“And you can start tomorrow. Be here at nine a.m. sharp.”

My heart is racing. My stomach is doing gymnastics. And my nerves threaten to make all my limbs shake like leaves on a branch in the middle of a windstorm.

I don't know when it happens or how it happens, but I know that we shake on it. A nonverbal confirmation that I have accepted the job.

“Now, if you don't mind, I have other things to do.”

He walks me to the door and sees me out like none of the several life-changing things that just happened to me exist at all.

I got the job with Bennett Bishop.

And I start tomorrow.

Holy shit.

19

Norah

I don't know how long I drive around Red Bridge, but when I loop downtown for the sixth time and Sheriff Peeler starts to look a little too interested in what I'm doing, I decide to head back to Josie's house.

To say I'm a little shocked that my confrontation with Bennett Bishop ended in my getting a job that pays eighty grand a year would be an understatement. To say that's the thing I'm thinking about most would be a lie.

Bennett has a daughter.

A daughter who's obviously ailing and sick and who turns Bennett's normally stony countenance into a puddle of goo.

As I turn onto the street that leads to Josie's house, I try to concentrate on the pros of the situation.

My bank account won't dwindle to zero, I don't have to disappoint customers at CAFFEINE, clean up cow shit, or shear sheep, and I'm going to be doing something that genuinely fills the cup where I keep my soul.

Sure, I don't know what my actual duties or schedule look like and I'm going to be working with a giant grumpous every day, but for the sake of reality, beggars really can't be choosers. I came here with nothing, because for my whole life, I've been a nothing. But from now on, I'm actually going to have something. Something that feels like me. Something I actively chose.

This is a good thing. *I hope.*

My head is still spinning like a top when I close the distance to Josie's house, but the situation that's currently playing out pulls *all* my attention in a flash.

Oh no. Of course, this had to happen today.

My sister stands on the front porch, her arms crossed over her chest and her mouth set in a tight line. Moving boxes surround her, and more moving boxes are being unloaded by two big guys from a truck that's parked in her gravel driveway and has *NY Moves* emblazoned on the side.

Looks like Lil's efforts have finally arrived.

I cringe, put the Civic in park, and hide my face behind the steering wheel.

"I can see you, Norah!" Josie's voice is loud enough to break through the barrier of the window. "You can get out of the car now and explain what in the hell is going on!"

Slowly, oh-so slowly, I get out and make my way to the front porch. It's not that I'm intentionally being slow. It's more that I'm hoping by the time I get there, the moving truck will be gone, and Josie won't look so pissed off.

Obviously, it doesn't work.

"So, there's a moving company here," Josie announces the obvious. "And they're unloading boxes for a Miss Norah Ellis. Evidently, this is her final destination."

"That's pretty wild," I respond with a nervous laugh and avert my eyes from my sister and to the two men moving the boxes. Every dang box has **Norah Ellis** written on it, so it's not like I can pretend there's been a big mix-up.

"It is wild," Josie retorts. "Because it looks like they're moving a three-bedroom house for a family of five."

"Um..."

"Norah."

I force myself to meet her eyes. “See...uh...my best friend Lillian was able to get my stuff out of Thomas’s apartment, plus some of his, if I’m honest, and she had to send everything somewhere, and since I’m here...”

“You had her send it all to my house.”

“Precisely.” I cringe again. “I didn’t think it would be this much, but Lil wanted me to have *options*. For selling, bartering, whatever. I had no idea she was including the sofa!”

Josie shakes her head on a sigh. “There are already two others inside.”

“You’re kidding me!”

Josie’s expression says that she is very much *not* kidding me. Desperate, I search for a reason to flip the switch from hopeless to hopeful.

“Is now the right time to tell you that I got a job?” I question. “I mean, I can’t be sure, but that feels like good news right about now...”

She tilts her head to the side. “You got a job?”

“And it pays really well,” I explain through several nods of my head. “So, you know, me being your roomie might not have to be such a permanent thing.”

“Call me crazy, but I don’t remember ever agreeing to it being a permanent thing,” she comments on a laugh that is equal parts exasperated and amused. “So, what is it? I have a hard time believing Earl is giving more than minimum wage, and I know Melba Danser wasn’t even offering seven bucks an hour to work at her bakery. The only other opening I saw was shearing sheep with Tad, and he’s a tightwad if I’ve ever known one.”

“It’s a position I interviewed for last week.”

“What position?”

“An artist’s assistant position.”

“An artist’s assistant?” She looks puzzled at first, but then, she puts those puzzle pieces together. “Wait a minute!” she shouts so loud it startles one of

the moving guys. “You’re going to work for Bennett Bishop?” she questions, and her eyes dance with too much information.

Clearly, I was the only Ellis who didn’t know who the artist in town was.

“Don’t even start.” I point one index finger at her. “Don’t say a damn thing. It’s just a job. That’s it.”

Her smile is mischievous. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Well, you were thinking it. It’s written all over your face.”

“How much is he paying you?” she challenges with a little slant of her head.

“Enough that I can save up money to rent an apartment and get out of your hair.”

“How much, Nore?”

“Eighty thousand a year,” I whisper. She hears me anyway.

“What. The. Hell? *Eighty G’s*?” Her jaw goes slack. “What exactly does Bennett plan to have you doing?”

“I don’t really know. But, like, assistant things, I assume.”

“Wow. You got a job working for *Bennett Bishop*.” Her smirk is aggravating. And she doesn’t even know about the stupid kiss! Somehow, everyone in town managed to be somewhere other than Earl’s parking lot that day.

“Josie, it’s just a job.”

She nods. “Uh-huh. Just a job. With the guy who rescues you from scary exes and—”

“It is *just a job*.”

“Yeah. I know.”

I frown. “You implied differently.”

She laughs. “Can I assume you’ll start contributing to groceries while you’re living here since you’re a billionaire now?”

I snort. “Shut up.”

She grins, but then her mouth straightens in a slightly serious way. “Listen, I don’t want to ruin the mood, but there’s something else I think I need to tell you.”

Immediate dread settles in my stomach. “What?”

“Mom called me today,” she states bluntly, her gaze holding steady on mine.

“*Mom* called you?”

“She called CAFFEINE, actually. She wanted to know where you were.”

Oh hell.

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her I didn’t know,” Josie answers without hesitation. “From where I stand, it’s none of her business where you are or what you’re doing.”

Instantly, my breaths start to get easier.

“Did she say anything else?”

“It’s Eleanor. Of course she said other shit.” Josie shrugs. “Doesn’t mean I listened or believe her.”

“Did she mention anything about Thomas coming to Red Bridge and Bennett hitting him?”

Josie just nods but doesn’t give me anything else.

I can only imagine my mother’s point of view on the whole Thomas debacle. Surely it’s all my fault, and the golden boy didn’t do anything

wrong. He might not be her biological child, but they're two peas in a self-involved, narcissistic pod.

"So...I take it she had some not-so-nice things to say about me, then?"

"Don't take it personally," Josie responds with a gentle smile. "Eleanor Ellis is the most judgmental woman on the face of the planet. Amazing how everyone she encounters is the crazy one. Seems to me there's a common denominator she's excluding."

She's not lying. Our mother never turns the harsh judgment on herself, even though she needs to.

"Norah, I'm hoping one day soon, you'll tell me the whole story. I'm your sister. I want to be there for you," Josie adds and leans forward to pick up one of the moving boxes on her porch. "Now, let's start helping these guys get all these boxes inside so they're not here until midnight."

She doesn't push any further. Instead, she carries one of my boxes into the house, and I follow her lead, picking up another box and carrying it inside.

When I catch up with her, I ask one more question, though it doesn't have anything to do with our mother.

"Hey, Josie?"

"Yeah?"

"Did...did you know Bennett has a daughter?"

Her face softens, making it instantaneously clear that she did. "Yeah. He tell you about her?"

"I met her."

Her eyebrows shoot to her hairline. "You *met* her?"

"Yeah."

She shakes her head. "Wow. I'm surprised."

Frown lines sink into the skin at the corners of my mouth. “Well, it’s not like I gave him much choice. I just showed up at his house, demanding to know about the job. I just...needed an answer. To be fair, I had no idea he was the artist, though.”

“Tread carefully there, okay?” she says then, surprising me.

“What do you mean?”

She shakes her head and purses her lips before letting out a sigh. “Forget it. Bennett’s a good guy, and it sounds like he’s going to pay you handsomely. The job’ll be great.”

Her cryptic warning would normally put me on edge, but today, I have to admit, I’m too tired to care. I got a good job that’s going to pay me well, and I don’t want to taint it with anything else.

And just think, all you need to do is find a way to work for Bennett Bishop without it ending in disaster.

I still can’t believe *he’s* the mystery artist. I figured he did something that required sweat and brute strength. But an artist? Color me shocked. And incredibly curious...

Scrambling to my bedroom, I ignore the mess of moving boxes, drop the box in my hands on the bed, and pull out my phone. I’m pulling up Google not even a minute later and typing my new boss’s name into the search bar.

In an instant, millions of results come up. A Wikipedia page. *New York Times* articles. Interviews. Gallery reviews. Auction houses like Sotheby’s and Christie’s.

Bennett Bishop is, in fact, an artist. A very successful artist with a very famous past.

I tap on his Wikipedia page and scan the first few paragraphs.

Who is Bennett Bishop?

Bennett Bishop is an American artist and son of Henry Bishop, owner of Bishop Galleries, and grandson of the late Harold Bishop, founder of Bishop Galleries. He is one of the Young American Artists (YAA) who dominated the art scene in the United States during his late teens and early twenties. At age twenty-five, he was reportedly one of the United States' richest living artists.

Bennett Bishop is best known for defying rules within the art world. He has been nicknamed "the Chameleon" by American art critics, and European art critics have been known to call him the "bad boy" of the art world because he doesn't follow rules. He is one of only a few artists who has been able to span different art genres with great success.

Life and death tends to be a central theme in Bishop's works. A constant push and pull of living and dying is what Bennett Bishop is most famous for. He received notoriety at the age of eighteen after a series of impressionistic-style paintings showcased raw portraits that made distinguishing life from death impossible for the viewer.

Five years into his career, he sold an abstract painting called "The Mourning After" for a record-breaking \$10.4 million.

I don't even reach the end of the Wikipedia page before I come to a halting stop.

Bad boy of the art world?

10.4 million dollars? For one freaking painting?

And he's been famous since he was eighteen?

None of this adds up with the man in the pickup truck and faded jeans who set me out in the dirt on my way into Red Bridge. Or the man who stepped into CAFFEINE and punched Thomas in the face...twice.

Or the grumpy bastard who seems to enjoy pissing me off to the point where I slapped him in the face. *Or the mental case who kissed me after I did.*

The article doesn't say anything about Summer. To be honest, it's lacking any and all information on Bennett for the last ten or so years.

Who Bennett Bishop Used to Be is what the title should have said.

I, for one, want to know who he is now. And since I start working for him tomorrow, I guess, maybe, just maybe, I'll get to find out.

20

Friday, August 20th

Bennett

Norah Ellis has been working for me for three days, and it already feels like a mistake.

Not because she's dumb or because she hasn't done something I've asked or hasn't been prepared. Honestly, her work performance has been the exact opposite. She's been on time, on task, thinks ahead, and has made my ability to focus on painting and nothing else ten times easier. She's a hundred times better at this than she is at making coffee.

But she's also got a laugh that'll cut through even my deepest concentration, wild, curly hair I can't stop imagining sinking my hands into, and is already in so deep with my daughter that Summer refuses to hang out anywhere but the studio anymore.

Breezy was right that I needed an assistant, but I should have gone with fucking Paul.

"Norah!" Summer shouts excitedly from her chair. "Stop!" Her laughter comes in peals, her breathing nearly ragged as Norah flicks another tiny droplet of water onto her leg from the slop sink.

I step back from my canvas, examining the reds and maroons that fade into brown around the edges. It's a soft brown, one with a creamy center and flecks of golden speckle. I pretend it has nothing to do with my new assistant's eyes.

“Norah,” I call, raising my voice enough to break through the cackling. “I need a new brush, a damp sponge, and the one brown color...” I search my mind for the name of it, but she beats me to the punch.

“The *Mauve on Marron*?”

“Yes.”

“On it!” she chirps happily, scooting around Summer with a smile and a wink and grabbing the paint from the closet in the back. After dropping that off, she grabs a sponge and a brush from the shelf, wets the sponge on the way, and sets them on my cart behind me while I pry open the top of this new can.

After doing that, she heads straight for Summer’s chair, turning it gently so that she can see the almost finished canvas hanging on the wall.

“Wow, Daddy. That looks cool!”

A little fatherly pride swells my chest. Funny how the approval of my seven-year-old means more than the experts at MoMA.

“You like it, Summblebee?”

“I’d like it more if it was pink, but the red and brown is cool too.”

I laugh. “They can’t all be pink, baby.”

Norah’s gaze jerks toward me suddenly, but when she notices I see her, she turns away.

“What?” I ask, completely uncomfortable not knowing what she’s thinking—an entirely new concept for me.

“Oh. Me? No, nothing. It’s nothing.”

“Norah, what?”

“I...” she starts so softly, I almost can’t hear her. “I’ve just never really heard you laugh before.”

“Isn’t it the best?” Summer interjects excitedly, making Norah smile, if hesitantly.

“What do you think of the painting?” I ask Norah, avoiding the other subject completely.

“I think it’s really interesting.” She steps closer to the canvas to inspect it. “I’ve never seen anything like it, never seen colors like those together in that way.”

“What does it make you feel?” I ask the most important question of all. Something becomes art when it makes you *feel*. It doesn’t matter the emotion, but it has to evoke something from inside you. A memory. A feeling. A fear. A desire.

“Well...” She glances over her shoulder at me. “You’ll have to give me a little grace because I don’t know a lot about art or even have the ability to fully understand pieces like this, but when I look at it...I feel...like I really want to keep looking at it, but something is telling me to look away at the same time. Like half of my body is being wrapped up in a cozy blanket, while the other half is being burned at the stake.”

Her response nails me to the floor. She’s a lot better at this than she gives herself credit for. *It’s almost as if she can see inside your damn head.*

“That probably sounds crazy, huh?” She digs her teeth into her bottom lip. “Just ignore me. Seriously. I—”

“No,” I cut her off with a shake of my head. “It’s not crazy at all.” If anything, it’s spot-fucking-on.

“Norah sounds just like you, Daddy,” Summer chimes in on a giggle. “When you’re talking about art with Aunt Breezy.”

“But do you think she likes it?” I ask, glancing between the two of them. “Because I can’t decide...”

“I do, I swear! I think it’s really great,” Norah jumps in, her face turning a shade of pink Summer probably loves. “Really, *really* great. I honestly think it’s going to surprise people, but I think that’s a good thing.”

I nod. That's good. I need to make some money. And the sooner I sell it, the sooner I can forget what I used as inspiration for it.

A quick glance at the clock tells me Summer is due for her bath and meds, plus the therapy she refused to leave the studio for earlier today, but years of experience as her father also tell me she's not going anywhere as long as Norah is still here. "All right, ladies, I think it's about quitting time for today. We'll pick back up next week."

"Alreadyyy?" Summer whines.

"It's getting late, Sum. You need a bath and meds, and I'm sure Norah's ready to go home since it's Friday night." I turn to Norah directly. "If you'll just wash out all the brushes and sponges and make sure everything's sealed, you can take off when you're done."

Norah nods. "Of course. That's great, thanks. Perfect, actually."

I hate that I do it, but I can't stop myself from asking, "Big plans for tonight?"

"Big? No," she answers through a little snort. "I wouldn't say big. But I'm thinking Josie and I might grab a bite or something. You know, celebrate my transition from being a freeloader and all."

"Good." I allow myself a half smile. "And I did talk to Breezy a couple of days ago, so she's got you on the payroll. Probably won't get a check until next Friday, though, if that's okay. Just the way the pay schedule works."

She waves me off with a chuckle and a shrug. "That's fine. I'm used to having no money."

Surprisingly, that makes me feel bad. Having no money is not how I read Norah Ellis the day I met her. Not at all. Maybe when I go up to the house, I can text Breezy and see if this first check can be fast-tracked? It's certainly worth a shot.

I start to head over to the sink to wash my hands, but Norah's voice grabs my attention before I get there.

“Bennett?”

I turn to face her.

“I just wanted to say thanks for the job,” she says, and her eyes soften to the warmest shade of brown. “Truly. I so appreciate you taking a chance on me. This is the best thing I’ve ever done and the happiest I’ve ever felt. Seriously.”

“You’re the best!” Summer interjects, saving me from having to say anything I might get a little too carried away with. For as good of an assistant as Norah is turning out to be, she’s still a terrible idea in every other way.

I’ve changed my life too much to consider any other possibility.

The old Bennett was pathetically loose with women. I spent a lot of time in bars, clubs, and fast cars, and my primary goals were booze and hot sex. It was an ugly look, to be honest, and in no way works with my priorities now. There’s a reason I avoid women, Norah included, and it’s the same as why I avoid my old life and have practically removed myself from the art scene. Maybe it’s a part of my creative psyche, but when I let things in, I tend to let them consume me.

The beautiful Norah Ellis wouldn’t leave any scraps.

After a quick wash of my hands in the slop sink, I spin Summer’s chair to the door as she shouts her goodbyes to Norah. My skin tingles with electricity and worry and uncertainty as I make our way to the golf cart, get her and her special chair strapped in, and then head for the house.

Summer talks my ear off the entire way.

“Norah is so cool.”

“Norah is so fun.”

“Norah is so pretty.”

“Norah is so smart.”

My daughter is in love, just as I knew she would be, and I don't bother trying to correct her.

If only I'd realized how much she wasn't the only one in danger.

21

Norah

Friday night and I'm at the only bar in town.

After we grabbed a bite to eat at the pizza joint on Main Street, I tried to convince Josie to have a drink with me, but she outright refused. It's safe to say the rejection has everything to do with the handsome bartender—and owner of this joint—who greeted me when I arrived a few minutes ago.

“How's the new job going?” Clay asks as he sets a glass of Pinot Noir down in front of me. “Hope Ben is treating you well.”

I'm not surprised Clay knows Bennett hired me for the assistant's position. Bennett Bishop is a very private person, but from what I've witnessed since I arrived in Red Bridge, Clay Harris is one of his closest friends.

And considering how my first interaction with Bennett went, it's a surprise that I don't even have to lie. “The first three days were great. I honestly can't put into words how thankful I am for the opportunity.”

“Good. That's good.” He considers me for a few beats, and I hold my breath, waiting for him to move the subject to my sister. With the way he was hot on her heels that night we came into the bar after Thomas showed up in town, I'd be naïve not to expect it.

I still have no idea what went down between them, but the fact that they were married and got divorced makes me think it was something *big*. Truthfully, it takes a huge effort for me not to start asking him questions that might give me some answers. I don't, though. I'd never go against Josie's trust like that.

“You know, I’ve known Bennett nearly my whole damn life,” Clay states, and I’m floored Josie’s name is absent from his lips. “We grew up together. Got in a lot of trouble together when we were crazy teens.” He winks. “I know he can be a real dick sometimes, but there’s a reason he’s like a brother to me. I’d walk through hot fire for him and his daughter, and I know he’d do the same for me.”

“I’m pretty sure I’d walk through hot fire for Bennett’s daughter too,” I comment, and Clay’s face brightens with a smile. “I feel spoiled that I get to spend time with her while I’m working.”

“That little girl is special, isn’t she?”

I nod. “Like God put an angel here on earth.”

I’ve only known Summer for a short time, but for the past three days, every morning when I’ve woken up, I’ve felt excited to spend time with her. *And Bennett, too.*

“That little girl is his everything,” Clay says, leaning his elbows on the bar. His voice is so quiet I almost don’t hear him over the bar noise. “Since the day she came into this world, everything he does, every decision he’s made, it’s all for her.”

There are so many unknowns about Bennett’s past. I don’t know how he ended up in Red Bridge or why it appears he’s been out of the art scene for the past ten years. I don’t know what happened with Summer’s mother or why she isn’t in the picture at all. Hell, I don’t even know what disease has that little girl pretty much immobilized to a chair.

“Just...be good to them, yeah?”

“I will.” I nod, and Clay stands to his feet when a patron at the other end of the bar gestures toward him.

But before he goes, he leans toward me and says one last thing. “If you happen to fall in love with them, just know, they’re more than worth it. They’re everything.”

And then he walks away like he didn't just drop a bomb of truth into my lap.

Well, *shit*. What in the heck am I supposed to do with that?

Come to terms with the fact that seeing yourself falling in love with Bennett and Summer doesn't feel like such a hard task. If anything, it feels easier than breathing.

I try not to focus on those thoughts or the reasons they're there in the first place. Instead, I turn on my barstool and face the crowd behind me.

The Country Club is jam-packed with what feels like half the town, and Earl is onstage giving his best impression of a karaoke star. He belts out the lyrics to "Take Me Home, Country Roads," and I'm certain if John Denver were still alive, he wouldn't be upset he missed the show. And when Earl's voice cracks on the chorus and causes a horrible screeching sound to echo from the microphone, I turn back toward the bar and try to hide the cringe on my face.

But when I attempt to discreetly plug one of my fingers into my ear to shield myself from the pain, someone bumps my elbow from behind and I nearly poke myself in the eye instead.

"Shit. I'm sorry," a husky male voice fills my ears, and a gentle hand touching my shoulder follows. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." I turn to face him. "No worries," I add, and I have to lift my eyes upward to meet his chocolate-brown gaze.

"You sure?" he questions with an apologetic, but also very striking, smile. This guy, for all intents and purposes, is attractive. He's tall with a slender build, and his jaw appears strong beneath his light-brown beard.

"Positive." I nod. "It's crowded in here tonight. Surely a few bumps and jolts are expected."

"I don't think we've met before." His smile grows as he offers his hand. I take it. "I'm Tad Hanson."

So, this is the hot farmer Josie told me about...

“Nice to meet you. I’m Norah Ellis.”

“Ellis? As in, you’re Josie’s sister?” he asks, and I confirm with a little nod. “So, *you’re* the new girl working at CAFFEINE that I keep hearing so much about?”

“Uh-oh. I can only imagine what was being said. I’m pretty much the world’s worst barista.” I snort and wince at the same time. “Lucky for Josie, I recently got a new job, and her coffee shop is no longer at risk from me accidentally burning it down.”

“A new job?” he asks and leans his hip against the bar. “Sounds like congratulations are in order. Let me buy you another glass of wine to celebrate.”

“Thank you,” I say, waving him off with my hand, “but that’s not necessary.”

“I insist.” He smirks and proceeds to flag down a bartender named Marty, letting him know to refill my glass of Pinot when he gets a chance. “So...” Tad turns back to me. “What’s the job we’re celebrating?”

“Um...” I pause, suddenly feeling protective over Bennett’s privacy. Sure, my sister and Clay know I’m working for him, but I don’t know what the rest of the town knows. And while Tad Hanson might seem like a nice guy, I don’t know him from Adam. “It’s just an assistant position but pays pretty well.”

“Nice.” He grins. “Who are you—”

“You know, from what Josie has said, your sheep have quite a history with the town,” I cut him off with a teasing smirk before he can ask me more questions I don’t feel comfortable answering.

Tad’s responding smile is equal parts apologetic. “Uh-oh. Is she still mad about last week?”

Last week, Josie had a little run-in with Tad's sheep. She was trying to get home from the coffee shop, and they were determined to stand in the middle of Main Street. Apparently, it took her a good fifteen minutes in the rain to herd them back toward the pastures.

She came home that night drenched, covered in mud, and madder than a hornet.

"I wouldn't say she's still mad, but she definitely wasn't happy with you when she got home that evening."

"I figured as much." Tad grimaces. "Honestly, I've been trying to hire more help, but it's been difficult. It's just me and my brother Randy and far too much work."

"I actually saw your job ad at Earl's when I was on my employment search."

"Wait..." He grins and tilts his head to the side. "You saw my posting, and you didn't try to apply for the job?"

"No offense, but I'd be worse at shearing sheep than I was at barista-ing." I eye him with a knowing but tickled smile. "Honestly, you should be thankful that I steered clear of your sheep. They're better off."

Tad's responding laugh is infectious as bartender Marty sets down a fresh glass of wine and just-opened bottle of beer in front of us.

"Appreciate it, man." Tad hands him a credit card. "And you can keep it open."

Marty just nods and heads over to the cash register, and I finish off the last few sips from my first glass of wine before setting it back on the bar.

"So, Norah, I have to ask you the most important question of the night..."

"Okay...?"

"When do I get to hear you sing?" Tad asks, and a giggle spills from my lips.

“Sing? As in, karaoke?”

He nods.

“Well, I guess that depends.”

His eyes are intrigued. “On what?”

“On how much liquid courage I manage.”

A secret smile etches Tad’s lips, and he grabs bartender Marty’s attention again with a wave of his hand. “Norah’s drinks are on my tab tonight!”

“What?” I laugh. Outright. “Are you trying to get me drunk, Tad Hanson?”

“No, I’m not trying to get you drunk.” He winks at me. “I’m just trying to make sure a beautiful woman has a good time tonight.”

Is it just me, or am I being sweet-talked by a hot sheep farmer right now?

It feels good to be flirted with.

Too bad you’re secretly wishing it was someone else doing the talking...

22

Bennett

After Norah left and Summer and I had dinner, Charlie took her to get settled in bed before the night shift nurse took over. And I don't know why, but I took a shower, got dressed, and drove to The Country Club.

It's just after nine, and normally, this is the last place on the planet I would come on a Friday night. People are drunk, the music is loud and slightly off-key, and I have to be careful letting myself get comfortable with booze.

But my mind is a clusterfuck, and in a town this small, I'm struggling to find anywhere else to try to sort it out.

The odd timing of my presence makes Clay do a double take.

"Well, I'll be damned," he comments as I take a seat across from him. "Look what the devil dragged in on a Friday night."

"Get me a bourbon, Clay."

"On the rocks?"

I nod. Tonight isn't about downing a bottle in an attempt to drown myself—it's about sipping. And thinking, I guess, even though that sounds miserable.

"You're never going to believe this, but..." He waggles his brows as he reaches down beneath the bar and pulls out a bottle. "I have your favorite on hand tonight."

I read the label and look up at him with wide, amused eyes. “Tell me that’s a bottle of Pappy’s, and I’ll tongue-kiss you.”

“Open wide, baby.” He winks and sets two glasses on the bar. “I just opened it last night.”

Pappy Van Winkle is the holy grail of bourbon, and it’s hard as hell to get, not to mention *expensive*. Only eighty-five thousand bottles of the best bourbon that will ever touch your lips are produced each year.

When we were wild and crazy teenage assholes, Clay and I used to steal this bourbon from his dad’s home bar. And when I was the old Bennett Bishop who lived life in the fast lane of New York, this was all my pretentious ass would drink.

He slides one glass to me and keeps one for himself. “Cheers, Ben.”

“Cheers,” I clink my glass against his and savor the first drink of Pappy’s I’ve had in over seven years. Smooth as silk yet still holds that delicious sting down my throat, it’s fucking perfect. “Damn, that’s good.”

“I had a feeling you’d enjoy it.” Clay grins. “Though, I really thought I’d have to bring it to your house since you’re generally a fucking hermit. What gives, man? What are you doing here tonight?”

“Figured I’d come in and enjoy open mic night.”

Clay stares at me like I’ve grown two heads. “In about three songs, Sheriff Peeler is going to be up there with his banjo, breaking bluegrass’s heart. You can’t tell me you don’t hate that shit.”

I shrug. “I needed to get out. Think.”

Clay snorts. “Well, good luck doing that here. Especially since part of what I reckon you’re planning to think about is climbing on the stage.”

I turn quickly, looking over my shoulder as Norah gets a hand up from Mikey, The Country Club’s resident DJ, and takes her spot at the mic.

What the fuck is she doing here? She said she was going to dinner with Josie.

Her hair is up in some kind of fancy bun that allows a few ringlets to frame her face, and her lips are painted red. She's wearing a little summer dress and a pair of heels, and she's laughing at something someone in the crowd in front of her said. It doesn't take much scrutiny to find out who it is—fucking Tad Hanson.

She looks beautiful.

"Duuuuude," Clay comments in a low, amused voice. "Stare any harder, and I think she might combust."

I turn back to meet his eyes. "Shut up."

"I thought it'd take a little longer before you gave in and fucked her," Clay remarks instead. I reach out to punch him in the shoulder.

"Ow. Fuck, Ben."

"It's not like that. I haven't fucked her. She's working for me."

He rolls his eyes. "Come on, Ben. Both of you are magically here on a Friday night?"

I run a hand through my hair. "I don't know why I'm here. But I didn't know she was coming either."

"All right. All right. Consider the white flag raised." Clay raises both hands in the air. "But I will say I had a nice little convo with her when she first got here. She had nothing but good things to say about her new job as Bennett Bishop's assistant. Didn't even call you a dickhead or asshole once."

"She was talking to you about working for me?"

"Yeah, but it's only because I asked her about it."

Of course he did. "You're such a nosy prick."

He just laughs, but then his eyes take on a tenderness. “She also seems pretty damn smitten with your daughter.”

That revelation, along with the fact that Summer couldn’t stop waxing poetic about Norah today, might as well be a sucker punch square in the nose. Only a few days of working for me, and my daughter wants to keep her forever. What will Summer feel for her after a few weeks? Months?

When I start thinking about timelines, I feel like someone just rammed a rusty knife into my heart.

Clay reaches out to squeeze my shoulder. “Don’t sweat it, Ben.”

Don’t sweat it? That’s cute. I might as well be standing inside a sauna with hot coals under my fucking feet.

I sigh and take another hearty drink of bourbon.

“But just so you know, if you end up trying to kick Tad Hanson’s ass in the middle of my bar, I’m sending *you* the bill for any damages that occur in the process.”

“Relax.” I roll my eyes. “I’m not going to start a fight.”

Before Clay can offer some kind of sarcastic retort, he’s called to the other side of the bar. I stay in my seat, looking up at the random baseball game that’s playing on the television screens. The Cleveland Guardians and the Atlanta Braves—safe to say I don’t have a dog in that fight. But it gives me something to think about other than the sound of Norah’s voice as she sings about having “Friends in Low Places.”

She’s not bad, considering what I know the rest of Red Bridge sounds like on karaoke night, but I’d be remiss to suggest she quit her day job.

Though, her quitting her day job would sure make my life easier.

I fight against looking back at her as she finishes the song and focus instead on the TV screens with avid fascination. More people sing, and I sip my bourbon. And I sip my bourbon some more.

Until the glass of bourbon I've consumed means I need to take a piss, so I get up from my seat and head to the bathroom. Unfortunately, I have to pass the pool tables on my way there, and evidently, that's where Norah is now. Farmer Tad is still chatting her ear off, and she has her back against the wall, sipping on a glass of wine.

He says something and she offers a little smile, and I force myself to keep walking even though a vivid fantasy of breaking Tad's sheepy fingers plays out in my mind.

Fuck, I'm losing it.

23

Norah

Tad grins at me as he drops a binder onto the edge of the pool table that has the words ***Karaoke Songs*** labeled on the front.

I chortle at the sight. “That was your secret mission?”

I’ve spent the past hour or so hanging out with Red Bridge’s hottest sheep farmer, and I can’t deny that I’m enjoying myself. Tad is cute, friendly, and quite the talker. Maybe a little too good at talking, if I’m being honest. I’ve learned way more about sheep farming than I’ve ever wanted to know.

“Hey, you don’t know how difficult it is to get this binder on a Friday night. Karaoke is Red Bridge’s most popular pastime.” He nudges me playfully with his elbow. “So, what’s it going to be, Norah?”

“I’d like to remind you that I already did a song. And I don’t think Garth Brooks would appreciate if I do another.”

After I managed to drink half of my second glass of wine and Tad started getting a little too detailed about the difficulties of shearing wool, I let him convince me to get up onstage and sing “Friends in Low Places.” Poorly, I might add, because a singer I am not. The only thing I can and should do related to music is listen to it.

“And I’d like to remind you that you had fun up there onstage.”

“But I don’t want to be the only one having fun, Tad,” I tell him with a cheeky smile. “Which is why it’s time for *you* to pick a song and get your ass up there.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll take the bait. But only if you’ll agree to a duet.”

“I’m *not* dueting with you.” I roll my eyes and laugh at the same time. “But I will get up there one more time if you do the same *and* go first.”

“You have a deal, Norah Ellis.” A big smile covers his lips. “Already know which song I’ll sing.”

“Great.” I snort and finish off the rest of my second glass of wine with a hearty chug. I set the empty glass on a high-top table against the wall. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to run to the ladies’ room real quick before I have to follow through.”

“What song should I tell Mikey to play for ya?” Tad calls toward my now-retreating back. Mikey, the man he’s referring to, is Red Bridge’s hottest DJ. Or, you know, a twentysomething dude with a black mullet and some old DJ equipment.

“You just worry about your performance. I’ll tell Mikey when I get back,” I call back over my shoulder as I make a beeline for the restrooms.

A light flickers in the middle of the long hallway, signaling a bulb that probably needs to be changed, and I squint to adjust my vision as I seek out which of the two doors is labeled *Ladies*.

But I don’t get very far in my search because the person walking out of one of the doors is someone I know, someone I just saw mere hours ago—Bennett.

He’s changed his clothes from earlier today, wearing a simple pair of jeans and a clean white T-shirt with his usual brown boots. His hair looks like he’s run his fingers through it a thousand times. And his blue eyes appear ten shades darker under the bad lighting.

Though, the bad lighting doesn’t make him look bad. Not at all, actually. It simply highlights the hard edges of his muscular arms and chest and cloaks his face in something I can only describe as mystery. *Sexy-as-hell mystery*.

It’s confusing that God made a guy this difficult so damn good-looking.

He stops a mere foot away from me, and I have to look up, up, *up* to meet his eyes. Good Lord, he really is a big guy. Tall and well-built, if he were a tree, he'd be a damn redwood.

"Did you just get here?" I ask, and my heart bounces around in my chest as if I'm happy to see him. Like he was the exact person I was hoping I'd run into tonight. Which is nuts.

"Been here for a bit." His voice is doing that honey and sandpaper thing I've come to know so well.

"Oh really?" I scrunch up my nose in surprise. "I didn't see you come in."

"Not surprised about that," he mutters through a tight jaw. "You looked pretty occupied."

Huh? Is it just me, or does it feel like I'm the last person Bennett Bishop wants to be around right now? After my three days of working for him and actually getting along with him, his current stone-faced demeanor is giving me whiplash. I mean, I was just in his studio with him and Summer this afternoon, and everything felt...good. It felt relaxed.

But this feels loaded.

He doesn't give my brain time to catch up before he's tossing a question at me. "How much have you had?"

"How much have I had?" I repeat, my mouth full of bewilderment. "What are you—"

"To drink." He steps closer to me, leaning down to meet my eyes. "How much have you had to drink, Norah?"

"Uh...not much."

"How much is not much?" he continues, and someone slather butter on me because I'm a kabob being grilled. "I sure as shit hope you're not planning on driving home tonight."

Jeez Louise. What's his problem?

“Relax, Dad,” I tease, trying to lighten his mood. “I’m being a good girl. Only had two glasses of wine.”

It doesn’t work.

“I think it’s time you cut yourself off,” he comments, and his smile isn’t really a smile at all. It’s an accusation. “Otherwise, you might give that sheep farmer exactly what he wants.”

“Sheep farmer?” *Is he talking about Talkative Tad?*

“You know who I’m talking about. You’ve been up his ass since I got here.”

My jaw might as well hit the floor.

“Up his ass?” I question on a scoff, stepping back to lean against the wall and cross my arms over my chest. “I don’t think so.”

“Sweetheart, you don’t have to pretend on my account.” Bennett steps even closer to me and surprises me by reaching forward to tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. His fingers are gentle—tender, even—but his eyes are the exact opposite. They hold an edge of silent interrogation. “Farmer *Ted* is working hard to get into your panties tonight, and by the looks of it, you don’t mind one bit.”

If my eyes get any wider right now, they’ll consume my whole face. Seriously. I’d just be a head with two eyeballs. “His name is *Tad*, not Ted. And he’s not trying to get into my panties.” *Frankly, he’s too busy trying to get me to sing karaoke and talking about his sheep.*

Bennett smirks and rests one hand on the wall beside my head. He leans closer and drops his voice to a whisper. “Yeah, sweetheart. That’s exactly what he’s trying to do.”

He’s so close, I can make out the flecks of gold in his blue eyes. And the smell of his cologne invades my nostrils, filling my head with cedar and cinnamon and soft vanilla all at once.

I hate how good he smells. *Technically, you hate how much you love it.*

“He’s just being friendly,” I attempt to redirect my thoughts and this insane conversation. I don’t know what crawled up Bennett’s ass tonight, but I’m starting to get pretty ticked off that I’m on the receiving end of his ire when *I know* I don’t deserve to be.

I’ve done nothing wrong besides exist and butcher one of Garth Brooks’s most popular songs.

“Friendly?” His laugh is devoid of comedy. “Is that a newfangled word for *trying to fuck you?*”

One second, I’m standing there, listening to Bennett spout bullshit in my direction. And the next, my palm finds its way to his cheek with a loud *smack*.

Holy shit! What are you doing? You just smacked Bennett—your new boss—in the face!

Déjà vu hits me like a truck. This isn’t the first time I’ve done this, but the biggest difference is that now, he’s my *employer*. The man whose assistant job has finally made me feel like I am really turning my life around.

You idiot!

“Oh my God. I...I...I...” I open and close my mouth several times, unsure of what to say or do. A thousand apologies sit on my lips, but when I see that Bennett is just standing there, smirking down at me, I clamp my lips closed.

And when he says, “Did I strike a nerve, sweetheart? You want to fuck the sheep farmer?”

My hand finds its way to his face for a second time.

24

Bennett

My cheek stings from the shock of her palm, and Norah stares up at me with those big brown eyes of hers, the ones I've managed to memorize every facet of like the back of my hand.

And when the realization of what I just instigated settles inside the logical part of my mind, my heart takes off at a run, pounding inside my chest. *Way to go, you dick.*

I'm not even mad that she slapped me. I'm mad that I acted like I cared so much about that dumbass sheep farmer flirting with her and spouted a mouthful of bullshit at her because of it. Being cruel isn't something I want to be, nor will I ever be proud of it.

"Norah, I—"

"What the hell? I thought we were getting along!" she shouts over me. "I thought things were gravy between us. I actually love working for you and I want to *keep* working for you, but you just *had* to prove me wrong by doing what you always do, and now you're probably going to fire me even though I wasn't the one acting like a total asshole!"

Fire her? Summer would be devastated. *And she wouldn't be the only one missing Norah's presence.*

"Norah, I'm not going to fire you."

A deep sigh escapes her lungs, and I'm not even sure if she heard what I said because she dives right back into yelling at me. "Why, Bennett? Why do you always do that? *How* do you always do that? Up until I met you, I'd

never slapped anyone! But you? You manage to get me so pissed off that I've now slapped you who even knows how many times at this point!"

The irony of what she's saying isn't lost on me. I'm not the only one making other people do crazy shit. "Join the club, sweetheart. I don't make a point of getting arrested for punching people's ex-lovers. Before you came barreling into Red Bridge, my life was a hell of a lot less dramatic."

"Shut up!" She shoves a hand into my chest. "Just...shut up, okay? *Shut up.*" When I don't say anything, she closes her eyes and leans her head back against the wall. "And why do you even care?" she eventually asks, her voice quiet.

"Excuse me?"

Her eyes open again and lock with mine. "Why do you even care that I was talking to Tad Hanson? Why do you care what I do or who I do it with?"

"I don't." *Liar.*

Norah stares at me. I stare right back at her.

"I don't," I repeat but find myself stepping closer to her. "I don't care," I say, leaning down to meet her gaze at eye level. "Not one fucking bit."

But the instant those words leave my throat, my mouth follows their path, and before I know it, before I can even make sense of it, we're kissing.

I don't know who started it, but I know that I'm not stopping it. And I know that her hands grip the material of my shirt as she pulls my body closer to hers.

A moan escapes her throat, and I feel it all the way to my cock.

Son of a bitch. This, right here, is the last thing I should be doing.

But she tastes so good.

I wrap my arms around her body, sliding my hands down the small of her back and over her ass, until my fingers grip the flesh of her thigh and lift it

up to my hip. The silk material of her dress brushes against my skin, and a greedy little groan jumps from her mouth and into mine.

I should stop this.

She presses her hips against me, rubbing herself against my already hard cock through the material of our clothes.

But she feels too good.

Her breasts are pressed tight against me, and I feel them every time she takes a breath against my chest. Hell, I can feel the hardness of her nipples beneath her dress.

I. Need. To. Stop. This.

But you don't want to stop it. You want to slide your hand farther up her thigh until your fingers are underneath her panties.

She kisses me deeper, and her hands find their way into my hair. Her hips vibrate with need, pulsing her body against my still-clothed but hard-as-steel cock in rhythmic, needy waves. All the while, her tongue plays an erotic game of tug-of-war with mine.

Stop. This. Now.

"We shouldn't be doing this," I say, still kissing her, and I'm not sure if it's more for her or for me.

"I know," she whispers back, her persistent lips still working against mine. "We should stop."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

We don't stop. If anything, it feels a lot like we're only getting closer to me ripping her fucking panties off and sliding my cock inside her.

Oh, what you'd give right now to be able to fill her with your come. To be able to slide yourself inside her, as far as you can go, and stay there until

you feel her climax wet your dick.

“Oh my gosh! I’m sorry!” A completely unfamiliar voice fills my ears, startling both me and Norah to finally fucking stop. In an instant we go from melded-together-like-a-second-skin to junior-high-dance-appropriate distance from each other.

I look down the dark hall, back toward the bar, to find Sheila, Marty Higgins’s wife, standing there with big eyes. “I didn’t see anything, I swear!” Promptly, she covers both eyes with her hands, adding, “I’m... Yeah... Sorry,” before hurriedly spinning on her heels and heading back to where the crowd imbibes booze.

So much for getting some control.

Norah’s cheeks are flushed, and her lips are swollen from kissing. She nervously clears her throat and runs her hands down the front of her dress. “I...I’m going to go to the bathroom. I’ll...uh...I’ll see you...later,” she whispers before scooting herself the rest of the way down the hall and through the door labeled **Ladies**.

Time to get the fuck out of here.

I run a hand through my hair before I head back to the bar to close out my tab.

I knew it wasn’t a good idea to come here in the first place, and after witnessing Norah get cozy with Farmer Tad before kissing her—again—near the fucking bathrooms, it’s even worse than before.

Clearly, I can’t be trusted around her right now. And there’s no way I can get her warm brown eyes and wild hair out of my mind if I’m staring at them.

Clay approaches from the other side of the bar and stops directly in front of me. “So...quick question...” He pauses, and I don’t like the sly smile on his lips one bit. “Anything interesting happen back there?”

On a sigh, I look down the bar and find Sheila standing by Marty. The instant we make eye contact, her eyes snap away from me like a kid who

just got caught with their hand in the cookie jar. *I should've known.*

Eyes back to Clay, I see him offer one amused shrug of his shoulder. "Small-town news travels faster than diarrhea leaving a clenched asshole."

Ain't that the truth.

"So..." he continues, waggling his eyebrows like a fucking fool. "Is small-town news correct?"

"Don't start with me, man," I say, refusing to have the conversation the nosy prick would love to have right now. "I'm heading out." I lay a hundred-dollar bill down on the bar to cover my tab.

"Nope." He shakes his head and pushes it back toward me. "This one's on me. I got this bottle just for us, and I owe you for a million and one favors anyway."

"Thanks, Clay."

I turn to leave, but the sound of his voice and his hand on my elbow stop me.

"Do you... Have you ever heard anyone talk about Jezzy?"

"Who?" I ask, wondering what the fuck Clay is on about and why he feels the need to get it off his chest now, when I very clearly need to get the hell out of here.

"Jezzy Ellis. Josie and Norah's baby sister."

I should be pissed at him for trying to keep the one woman I'm trying not to think about front and center in my mind, but instead, I'm too intrigued not to respond. "They've got another one?"

"Nah. She died when they were kids." Clay shakes his head and purses his lips. "Legend is, their mama left her in the bathtub by herself while their daddy was out of town."

"The fuck? You've gotta be shitting me."

“Well, the thing is, it’s only legend. Autopsy was inconclusive and their mother was never charged, but I know from Josie tellin’ it, that’s probably what happened. They left town when their dad Danny died because there was no more shield against her being a town pariah.”

“Damn. No wonder Josie cut ties with that woman as soon as she could.”

“Tell me about it,” he comments with a frown. “The point of me telling you this is because Norah didn’t cut ties with their mother, not back then anyway. And the way I hear it, no one knows the whole story now. Not even Norah.”

“Okay?”

“Ben, I can see you’re struggling here because it’s complicated. But fuck, we’re all more complicated than anyone knows. That’s the point. You’ve got a past, and so does she. Letting her in? Seeing where it goes? What’s the worst that could happen? You and Summer fall in love with her?”

“We’ve both got pasts, but you’re forgetting she’s also got a present, Clay,” I comment on a sigh. “A fuckwad ex-fiancé with a fancy car and even fancier lawyers. There’s a lot more to this than falling in love with her. Plus, if she ever found out the truth about what happened to her sister, I’d be more worried about her falling in love with us—with Summer. It’ll end her.”

Clay purses his lips. “Falling in love with Summer is what’s gonna end all of us, Ben. But I guarantee you, it’ll be worth it, even then.”

25

Monday, August 23rd

Norah

One thing I loved about New York was Central Park. Every morning, no matter what day of the week, you could find a bustle of runners, joggers, bikers, walkers, dogs and dog owners, enjoying the small slice of nature within the otherwise overcrowded, congested city.

And most days, I was in that group. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not some avid runner training for a marathon. Not even close. I'm more of a "I'm going to move my legs in a running motion until my legs don't feel like doing that, and then I'll just walk" kind of gal.

Rain or shine, snow or summer heat, I put on a pair of sneakers and let my feet hit the pavement for thirty minutes or so. I let my lungs inhale the fresh air and my eyes take in the sight of my fellow city dwellers trying to get a little morning exercise.

It was my thing. And over the years, it had become one of the very few things I did for myself.

That I *chose* for myself.

It's no wonder, as I try to find my way again inside a town the size of a sardine can, that I'm internally restless for more things like that. Mundane, sure, but equally important.

That's not the only reason you're restless.

Okay, fine. What happened Friday night at The Country Club might also be a driving force for my need to run. There's nothing like some arguing turned slapping turned hot-and-heavy kissing *with your new boss* to make any woman feel discombobulated.

And hot-and-heavy kissing it was. Pretty sure you were—

No. No. No. Not going there.

Needless to say, I haven't seen Bennett since shit went down, but my stupid brain hasn't given me a break from constantly thinking about it.

Hell, I couldn't even bring myself to hang around the bar after I saw Bennett leave. I didn't follow through with my promise to Tad to do another karaoke song. Didn't even stay to watch him give his best rendition of "Baby Got Back." My head was spinning too fast with thoughts of Bennett—and the implications of that insane moment—to do anything but go home.

And now, before heading off to work another day at a job I'm hoping I still have, I've decided to get back to my roots and go for a run. Well, a walk-jog, if you will. Surely it will help with the nervous energy that has rooted inside my belly since Friday night.

Fingers and toes crossed, this will give me the endorphin boost I need to survive whatever is going to happen when I show up to his house this morning.

Now, Red Bridge doesn't have a Central Park, but there is a quaint hiking trail that runs along the outside of the town. Apparently, the loop is about four miles, but you can easily detour straight back into the center of town without any issues. At least, that's what the map at the start of the trail leads you to believe.

I pause at the entrance and snort when I note the actual name of the trail—**Happy Trail**. As in, this name could go two ways. Either a serious sexual innuendo or completely innocent to the point of naïve that no one picked up on the double entendre.

In this town, the motivation is a toss-up.

When my phone starts ringing inside the side pocket of my leggings, I pull it out to find ***Incoming Call Lillian*** flashing on the screen.

“Hey, stranger,” I answer by the second ring, and I’m surprised that my cell service appears intact.

“I feel like it’s been forever since I’ve talked to you.” Lillian’s voice accuses gently, and I instantly miss her.

I don’t miss my life in New York. I don’t miss the fake friends I acquired because of my relationship with Thomas. I don’t miss constantly having to appease my mother by going to functions I didn’t care about or doing things because they made *her* happy. And I certainly don’t miss my ex.

But I do miss Lillian. We haven’t been able to talk much since I’ve been here, but I’ve managed to keep her updated on most of the highlights.

“I know,” I reply and decide to utilize the time to stretch out my muscles. “I’m sorry I’ve been so busy lately, but I got a job.” The first stretch I attempt is a hamstring stretch on my right thigh. It burns as much as my fear of losing said job because I acted like a violent-horny fool Friday night.

“A job, huh? Not going to lie, I’m happy for you, but I’m also kind of disappointed,” she answers on a little laugh. “Obviously, I want the best for you, but there was a part of me that hoped you’d have to come back to New York.”

“You and I both know that’s not an option.”

“Yeah, well, a girl who misses her bestie can dream, you know?”

One thing I’ve always loved about Lillian is that she’s amusing to watch in conversation because she’s so theatrical. I can picture her now, flashing some sort of jazz hand or drawing a bubble above her head with a finger.

“I know, Lil. I’m sorry, but I can’t come back. Eleanor already called my sister’s coffee shop looking for me, and that freaked me out enough.”

“I can’t believe she has the balls she does, but she’s been trying to track me down too.”

“Eleanor has never been lacking in ego.” I spread my legs and lean forward to touch my toes. “And she knows about Thomas coming to Red Bridge, so she’s going to be a dog with a bone until she gets what she wants.”

“Oh shit. Now the demon-dials are making more sense.”

“Yeah.” A sad exhale of air leaves my lungs as I stand upright again. “Have you talked to her?”

“Hell no,” Lillian replies like I just asked the most ridiculous question in the world. “I don’t care if she shows up at my office with one of those singing telegrams. I don’t owe her anything, and you don’t owe her anything either.”

“Have you...uh...heard anything about Thomas?”

“I saw an article about him in the paper a few days ago. Just some boring coverage of that charity his family owns. They hosted some kind of event at the Met, and I honestly can’t even tell you the details because who cares about that asshole,” she rambles. “I mean, screw that guy. I still can’t believe he showed up in Vermont and tried to physically force you to talk to him. Like, he manhandled you, Norah. He was abusive. I wish you’d put him in the clink. He deserves to have a shiv or two rammed up his ass by strangers.”

Obviously, Lillian knows all about The Red Bridge Scuffle. She didn’t take it too well the first time I told her. It was a day or two after it happened, and it took some effort to convince her that showing up at his apartment with a baseball bat was a really bad idea.

“Let’s not get too worked up over this again, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” She groans. “I know why you didn’t press charges—sort of. But that asshole should be sitting in a cell, rotting.”

She isn’t the only one who feels that way—for as gentle as she’s been with me, Josie’s made her opinion abundantly clear.

“Oh!” Lillian exclaims. “But one thing that’s kind of good news is that in that dumb article I read, he had a date with him at that event. She’s a French supermodel or something. She barely looked eighteen, but that probably shouldn’t be a surprise, you know? Thomas King has a thing for barely legal. But maybe that means he’s moving on and won’t be bothered with you anymore.”

A thing for barely legal. Ugh. It’s moments like this that make me wonder how in the hell I could’ve been so naïve about that man.

“Anyway, enough about your asshole ex. Tell me more about this job.”

“I’m an artist’s assistant,” I tell her. “And it actually pays really well. Thank God. The arrival of your moving truck really ramped up my sister’s impatience with my squatting. I need to find a place of my own soon.”

“Wait...” She pauses. “*An artist’s* assistant? Who is the artist? Don’t tell me you have someone famous hiding in that tiny town up there.”

“Um...” I mash my lips together and pop them open with uncertainty.

“Norah, I swear to baby Jesus, if you’re keeping something from me...”

I sigh. “The artist is Bennett Bishop.”

“Bennett Bishop, as in the broody, rude-y, grumpy-ass macho man who punched Thomas and kissed you in a grocery store parking lot?”

“That’s the one.” I sigh again, mulling over whether I should give her the latest updates. Unfortunately for me, she sniffs out my hesitancy like a dog.

“Why do I get the sense there’s more to this story?”

“Because there probably is...”

“*Norah.*”

“It’s quite possible that something of a similar nature happened Friday night at a bar...” I shut my eyes and force myself to ramble out the rest as quick as my mouth will let me. “I might’ve slapped him again for being a jerk *again* and that led to more kissing and now I’m on edge about going to

work today because I haven't seen him since then and I have no idea how things are going to go."

"Norah Rose Ellis!" Lillian shouts into the receiver so loud my AirPods vibrate inside my ears. "Oh my God! I cannot believe this! With as much as the two of you fight and kiss, you might as well be horny UFC members!"

"It's not a big deal. And it's not going to happen again."

"Not a big deal?" she retorts. "Norah, get real! This feels like a really big freaking deal."

"It's no big deal," I repeat. "Seriously. From here on out, I'm solely his employee, and everything is going to stay professional." That is, if he doesn't change his mind and give me the axe.

She laughs. And laughs some more. And when it feels like she isn't going to stop, I mutter, "You're kind of a bitch right now, you know that?"

"Sorry." More laughs. "But I honestly thought your life in Red Bridge would be so damn boring, but it's like the opposite of boring! Hell, it's more exciting than mine, and I'm in the city that doesn't sleep. Not surrounded by farms and cow shit."

"There's not that much cow shit in Red Bridge."

"Whatever you say, friend," Lil responds, but her amusement is evident in the rasp of her voice. "Anyway, I have to get going or else I'm going to be late for my early meeting. But now you have to promise to tell me more about your job with Mr. Hot and Broody. You think you'll kiss him again today?"

"Lil, stop it!" I whine, but Lil just giggles.

"Gotta run! Bye, Nore. Love you!"

Her laugh fills my ears until the line clicks dead. Though, she can't stop herself from following it up with a text message.

Lillian: Just FYI, all the BEST books start with banging the boss.

Me: You're a psycho.

My phone vibrates in my hands again, but I ignore it, shoving it back into the side pocket of my leggings. My best friend is a highly intelligent girl, but she doesn't have a clue when it comes to Bennett Bishop.

I'm more likely to strangle him than have sex with him. That is fact.

I give myself another five minutes to do a few stretches, and once I hit the timer on my smartphone and put on my favorite workout playlist, I give my AirPods one last adjustment and get moving.

My pace is slow as shit. More walking than jogging, but it doesn't matter. It feels good. The air is crisp like an apple, and the sun shining down through the trees provides just enough warmth on my face to take the edge off.

And the view is something special. The leaves are showing the first early signs of change. Some are still a vibrant green, but others are already highlighted with tiny dots of red and orange and yellow. It makes me excited to see what Red Bridge looks like when the season really shifts from summer to fall.

Before I know it, I'm ten minutes into my walk-jog, and Leo Sayer has taken my ears back to 1976, telling me he feels like dancing the night away.

Another five minutes and my leg muscles decide to remind me that the last time I ran was when I pulled a Julia Roberts and left my wedding.

But two minutes after that, all thoughts of getting tired fly out the window when something catches my attention in my periphery. I glance over my shoulder, and the sight brings me to a dead stop in the middle of the trail.

It also makes me scream. "What the hell?!"

The fluffy, four-legged creatures behind me also come to a stop, and when I pull my AirPods out of my ears, I note the faint sound of a few small bells ringing from the crowd.

Yes, *the crowd* of fluffy white sheep staring *at me*.

Are these Farmer Tad's sheep? If not, how many freaking sheep farmers are in this small town? It feels like an overpopulation.

The crazy thing is, the longer I stand here, the bigger the crowd gets as more sheep come around the bend and stop with the group.

How many are there? I try to count, but I get to forty and have to start recounting because I lose track and more keep coming.

But they all stop. And wait. And look ahead...at me.

“Uh...hello? Hi? Can I help you with something?”

They don't respond. You know, because they're *sheep*.

Just...keep going. Maybe this is like a thing? A Red Bridge thing? Maybe these sheep come here in the mornings too, to get a little fresh air?

“I...uh...I'm going to keep on running. You guys have a great day, okay? Maybe...uh...head back home? Yeah?”

But when I turn on my heel and start to run down the path again, I steal a quick glance over my shoulder and note they are now moving with me.

It's like they're following me down the trail.

I stop.

They stop.

I look at them. They look at me. *Baaaaaaa.*

I offer another wave goodbye, point toward the other side of the trail, and start to run again, but they just do what I do.

If I'm moving, they're following.

If I stop, they're waiting for me.

“Listen, um, what is happening right now?” I ask them.

Baaaaaaa.

“Are you guys lost?”

Baaaaaa.

“Do you realize that I have no idea how to take care of sheep? I can barely take care of myself. I mean, I’m a twenty-six-year-old woman who has about a hundred dollars to her name and is living with her sister. If you need guidance, I’m not your gal.”

Unfortunately, my speech doesn’t achieve anything, and before I know it, another twenty-five minutes of playing red light, green light with a bunch of sheep on the freaking Happy Trail have passed by. Which means, if I want to be on time for work, this is now starting to cut into my shower time.

“Listen, I have to get to work, guys,” I tell them, but they’re not all that fussed about it. Hell, some of the sheep are busying themselves with munching on grass, occasionally glancing up to see my whereabouts. “It’s a complicated situation and I don’t know if you know who Bennett Bishop is, but let me tell you, he’s *not* going to want me to bring buddies along, you know? I’m supposed to be there to work. And after Friday night, things aren’t exactly easy peasy between us. The last thing I need to do is bring, like, a hundred sheep with me because they’re my new friends. Don’t get me wrong, you’re my friends. You guys are great. But I can’t do that, you know? I’m trying to keep my job, not lose it.”

Baaaaaa.

Eventually, I decide to phone a friend. My friend, besides these sheep, being my sister. It takes four rings twice over on two different calls for her to answer, but when she does, I don’t bother with pleasantries.

“I have a problem.”

“Okay?”

“I decided to go for a run this morning before work, and now I have about a hundred sheep following me.”

I expect shock. Maybe horror. But Josie doesn’t give me either. She’s all business, so much so, it makes me wonder if she’s in the sheep business.

“Are they marked?”

“What do you mean marked?”

“Farmers around here mark their sheep and cattle with paint. Usually, a little strip down their back or on one side.”

“Um...” I step closer to my new sheep pals and note a bright-orange strip of paint on their left sides. “Yes. Orange paint.”

“Tad Hanson’s sheep have latched on to you because he’s apparently incapable of keeping them in his pasture.”

“Latched on to me? What does that mean?”

“That means they’re lost like always, and you’re their temporary mother until you get them home.”

“Get them home?” I shout, and the sheep beside me lets out a bleating noise. “Josie! I’m supposed to be at work in, like, forty minutes!”

“Well, unless Bennett is okay with you bringing along sheep for the day, I’d say you better get your little ass moving toward Tad’s farm.”

“Like I even know where Tad’s farm is! I’ve spoken to Tad once in my life, and that’s only because you *refused* to come to the bar with me after dinner.” And for as chatty as he was on Friday night, he didn’t get around to telling me where he lived.

“Norah, you know I don’t go there, so just get over it.”

“Get over it?!” I protest on a shout. “I’m in it! I spend one night talking to Tad, and now his sheep are stage five clingers!”

“Where are you?”

“On the Happy Trail.”

“You’re not too far from Tad’s. And lucky for you, Bennett’s place and Tad’s farm are right next door to each other.”

I sigh. “That doesn’t feel lucky. I was planning on taking a shower and getting ready for work like a normal human being. Not putting in two hours of herding sheep before starting my day.”

Josie just laughs and gives me directions to Tad Hanson’s farm from where I’m at on the Happy Trail.

And as I try to run these sheep home, I realize just how right Josie is about Bennett and Tad being next door to each other. They’re so close, in fact, I’m cutting through my new boss’s property to get to Tad’s. I recognize the front of his large house and can just barely make out the small building behind it that he utilizes as his studio.

Me and a hundred damn sheep traipsing through his freaking yard.

Could this be any more outrageous? I think not.

Please don’t let him see this. Please don’t let him see this. I repeat those words to myself fifty times as I sprint across the grass, but they do the exact opposite.

Right on cue, as if he could hear my internal thoughts, Bennett steps out onto his front porch and narrows his eyes toward me and my flock of sheep as we haul ass across his yard.

I try not to make eye contact, but let’s be real, it’s impossible. How can you not make eye contact in a situation as ridiculous as this?

I am a train wreck in progress, and Bennett Bishop can’t look away.

26

Norah

Of all the ways to start today off, being the leader of a flock of sheep in the middle of Bennett's yard wasn't one of the options I mulled over. A clear-the-air chat, a just-act-like-nothing-happened avoidance, those were more on par with what I'd pictured.

But this? *Yeah*. Epitome of awkward. And now that I've been spotted, keeping this very embarrassing moment a secret is no longer an option.

Bennett crosses his arms over his chest and leans into the post at the front of his porch. His eyes are locked on me and my flock, and bells and *baaas* sound at my back as I approach him. He's silent, as expected, but his face says more than enough for a full-blown rebuttal to trigger in my head and shoot off my mouth in a ramble.

"So, weird story, but I started this morning on a run slash walk, thinking I could get back on track in the area of physical fitness, and now I'm kind of, like, the head of this herd of sheep. Josie says they're Tad's because they have orange paint on them, so I've been trying to get them to go home. I heard he lives next to you, so, well, here I am with a herd of sheep in your yard."

When he doesn't say anything, I take a deep breath and continue.

"I know things are a little weird between us because of Friday, and I know this is inconvenient and I'm undoubtedly going to be late for work now, but I've tried cajoling them, complimenting them, and insulting them for going on an hour now, and none of it has seemed to help get rid of them."

“That’s because they’re sheep.”

“Right. Well, that pretty much leaves me with walking them the rest of the way to Tad’s, so that maybe when they see him, they’ll get over me.”

At the mention of Tad’s name, his lips turn down in an almost-frown—a state in which I’m completely used to seeing his handsome face. I don’t know what he has against the sheep farmer, but I do know that this is *our* MO. I mean, I’m almost always annoying or disappointing him.

Though, I am surprised when he simply responds with, “I’ll take the sheep to Tad’s.”

I don’t know what I expected, but I take it as a good sign. He hasn’t said the word fired once. *Maybe things won’t be weird between us. Maybe we’re both just going to forget Friday night even happened.*

“Really? You’ll take the sheep to Tad’s?”

“Really,” he affirms, shoving away from the post and coming down the steps toward me. “Summer’s so excited to see you, she’s already in the studio. I wasn’t quite ready, but she made Charlie go ahead with her so she’d be there when you got there.”

My chest warms so much it almost feels fuzzy. I haven’t known Bennett’s daughter long, but her spirit is the kind that infects you immediately. Her positivity, her radiance, her eagerness to learn about anything she can—it all defies the body she’s been given like space defies gravity. She might only be a seven-year-old little girl, but there’s something special about her. It’s like she’s wise beyond her years. It pains me to think that her daily battle with her disease has made her grow up faster than any little girl should.

And the thought of her waiting for me to arrive in the studio trumps any and all vague notions I had about running home and taking a shower. I refuse to make her wait anymore.

“Okay. If you think you guys can bear the smell of sheep on me all day, I’ll go ahead and head to the studio now and save my shower for after work.”

Bennett's face contorts again, and then he jerks his chin back toward the house. "You can shower here if you want. Won't have any of your girly shit, but at least you won't smell like livestock all day."

Take a shower in Bennett Bishop's bathroom? As in, I'll be naked in his house?

A shiver passes over my whole body at the thought. Still, with one secret sniff to the collar of my sweat-drenched T-shirt, it quickly becomes a viable option.

"I don't have any clothes or anything."

He rolls his eyes. "I'm sure you can find a shirt and some sweats in my closet."

Now he wants me to wear his clothes?!

Clearly tiring of me, he sighs and walks down from the porch with a directness I'm not ready for, stopping right in front of me. I have to look up to meet his eyes. "Take a shower or not, okay? Neither will bother me. Just make a decision before snow covers the ground, would you?"

Without another word, he grabs one of the big sheep by the fluff on its neck, making it *baaaa* in a way that gets the rest of their attention. As Bennett turns toward Tad's, so do the sheep, and just like that, he's off with the flock, leaving me in their wake.

Funny how they were so attached, and all it took was one strong hand from the scary macho man to change their minds.

"Can't say I blame you," I mutter in the direction of the sheep. For as much bad blood as Bennett and I have had, I'm still pretty sure I would crumble at the first sign of sexy manhandling. I have two unexpected but all-consuming kisses to thank for that.

He is your boss, you know.

I sigh. Maybe a shower is a good idea, and maybe I should make it a cold one.

I scramble toward the front door and open it carefully, calling inside for extra people I don't know about or, I don't know, monsters or something. "Hello?"

No one answers, which is good since Bennett is gone and Summer and Charlie are already in the studio. I've had just about as many Bennett-related surprises as I can take for a while.

It's weird being in his house alone when I've never really been inside it before. Sure, the day I demanded this job and met Summer, I breached the front door and found my way into the hallway, but there's so much more beyond that I couldn't possibly have imagined.

I see tons of pictures of Bennett and Summer throughout the years. Some of them feature other familiar faces from town and some of just the two of them, but in almost all, Bennett showcases a huge and handsome smile. He looks more carefree—not entirely, of course, he is a grump after all. But there's a happiness behind his eyes that you can't miss.

That little girl is his everything, Clay's words ring out in my head.

I choose not to dally too long on the photos and tiptoe across the rug in the living room, heading down the back hallway. I look in open doors, searching for a bedroom that looks like it belongs to the protein lover, and I finally find it at the very end.

It's both clean and tidy, and almost impressively nondescript. There is no color, no touch of rugged bachelor, no personality whatsoever, just white walls, a black metal bedframe, and white linens.

As an almost interior designer, I think it's as close to a blank canvas as I can imagine an artist having.

Especially him.

Since I started working for him last week, I've been studying all of his previous works rigorously. The internet is a vast source of knowledge, and what it's taught me is very much at odds with Bennett's bedroom. Artistically, he works conscientiously with color, mixing hues that are

unexpected and oftentimes vibrant. I'm not surprised my wall painting made him consider hiring me, because while it wasn't even in the same country of skill level he has, it was on point for the way he mixes colors.

Him having an all-white bedroom is just...weird.

Quickly, I move on from being judgmental and head for the attached bathroom. There's still a little girl in the studio waiting for me, and I need to get my shit together.

I close the door and lock it, and then turn on the shower to let it heat up while I strip down. The air feels eerily chilly on my bare skin, and I know without having to think too hard that it's more because of the owner of this bathroom than the temperature. To be honest, I'm still kind of sweating.

The spray feels good when I climb under it and close the glass door behind me. I wet my whole body down and soak my hair before grabbing the first product I find to start the process of cleansing the aura of sweat and sheep.

It's a 3-in-1 shampoo, conditioner, and body wash, and I am objectively horrified at the level of unbothered men can get away with. Still, I lather it up and put it in my hair before using the remainder to soap up my body.

Unfortunately for me, it doesn't take long before I'm overwhelmed by the scent of Bennett.

I try to ignore it as I scrub, but this annoying, arousing ache starts in the lowest part of my belly. And the more I inhale through my nose, the more I'm reminded that I'm naked in Bennett's shower. That I'm scrubbing myself with his soap. And that three nights ago, while he was kissing me, I came undeniably close to experiencing an orgasm at his hands.

My fingers linger a little on my clit.

Come on, Norah. Move it along.

Okay, but really, what would it hurt? It's not like it's going to take a while—I haven't come in I don't know how long. Thomas tried—or at least, made it seem like he did—but he could never hit the spot just right. Plus,

it'd probably relieve a lot of the tension I'm feeling toward my new boss. And man, that wouldn't be a bad thing.

Right?

Carefully, tentatively, I swirl my finger around my clit, swiping at it at the end of each circle. At first, I'm just considering it. Just testing. Just teasing. But it ultimately feels so good—too good—that my toes curl against the tile, and I have to steady myself with a hand to the wall.

Yeah, this isn't going to take long at all.

Decorum out the fucking window while the scent of my boss's cleansing trio fills my head, I touch myself until my spine feels like a single puff of air could snap it.

My mind loses itself in thoughts of Friday night. *The way he kissed me. The way it felt to have his hands on my body. How hard his cock felt beneath his jeans.*

Heat runs through my cheeks and my belly at once, the apex of my climax just a millimeter away. Spine bowed, I let my head fall back into the warm water as all the tension in my body releases in a crashing wave of pleasure. And the entire time, I can't help but visualize Bennett's body over mine, his cock inside me, and his finger at my clit instead of mine.

I have to cover my mouth with my free hand to stop myself from screaming. My body shakes and my heart races as I come down from the highest peak I've hit in years—maybe ever.

Oh man. *Talk about crossing an intimate line.* Not only have I been naked in my boss's shower, but now, I've also made myself come. I don't think he had this in mind when he offered to let me use it.

Holy hell, what have you done, you freak?

A rush of shame makes me hurry to finish, and I turn off the water without even considering doing a second wash on my hair. Sure, it's my normal, but I doubt this kind of shampoo and conditioner is going to turn my hair into

anything but straw anyway. Not to mention, it's that very product that led me to Masturbation Lane.

I towel off and twist my wet hair into a ponytail before putting my underwear and bra back on and running into Bennett's closet to grab something to wear. Typically, I'd be careful with my choice, but the embarrassment and need to vacate the premises as soon as possible really cut into my overthinking. I grab the first shirt and sweatpants I come to, throw them on and roll them up until they fit, and then flee the scene like I've just completed a heist.

By the time I make it to the studio, I'm nearly out of breath, and Summer *and* Bennett are there. Charlie is gone.

"I'm here, I'm here," I blather dramatically as I jog in. "I'm sorry I took so long, but I'm getting to work right this minute. Social media, emails, website, phone calls—I'm ready to tackle it all!"

When I look up, I see I am unavoidably the center of attention—and not just because I'm late.

Bennett and Summer both stare at me with mouths agape, their focus on my borrowed clothes. I look down at what I've thrown on and freeze. "What... what am I wearing?"

Bennett, astonishingly, laughs. Whole body, face transforming, bent over at the waist, he looks like a movie star and a rock star and the king of an entire country. He is regal in his humor, and it's the most amazing thing I've seen in at least a decade.

So much so, I almost don't even hear him when he speaks. "That'd be my Halloween costume from two years ago."

Summer giggles. "I wanted to be Anna, you know, from *Frozen*. Dad was Kristoff."

"Hmm. I guess that explains why I look like a Norwegian boy."

Bennett's laugh has faded to a smile now, but I swear it's just as good. Big and bright and so genuine, I would never have dreamed it possible.

Summer laughs again, but what starts out as endearing quickly turns into a cough. My eyebrows draw together in concern, and Bennett pauses for only the briefest of moments before jumping into action. I've never seen him move so fast as he runs to Summer's stroller chair and flips it up to elevate her. She struggles to catch her breath, and a sharp cry of pain is the only thing that breaks the sound of her fighting for air.

I join them, panic roiling a nausea in my stomach I've never felt in my life. "What can I do?" I ask desperately, my chest seizing as Summer's sweet face begins to turn blue.

"We have to take her out of the seat," Bennett commands, undoing one side of the buckles with swiftness I've never seen such a large frame exhibit. "Just be careful," he says in a quiet rush when I start undoing the padded straps on my side. "She has brittle bone. Even the slightest touch can cause fractures and breaks."

My mind registers his words while my heart feels like it's been put in a vise.

A simple touch can break this little girl's bones? *Oh my God.*

Inside, I'm tortured. But on the outside, I will my fingers to work efficiently. I've just managed the last strap when Bennett swoops her into his arms with a gentleness I can't even begin to describe.

"It's okay, Sum," I coach pitifully, hoping my words will bring her even an ounce of comfort as Bennett takes off at a run toward the house.

I follow frantically, churning my legs so hard to keep up that they burn like fire. One of his steps is two of mine, but I'll be damned if I'm not going to keep up with him. Somehow, I manage the speed I need, opening the door to his truck for him when he gets to it and climbing in beside Summer's delicate body when he runs around to the other side. Carefully, I hold her close with as little pressure as I can manage and try to straighten her body enough to get some air into her lungs.

When Bennett climbs in, fires it up, and takes off, I ask a question with a calm I am in no way feeling. Truth be told, the word composed isn't even

on the same planet as me right now. “What’s happening, Bennett?”

His voice is soft and tortured as he responds. “I think her ribs are collapsing.”

I have to suck my lips into my mouth to fight off a sob, but I do it. I’m the very last person in this truck who needs to be breaking down.

Summer is fighting for her life—literally—and emotionally, I know Bennett is fighting with every ounce of strength for his.

27

Norah

Today, without a shadow of a doubt, has been the longest, hardest day of my life.

I thought finding out everything I did on the day of my wedding was the worst thing I would experience in my lifetime, but this—watching Bennett’s agony and Summer’s pain—has surpassed everything that day was and more ten times over.

After we arrived at the local hospital just outside of Red Bridge and they managed to stabilize Summer’s breathing, a Life Flight helicopter arrived to take her to Burlington where her normal staff of doctors practices. Bennett had to talk fast, but they let him on the helicopter with her. I have a feeling the combination of his desperation and the underlying sense that he would literally kill anyone who stood in his way played a large role in getting him on board. I procured his keys to follow with his truck.

Now, after a day of tests and hushed conversations between doctors in the hall, Summer is finally resting comfortably, while Bennett sits at her bedside. She looks so small here, in the harsh lighting of the hospital, and I’m still fighting with everything I have not to break down and cry.

As soon as I’m out of here, though, my face will be the newest hot spot on Niagara Falls.

“Bennett,” I call softly, barely rapping my knuckles on the wood door as I do.

He looks up, and I can't help but notice the red rimming his eyes. I want to apologize, to make myself small in this really huge moment, but I don't. He wouldn't want me to. "Can I talk to you in the hall for a second?"

He nods, leaning down to kiss the back of Summer's hand before he releases it. I turn and head for the hallway, knowing that the biting hold my teeth have on the inside of my cheek isn't going to stave off my tears much longer.

I wait patiently in the fluorescent light, leaning my back against the wall for support. Bennett comes out a minute later, and I do my best not to falter when I see him.

"I just wanted to take a minute to see if you need anything before I head out." The emotion in my voice makes my words come out all choppy. I clear my throat and force the tears to stay behind my eyes. "I can get you food or clothes or call someone for you? Anything at all, I'd be happy to do it."

"You're leaving?"

Temporarily stunned, I open my mouth and close it again before finding some semblance of words. "Only when you're ready for me to. But I don't want to intrude, so I thought I could take an Uber home for the night and come back in the morning if you need."

"An Uber? Where's your car?"

I take no offense that he's discombobulated right now. Frankly, I'd be shattered pieces of hysteria if I were him.

"At the entrance to the Happy Trail, actually. The start of my sheep-ish adventure." My anecdote should be funny, but nothing feels funny right now.

"I'll take you to it."

"No, Bennett. It's okay, really. I'll find a way home. Take a cab or an Uber or something. You can stay with Summer, and—"

“I’m not letting you ride all the way home from Burlington with some stranger in a cab, Norah. Summer’s sleeping, and with the meds they gave her, the doctors think she will be for a while. I’ll take you to your car and then come back.”

I nod instead of fighting it. For just tonight, I refuse to be a pain in this man’s ass.

After letting the nurse know he’s leaving and stopping in to give Summer one last kiss—from each of us—we weave our way through the hospital to the parking garage, climb into his truck, and head off for Red Bridge in comfortable silence.

It’s not until we’re completely out of Burlington that Bennett says something that renders me speechless. “I was happy you were there today. For Summer.”

Wow. Just...wow. My heart races, and it takes me a hot minute to get my bearings. I have so many questions I want to ask him about Summer and her well-being and how often emergent situations like that happen. But I know now isn’t the right time.

So, I simply go with honesty when I get my tongue to work. “I was happy I was there, too.”

Besides Charlie and the other nurses who help take care of Summer, Bennett is usually doing it alone. Being a single parent is hard enough, but being a single parent with a daughter as sick as Summer? I can’t even imagine. I hate that that’s his reality.

“And I owe you an apology,” he declares, and I look toward him while trying to hide the disbelief that wants to make itself known on my face. “I was out of line on Friday night, and I owe you an apology for it. I’m sorry.”

First, he thanks me, and now he’s apologizing. *What in the hell has gotten into Bennett Bishop tonight?*

“I appreciate that, Bennett, I really do, but I wouldn’t say Friday night showcased my best self. I wasn’t exactly *in line* either,” I admit. “I’m sorry

for slapping you.”

“I deserved it,” he admits, and half of his mouth quirks up. “Well, at least the first one. The second might’ve been a little overkill.”

“Yeah.” I cringe, and one puff of humor escapes my nose. “I’d have to agree with you on that.”

“How late did you end up staying at the bar and hanging out with that farmer?”

“Who? Tad?” I nearly laugh. “Lord, I thought I was chatty, but that man just about talked my ear off. And I didn’t stay long. Left right after you did, actually.”

“You’re not interested in him?” he questions then, almost reshaping my spine, it snaps so straight.

“Um, no.” This time, I do laugh. “I mean, Josie was right to call him hot and all, but *no*, I am not interested in him. Plus, I’ve got a whole cargo ship of relationship drama. I don’t need to be jumping into anything right now.”

“Ah, yes. *Thomas Conrad Michael King III*. How in the hell did you end up with a pretentious prick like him anyway?”

Bennett takes the ramp onto the bypass around the only small town between us and Red Bridge, and I shuffle in my seat to find the words.

“Put simply? My mother. She’s been orchestrating every detail of my life since the day my dad died. And Thomas was a means to an end. The success, the wealth, being in the *right* circle of people.”

“And what? You just woke up one day and got tired of the whole deal?”

I shake my head as tears sting my eyes, my whole body feeling instantly like I’m standing at the bathroom sink of St. Patrick’s Cathedral all over again. “No. I woke up on my wedding day and got ready to marry the man I *thought* I loved. And then a woman handed me a letter that changed everything.”

“A letter?”

The truth will set you free.

“A letter. Turns out, Thomas Conrad Michael King III isn’t just a self-important asshole. He’s way, way worse. I’ve been trying to figure out what to do with the information ever since.”

When I realize I’ve just told him more than I’ve told my own sister, I wait for the shock to fill my gut. But it never comes. For some reason, it just feels right. It feels like I can trust him.

“Is it illegal?” Bennett asks, eyeing me out of his periphery. “Because if it is, you should turn that shit over to the cops. Let him rot.”

I shake my head. “It’s so much more complicated than that. I...I can’t believe I ever thought he was a good person.”

The car is silent for a minute as I gather my thoughts. Surprisingly, Bennett is the one to break it.

“I used to burn shit down for fun when I was younger. Did you know that?”

“You mean...like, arson?”

He nods, his face illuminated by a warm mix of moon and streetlight. “My brother Logan and I were firebugs, and just like Thomas Fuckwad the Third, we had more money than we knew what to do with. We spent every night drunk or high, tangled in women, and partying until we couldn’t stand up. Previously, we’d only burned shit our father owned, which was twisted in itself, but at least legally loopholed. But one night, after some rich asshole had been hammering me to get one of my paintings on his wall because he was obsessed with buying and selling art, I decided I wanted to fuck him over, and Logan was more than happy to join in. We ended up burning his car.”

“Oh shit.”

“Yeah.” He actually chuckles. “A Lamborghini, of all things.”

I gasp. “Oh my God, Bennett.”

“I know.”

“How the hell did you get out of that? Out of going to jail?”

“My brother Logan took the fall, and Breezy told me to get the fuck out of New York and keep my shit out of trouble.”

“Wow. Your brother Logan sounds—”

“No, whatever you’re about to say, don’t say it. My brother is no fucking martyr. He took the fall for the price of ten million dollars from my father, only spent thirty days in jail, and then helped himself to my girlfriend as a bonus.”

“What? Why the hell would your dad pay him to take the fall instead of both of you? You said you did it together.”

His laugh is bitter. “Because I’m a commodity for Bishop Galleries, Norah. My going to prison wouldn’t make financial sense, of course. But my point is that you’re not a bad person for not recognizing how shitty someone else was. You got fucked over, plain and simple. *I* am a bad person. At least, I was.”

I suck on my lips for a long moment to work up the courage and then finally ask, “So...how did you—the you you are now, I mean—and Summer come out of all of this? Your life now is completely different, and Summer is...”

My voice crawls to a stop. He knows what Summer is—the absolute best of us.

He grunts a little as he clears his throat, and I do him the courtesy of pretending not to notice. “The girlfriend I mentioned?”

I nod.

“She was pregnant with Summer, though I didn’t know it. I only found out when she put me on the birth certificate and took off right after she was

born.”

“She took off?” I nearly shout.

“She said she couldn’t handle a ‘broken baby.’ That’s what she called her when she was born with osteogenesis imperfecta.”

A broken baby. A mother saying that about her own child hits me straight in the gut. It’s callous. It’s cruel. It’s...pure evil. My eyes make a bid to climb right out of my head as anger burns the lining of my throat.

“And that’s the only time I’ve been back to New York—to get Summer and bring her here,” he adds. “It’s been the two of us ever since.”

Bennett pulls to a stop in the Happy Trail parking lot, right next to Josie’s old Civic, with a crunch of gravel and a small squeal from his brakes. And I sit in the seat, unmoving, for what has to be an entire minute.

“Bennett—”

“Norah—”

When we finally speak, we do it at the same time.

I laugh, prepared to focus on our faux pas, but Bennett grabs me by the waist of his sweatpants I’m still wearing and pulls me toward him, sealing our lips in a kiss.

Soft but still eager, his mouth works at mine until a small gasp creates an opening for his tongue. I moan and scoot my body toward him more, going so far as to climb onto his lap to straddle him when his tongue flicks at the tip of mine.

Bennett presses his fingertips into the skin of my hips just beneath my waistband, and I roll my torso toward him involuntarily.

I gasp again when my hair tie disappears unexpectedly, releasing a forest of wild curls around my face. Bennett shoves his hands in both sides and tugs—just slightly.

Holy shit. This might be the hottest moment of my entire life.

Forehead to forehead, Bennett and I breathe hard as he pulls back just enough to whisper, “Fuck, Norah.”

“Bennett, what are we doing?” I ask, my voice shaking with adrenaline.

“I don’t know. But I’m tired of fighting everything all the time. Tired of fighting whatever this is between us.”

“I am too,” I whisper, and he kisses me deep again, his lips and tongue persistent against mine to the point of madness. I swear, I’m nearly three sheets to the wind, drunk off this kiss.

“I want you,” he says, and he slides his big hands to my chest, gripping my breasts through the material of my shirt. “Fuck, do I want you.”

God, I want him too. Badly.

My breathing is ragged, and my body is already primed and ready for whatever action he can give. And I’m *so close* to giving in to the craving I have for him. So close to finally learning what it feels like to have his cock inside me.

But somewhere in the deep recesses of my brain, I’m reminded of what he’s been through today. If there’s any place he should be right now, it’s back at the hospital with Summer.

Plus, I went off birth control right after the wedding to save money—figuring the next dick I saw would be at the age of eighty-five—I don’t have a condom, and little Norwegian boy is hardly my sexiest look.

“I want you too, Ben. But...”

“Ah, fuck.” He leans his forehead against mine again. “Trust me, I know.”

“Bookmark this so we can resume it another time?” I ask, offering a little smile as I do. “I swear, I’ll remember what page we’re on.”

“I won’t forget what page we’re on either.” Bennett gives me a soft, nearly delicate kiss. One that starts at my lips but doesn’t finish making me tingle until it reaches my toes.

Carefully, he helps me climb off his lap and out of the truck, and then tucks me into the driver's seat of the Civic with the utmost care. We kiss again, this time in goodbye, and I remind him to call me if he and Summer need anything at all.

He's still standing there when I drive away, and as I look at his tall, muscular frame in the rearview, I can't help but think...

This might be the end of a long, horrible day and night, but it sure feels like the start of something else.

28

Norah

I take a right turn onto the gravel driveway that leads to Josie's, and it's not long before I'm parked and dragging my exhausted carcass into the house.

But as soon as I step through the door, I can tell something is off. The lights are still on in both the living room and the hallway, despite the late hour, and Josie's bedroom door is visibly open at the end. I put my keys and phone down on the counter, realizing only then, of course, that I forgot to send her any more updates after I'd texted her that Summer had been safely transported to Burlington.

Hell, I haven't even checked my phone in several hours. She must be worried sick.

"Josie? You awake?" I call out more quiet than loud to test the waters. Her answer comes from the living room.

"In here."

"I'm sorry I didn't update you or let you know I'd be this late," I say as I walk out of the kitchen. "Summer is stable but admitted at Burlington. And God, Josie, it was so scar—" I stop midsentence when I find her on the sofa. But it's not her presence that shocks me. It's the manila envelope in her lap and the handwritten letter in her hands.

I hope the truth will set you free.

"I didn't mean to," she says in a quiet rush. "But I was trying to get some of these damn boxes unpacked so we can actually move around the house

without tripping over shit, and I found this envelope and then I was just looking inside and I... Norah,” she whispers. “Is this...is this true?”

I don’t know what to say. All I know is that my heart is racing over the thought of my sister reading through the ugliness that’s inside that letter.

All I can manage is a nod. All of Alexis’s claims are backed up by other things—documents, a USB stick, and other forms of proof that came inside the envelope.

“This is awful.” She looks at me. Her eyes look soft, but it’s with sadness. A deep, disappointed sadness. “I always hoped that you got to see a different side of our mother. I always hoped that she was good to you. But this...”

She doesn’t even have to say it. In her eyes, this proves that *Eleanor is Eleanor*.

The corners of my mouth quiver as my lips slip down into a frown.

“She said you were always kind to her,” Josie comments, nodding down toward the letter. “Was she a friend of yours?”

“No, not really.” I shake my head. “To me, she was just a young girl from one of the many charities that Eleanor went to galas and events for. She had been in and out of foster care most of her life and had dealt with a lot of abusive situations throughout her childhood. I guess you could say our mother was mentoring her, and I got to know her a little because she worked for Thomas.”

“Wait...our mother mentors young girls?” Josie’s eyes make a bid for her forehead. “What does that even mean? I have a hard time believing Eleanor was doing shit like that out of the goodness of her own heart.”

“She would just help them. Buy them new wardrobes. Find them jobs.” I shrugged. “In Alexis’s case, she took her under her wing, helped her secure finances for college and get an internship at King Financial as Thomas’s assistant.”

My sister lets out an exasperated breath. Like she can't believe our mother would do anything to benefit another human being.

"Jose, I don't know," I whisper, and nausea makes my mouth fill with too much saliva. I have to fight hard to swallow against it. "I feel like there's something big I'm missing here. Like there's more to this than just Alexis."

Josie's eyebrows draw together. "What makes you say that?"

"The way she ended the letter."

"What do you mean?" She glances between me and the letter. "I just read it, and I didn't—"

"I know. Neither did I. Not the first time or even the first seven times I read it, but Josie, read it again."

She shuffles the papers in her lap, looks down, and starts to read again.

Dear Norah,

I don't know how to begin this letter. I don't even really know what to say. Truthfully, I wasn't going to say anything at all. I was going to stay silent and hide in the shadows and keep the truth to myself.

But I saw your wedding announcement in the newspaper.

Then I saw an article about you and Thomas and your happy life. It was an interview you did for Page Six. The photo of you and him gave the appearance that everything was bliss. And the journalist went on and on about what a beautiful couple the two of you are and how successful Thomas is and what a great man he is and how sweet and devoted you are to him.

I felt sick after reading it, and I just couldn't keep the truth to myself.

I guess what makes this letter so hard is that you were always so kind to me. And what I did to you, whether you knew or not, was terrible.

What I'm about to tell you is going to make you feel awful and betrayed and probably a whole bunch of other emotions that you don't

deserve to feel.

God, Norah, I'm so sorry for what you're about to read.

About three months into my position as Thomas's assistant, we started an affair.

And it was a fully involved affair. It lasted for months. We slept together at the office. At your apartment when you were out of town on a girls' trip. A few times, I even went on his business trips with him for the sole intention of continuing our affair.

He told me he loved me. He told me he wanted to marry me. He told me he was going to call things off with you soon. He told me a lot of things, but the day I found out I was pregnant with his child, everything changed.

When I told him about the baby, he became a different man. At one point, when I mentioned the possibility of telling you about the pregnancy, he got violent.

I look back on things now and realize how wrong I was about him. How wrong I was about myself. How wrong I was in what I did to you.

The day after I told Thomas I was pregnant, people showed up at my front door to talk to me. It was Thomas's lawyer, your mother, and her lawyer. They were pretending to be nice but kept referring to the baby as "the situation that we need to deal with."

This living, growing child inside my body was a situation to them. Not a human. Not a baby. But a problem they needed to fix.

In the moment, I didn't fully comprehend that. I was mostly just in shock, and their manipulative words were clever in their delivery. They made me feel bad about myself. They made me feel like I was the one who created "this problem." They even went as far as to tell me that the pregnancy would ruin my life. That I had so much potential, and if I stopped my life and career to raise a child, all of that potential would be lost.

My life would be lost.

They verbalized all the insecurities I was already having about being pregnant. It goes without saying that an eighteen-year-old girl who spent most of her life in and out of foster care is already thinking about those kinds of things. And it didn't help that I trusted your mother so much. I mean, she had helped me with so many things. Helped me in ways that no one in my life had ever done before.

I was scared. And worried. And I didn't know if I could even handle raising a baby on my own.

I was barely making rent as it was on the small internship wage I was getting from King Financial, and I wanted to keep going to college.

The next parts of this story are painful. Painful for a lot of reasons, but mostly, because I let them talk me into something I should've never considered.

They told me an abortion was the best way to handle "the situation." Your mother ensured they would make sure all my medical bills were handled, and that only the best doctor in the city would do the procedure, one she knew well personally. She said she'd make sure I'd be in the best hands and that I was doing the right thing for my future.

The two lawyers insisted I sign an NDA. They told me if I signed it, I would receive financial compensation that would give me a generous start in life.

They dangled the golden ticket in front of my face, but there was only one stipulation—I had to have an abortion and sign an NDA that prevented me from ever talking about Thomas King or "the situation" again.

I don't know why I did it, but I signed the NDA. I agreed to abort the child inside me. I guess, in that moment, I did it because what they were saying felt like it made sense.

Once I signed the NDA, your mother scheduled my appointment. She even made sure that a fancy black town car with tinted windows and a driver came to pick me up that day. The driver was going to take me to the clinic and take me home after. It was the full five-star treatment... for an abortion.

I got in the car. And I let him drive me all the way to the private clinic your mother had chosen and said was the best in the city.

I got out of the car, and I went inside. I let the nurses prep me for my procedure.

I was there to go through with it. I was there to deal with “the situation.”

And I realized I couldn’t do it.

This baby wasn’t a “situation” to me. It was a baby. My baby.

I left the clinic that day, still pregnant. And because the medical staff are bound by patient privacy laws, they could not discuss my case with anyone but me.

I let the driver take me back home. And when your mother called me the next day to check up on me, I told her everything went fine with the procedure.

The next day, an envelope was delivered to me, and it contained the hush money that had been promised.

I used that money to move out of the city. And eight months later, I had a boy. A beautiful, healthy baby boy I named William.

It’s funny how when a child comes into your life, your perspective on everything changes.

I don’t regret my child, but I regret what I did to you.

I regret that I never once told you the truth.

I am so incredibly sorry. I don't expect you to forgive me. I don't even know if you should. I don't know that I deserve any more kindness from you.

But I do know that you deserve the truth. You deserve to know who you are marrying. You deserve to know what your mother was a part of.

You deserve to have a choice.

I hope the truth will set you free. And I hope what you do with it will change more lives than just yours.

I'll forever be sorry.

Alexis

"I'm not getting it, Nore." Josie looks up at me, the letter still in her hand. "What is it you're seeing other than our snake of a mother and your ex-fiancé forced a young girl into an impossible situation—which is bad enough, by the way?"

"The part about what I do with the truth changing more lives than just mine," I say with a frown. "What do you... Do you think that means there were other girls they did this to?"

Josie's face melts in consolation.

"Oh my God." I cover my hand with my mouth. "You do. You think this wasn't the first. You think it was just the first time someone was brave enough to speak up...?"

"Norah, I don't know much about Thomas besides him being an abusive asshole, but I know our mom. And I wouldn't put anything past her."

For as long as I can remember, Josie has hated our mother. I truly can't remember a time when she had something nice to say about her.

"Why, Josie? What did she do when we were kids that makes you so sure? You were always so sure."

"Norah..."

“What? Just say it.”

“Mom killed Jezzy, Norah. She left her in the tub when she was too little, and she drowned.”

Everything inside me comes crashing down, and my ears feel like they’re filled with the ocean. “No.”

“You were too young. I knew you probably didn’t realize, and the investigation never proved it, but I knew. I saw the aftermath. I saw...” Her voice chokes, and one tear slips down her cheek. She swipes it away with an angry hand. “Eleanor knows what she did. And Norah, she doesn’t care. Because she never ever cares about anything but herself.”

Tears burst the dam in my eyes and start streaming down my face, unchecked. Josie jumps up from the couch and throws her arms around me, pulling me into a hug.

“I’m sorry, Norah.” She hugs me tighter. “I’m so sorry because I know how hard this must be to hear. But Eleanor Ellis is a vapid narcissist capable of the worst kind of behavior in every situation if she’s desperate enough,” she whispers directly into my hair. “Even when the victims are her daughters.”

We stay like that for a long moment, my mind reeling with thoughts of Summer and Jezzy and Alexis. The past twenty-four hours are a heavy weight on my shoulders. And coming home to this, to Josie reading that letter, has only awakened the nagging ache I’ve had since I walked out on my wedding day.

“So, what am I supposed to do now?” I whisper. “I don’t think I can ignore this awful feeling that there’s more to this whole thing any longer. That it’s possible there’re more women who have been hurt by Thomas.” *By our mother.*

“You move on. We plan. We investigate. And eventually, hopefully, we put Eleanor Ellis and your asshole ex in the kind of place where none of us will hear from them again.”

I step back out of her embrace incredulously. “Are you suggesting we *murder* them?”

“Hey, if the shoe fits!”

“Josie! Maybe I should’ve said, but I’m morally opposed to that particular sin.”

My ridiculous sister laughs, the maniac. “All right, then. We’ll come up with another plan. One that sets you, me, and whoever else needs to be, free from our mother and your asshole ex.”

29

Tuesday, August 24th

Bennett

Summer's chest moves up and down as she sleeps, the oxygen tubing in her nose assuring she's getting the breath she needs. She's still sleeping, and thanks to the pain meds, her face is relaxed.

I hold her hand gently and lean my head into the bed beside her, trying to find a way to get in touch with God—something, admittedly, I haven't done in a long time.

Please, I beg. Help my baby girl. Take her pain and replace it with happiness.

My eyes feel wet as I lift my head from Summer's side, and I startle when I find Norah standing in the door to her room.

"I hope I'm not intruding," she whispers, tucking the wild curls of her unbound hair behind her ears. I shake my head and stand, leaning down to kiss Summer's hand once more before letting it go.

Norah turns for the hallway, and I follow her out. She looks absolutely beautiful today, though her eyes are tired and surrounded by big, dark circles, and the memory of her mouth on mine last night has yet to fade.

She smiles in a way that's sad around the edges, and she rushes into my body to hug me when I make it outside the door. I don't think twice about it. I don't hesitate at all. I wrap my arms around her waist and breathe her in, embracing the wave of comfort that comes with the contact. When she pulls back, I feel a distinct chill.

“I hope you don’t mind that I came without calling, but I wanted to make sure you both had everything you needed and see Summer if she was awake.” She glances down at her shirt, a small grin turning her cheeks blushed. “I wore pink for her today, and well, I stopped at your house to get her sunglasses. I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course it’s okay. I’m glad you came.”

Her eyes meet mine, a silent question of “*Yeah?*” inside them, and I pull her in for another hug before placing a gentle kiss to her forehead. “And I know Summer will be glad you’re here, too.”

“Has she been awake at all this morning?”

“No.” I shake my head. “But she’s comfortable, and she’s gotten a lot of rest, which her body desperately needed.”

“That’s good. Is there anything I can do for you, Bennett?”

I almost tell her no but decide to tell her the truth instead. “It’d be great if you hung around. I’m sure Summer will be waking up soon.”

“I’m here as long as you need me.”

As long as I need her. I try not to think too hard on the fact that I can’t picture a deadline to that promise and pull my phone from my pocket, handing it to her. “And maybe you can field some of these calls. It’s been ringing all damn night.”

When Clay called late last night to check on Summer, he updated me that Eileen Martin had gotten ahold of my number. From the number of calls I’ve received in the last few hours alone, I’m pretty sure she’s passed it around to the whole damn town.

I appreciate that Red Bridge is a tight-knit community, and there’s not a single member of it who doesn’t care, but I can’t talk to one more person without losing it.

She slides my phone into the pocket of her jean shorts. “You got it.”

“I, uh, also, tried to call my sister Breezy last night, but she sets her shit to do not disturb at night. Can you let me know if she calls?”

“Of course I can, Ben.”

I nod, trying to find the words, but I’ll admit, I don’t have a whole lot of organized crap in my head at the moment.

“Daddy?” I hear called faintly, jolting me into awareness. I move back into the room without delay, finding Summer awake and blinking hard in her bed.

“Hey, Summblebee,” I greet, trying to keep my voice from shaking and failing miserably. “How are you feeling? You gave us a big scare yesterday.”

“A little sick.” There’s a small pause, and then her eyes flicker with a tiny light. “Does that mean we can get ice cream?”

I chuckle, but a deep pain is rooted in the base of it. “They usually do the ice cream thing for getting tonsils out. But yeah, I don’t see why we can’t get some ice cream.”

“Yay!” she cries with half the strength she normally does. Her gaze lifts slightly, and then she cheers at full strength. “Norah! You’re here!”

I turn to look over my shoulder, and Norah steps closer, looking to me for permission before coming all the way. I nod, a dark cloud settling over my conscience for the way I’ve treated her since she arrived in Red Bridge. All her apologies and consideration and treading lightly, even after everything she’s been through—that’s what makes her special. And all I did was mock her for it.

I have no fucking clue how she can stand me.

“I love your shirt!” Summer tells her excitedly as Norah sits down on the bed beside her.

“I hoped you would! I wore it just for you.”

“You did?”

“Uh-huh. And I also brought the new *People* magazine for us to flip through. You’re never going to believe the newest drama with the Housewives.”

Summer laughs. “Beverly Hills or Atlanta?”

Norah scoffs. “Pssh. What do you think?”

My phone starts ringing in Norah’s pocket, and she pulls it out to check the screen. When she turns to me, I know who it is immediately.

I reach for the phone from her and signal that I’m going to step out into the hall as I answer, “Hey, Breezy.”

“Dear brother. I sure hope you have a good reason for calling me in the middle of the night—”

“Breeze, it’s Summer,” I cut her off, stopping her before she can say something she’ll regret. Her tone changes in an instant.

“What? What happened, Ben?” she asks, her voice a ghost of its usual domineering tone.

“She had a respiratory episode yesterday. She turned blue, Breeze, because of the deterioration around her lungs. There’s no support there anymore, and it’s getting harder and harder for her to breathe. We’re in Burlington now. Dr. Brock is supposed to be here shortly to go over where we are.”

“Oh, Ben. I’m so sorry.”

I choke on emotion and have to clear my throat to continue talking. “What am I gonna do, Breezy? How am I gonna—”

“You’re going to take it one thing at a time, Ben. Spend time with your little girl and soak her in while you can. I’m going to get everything sorted here in the next few days, and then I’m going to come up there and help you in any way I can.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t have to, but it’s what family does. Not our family because they’re all fucked up, but you and I, Ben, we’re real family. And I’ll be there. I just need a few days to get things covered here.”

“Thanks, Breeze,” I say and start to head back toward Summer’s hospital room.

“Do you feel like hearing some good news?” she asks, and I can tell by the firm tone of her voice she’s switched the conversation to business.

Normally, I’d tell her to fuck off with the shoptalk, but when I peek open Summer’s hospital room door and find her and Norah looking at a magazine, I decide a little good of anything right now wouldn’t hurt. “Sure.”

“I have twenty buyers for your painting,” she updates as I gently close Summer’s door again and lean my back against the wall of the hallway. “And it’s only twenty because I’ve only told twenty clients about it.”

I guess Breezy wasn’t lying when she said she was fielding daily calls from people wanting a painting of mine. I should probably consider myself lucky my sabbatical hasn’t hurt my reputation.

“The highest offer I have right now is five mil,” she continues. “But I’m going to let this baby go to a bidding war. Make them work for it.”

“Still a shark, I see.”

“In business? Always.” Her voice lightens with humor. “Add in the fact that profits help my brother and niece? I’m out for blood.”

“Okay, well, keep me updated, then. And let me know when you’re heading our way.”

“I will, but before you go, I need you to do one thing for me.”

“Yeah?”

“Look at the list of potential buyers and make sure you’re okay with them.”

“Afraid I’m going to burn another Lambo if you sell it to some prick the old Bennett Bishop hates?”

All she does is laugh. “I’m emailing it to your phone. Can you look at it now and call me back?”

I almost tell her to fuck off with the demands of now, but when I look around at my surroundings, I’m reminded of Summer’s current situation. “Fine.”

Anything I can do to help my daughter, I’ll do it.

30

Norah

Once Bennett excused himself from the room to talk to his sister, I set up Summer's bedside table in front of her so we could browse the *People* magazine I brought together and put her favorite sunglasses in a place she'd be able to see them. Wearing them inside while hooked up to all these machines isn't ideal, but I hope just having them around will brighten her day a little.

I flip to a two-page spread talking about Taylor Swift's wardrobe. They highlight how her street style is simple yet sophisticated and that she utilizes anything from feminine skirt sets to cozy crewnecks to create a very wearable aesthetic.

"Ohhh! I love that." Summer is entranced as she points to a photo of Taylor wearing a flowy white blouse and faded, light-blue jean skirt. "Do you like her?"

"Do I like Taylor Swift? Girl, I *love* her."

"Me too!" Summer exclaims excitedly. "I love all of her songs! My favorite is—" She's cut off by a deep, rattling cough that barrels from her weak lungs. Instantly, her face goes from happy and relaxed to scrunched up in pain.

Memories of yesterday alarm inside my head, and it takes everything within me to stay calm.

"You okay, sweet girl?" I ask as I gently rub my hand over her hair.

Through another cough, she offers me a little nod.

The scared part of me wants to run out of the room to get Bennett or a nurse, but the logical part of me knows that would be too much dramatics for Summer. The last thing she needs is for me to act like an emotional lunatic and push my anxiety on to her. So, I stay rooted to my spot, rubbing my hand whisper-light through her hair as she works her way through the coughing fit. The entire time, my gaze stays fixated on her face, watching for any signs of respiratory difficulty to arise.

Thankfully, her lips stay pink, her breaths don't appear to be any more labored than they have been since I got here, and the coughs subside within a minute or two.

"Norah?" she asks, her voice still faint and raspy from the strain.

"Yeah, baby?"

"I'm so tired," she whispers.

"Oh, okay," I tell her and lean down to kiss her forehead. "You should let yourself get some sleep, then. We can finish the rest of *People* later."

"That's not what I mean," she says, and her voice is this painfully fragile sound that urges a deep ache to spur inside my chest. "I'm tired of this stuff, Norah."

Her face is missing the smile that was there when we were browsing the latest celebrity gossip, and her eyes are no longer on the magazine. Instead, they're staring down at where her small, frail body lies secured to the bed with padded contraptions immobilizing her limbs.

"Do you want me to get your dad?"

She shakes her head. "Not yet."

I pull the chair Bennett was using earlier back over to her bedside and sit down, leaning my elbows on the edge of her bed and gently taking her hand into mine. "Is there something you want to talk about?" I ask her softly. "Because I promise you can tell me anything. I'm a really good listener."

Slowly, her eyes lift to meet mine. "What do you think heaven is like?"

Her question catches me off guard. Hell, it makes my knees want to give out and I'm sitting down. I'm sure it's normal for kids to ask questions about heaven, but it feels heavier when a little girl in a hospital bed is asking you those questions. A little girl who has a disease that makes it possible for her bones to break with just a simple touch.

A hurricane of emotion floods my throat, and I bite the inside of my cheek so hard to keep it in check that the faint taste of blood touches my tongue.

"Well..." I pause, trying to find the right words. "I think heaven..." My bottom lip starts to quiver, and I suck it into my mouth to make it quit. "I think heaven is...like being around all the things that make you happy...but in one place."

"You think you can watch sunsets in heaven?"

"Yeah, baby, I do." I nod and tenderly rub her hand, careful not to squeeze. "And I even think if you want the sunsets to be pink, they'll be pink."

"Pink sunsets are the best," she says, and her mouth just barely lifts into a smile. "When I don't have to stay inside the house, Dad and I watch the sunsets together. I really hate when I have to miss them because I'm too sick to go outside."

How fucking awful. I never make a point to be angry at God, but it's hard when I think about Summer and the many obstacles she's had to overcome in her short life. Her disease has prevented her from having a normal childhood. It's made her face more pain than most people will ever face in their lifetime.

I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy, and yet this little girl, this special, beautiful little creature with the sweetest soul I've ever come in contact with, has been carrying this burden since the day she was born.

"I bet you can run in heaven. As fast and as far as you want," she whispers, a smile cresting her lips as her eyes start to fall closed. "I bet you can play at the playground... I bet your bones stay strong... And you can hug people as many times as you want, and they can hug you right back all the time..."

“I bet you can too,” I whisper back, one stupid tear slipping down my cheek.

“Don’t tell my dad I asked you that. It might make him sad,” she says, but her eyes stay closed, and her voice is thick with fatigue.

Before I can even answer, she’s asleep.

It’s all nearly too much.

Through quiet inhales and exhales of my lungs, I work to get myself together. And the entire time, I try really hard not to think about why a little girl in her condition would be asking me about heaven. Or why she doesn’t want me to tell her dad about it.

Once I’m certain she’s deep in sleep and I don’t feel like I’m going to bawl like a baby, I make my way out of Summer’s hospital room, tiptoeing as I pull the door gently closed behind me. Bennett stands on the other side of the hall, his back against the wall and his phone to his ear.

It’s not even ten seconds before he hangs up, though, saying, “Bye, Breezy” into the receiver.

“She fell asleep,” I update him as he shoves his phone into his pocket.

He nods and pushes away from the wall to meet me by her door. “I figured she wouldn’t be up for long with all the stuff they’ve got pumping in her right now.”

I try to smile softly, but after the conversation I just had with his daughter, it’s hard.

“You okay?” he asks, searching my face as he lifts one hand to brush a few strands of hair behind my ear. “I know you got back late last night, but you look a little more than tired.”

I try to smile again, but it feels like it’s creased with lies.

“What’s going on?” he pushes delicately, and my mind wars with itself on what to say. Between Summer and Josie finding the letter and me finding

out the truth about Jezzy, I feel like my brain is a pinball machine.

But when I note the dark circles underneath his blue eyes and the pain that sits right behind them, it doesn't feel like the right moment to tell him about the conversation I just had with Summer. Or that she asked me not to tell him. Bennett has enough to deal with as it is.

"Norah?" He places a gentle hand to my shoulder. "Did something happen?"

Did something happen? *Sigh*. It feels like too many somethings have happened.

"My night didn't end when I left the Happy Trail parking lot," I reveal. "When I got home last night, Josie was still up. She found the letter I got on my wedding day. She read it."

"So, she knows the whole story now?"

"She knows the whole story, and I guess, so do I." Tears fill my eyes. "She... Bennett, she thinks my mom killed my baby sister, Jezzy."

Bennett pulls me into his arms, holding me in a tight embrace, and I don't think I've ever felt safer than I do in his arms.

31

Bennett

Clay already put a bug in my ear about Jezzy Ellis, but hearing it come out of Norah's mouth hits like I'm hearing it for the first time. I hug her tighter, holding her small frame within the safety of my arms as if I have the power to protect her from everything bad in the world.

If only I had that power. For Norah and for Summer.

"Fuck, Norah," I breathe into her hair. "I'm so sorry."

"Hey, look at that," she whispers through a weak laugh. "This is the second time I've got you apologizing to me. It's like we switched places."

A half smile quirks up one corner of my lips. "That's good. I could stand to be less of an asshole."

The sound of a man clearing his throat beside us pulls me out of the hug and the moment. Dr. Brock looks contrite, but for as much as I'd like to stay hugging Norah, this is the man I've been waiting to talk to since the moment we arrived in Burlington last night.

He's been in charge of Summer's care from nearly the beginning, and I know he'll have the answers everyone else seems to have been dancing around all night.

I reach out a hand for his and shake it as he says his hellos to Norah. When they're finished, I don't mince words. "All right, Doc. Give it to me straight. What are we looking at here? How bad is it, and what do we need to do?"

He glances between me and Norah, just a flit of his eyes that says so much more. Dr. Brock isn't the kind of man to balk at eye contact.

"Bennett, it's...it's only a matter of time now. Summer's respiratory function is greatly deteriorating every day. There's also a concern for brain bleeds and other complications, as well as a great deal of pain she'll be facing in the coming days."

"Days?" I don't even recognize my own voice. Norah's hand grabs mine and squeezes—tight.

Dr. Brock's face is written persuasively in anguish. "Weeks, maybe. But yes, we're running out of time. She's running out of time. I'm sorry, Bennett. We're at the end of our road."

"But how can that... How? Two months ago, she seemed like she was—"

Dr. Brock interrupts me, a gentle hand settling on my shoulder. "Bennett, she's *hurting*. Every day now...she's hurting."

Tears start deep in my chest, seizing and stealing the air from my lungs. My knees give out, and before I know it, my ass is on the cold tile of the hallway floor and Norah's body is behind mine, her knees just barely holding my back off the floor too.

Dr. Brock is squatting in front of me, and other hospital employees rush around behind him, yelling to grab any manner of things I don't give a shit about. He steadies my shoulders enough that he and Norah manage to prop me up against the wall. Deep in my face, he finds my eyes and forces me to hold his. "You let yourself feel this, Bennett, okay? You take your time, and we'll be here while you do. We've got you."

Everything Summer's spent seven years building in my soul shakes and rocks along with the surface of the earth. A world without her isn't one I'm comfortable with knowing because it *isn't right*.

She deserves to grow old and happy way more than a troubled, fucked-up bastard like me.

I reach for Norah, who settles into my arms with ease. And I cry like a baby—I can't stop myself.

“What do I do, Norah?” I breathe into her hair. “What am I going to do?”

She wipes at my face with shaking hands, locking her warm brown eyes on to mine so hard I can feel her soul. “We’re going to love Summer with all that we have until we can’t anymore. That’s what we’re going to do.” I nod, but she steadies my head with the clamp of her hands, and I look back into the deep comfort of her sparkling eyes. “And Bennett, we’re going to let that little girl live. She’s dying,” she says, her voice cracking so hard on the word I feel it in my feet. “But right now, we’re going to let that little girl *live*.”

My whole being hurts, but I hear the words Norah says as if they’re written on my soul. The time for protection is over. Time management is over. These next few days...or weeks...they deserve to be the absolute brightest days of a dwindling summer.

“Dr. Brock,” I manage. “I think it’s time to take my girl home.”

He nods. “I’ll get it set up, Bennett.”

Norah’s right. With what little time we have left, Summer is going to goddamn *live*.

32

Saturday, August 28th

Norah

“Norah...”

“*Norah!*”

“What the—?” I open my eyes to find my sister hovering over my bed, her bright-green gaze meeting my sleepy one as she uses two hands to shake the ever-loving shit out of my shoulders. It only takes a few beats for the slightest sense of panic to seize my chest. “Is everything okay? *Oh my God*, is Sum—”

“Everything and everyone are fine,” she cuts me off before adrenaline has the chance to kick in. “But you’re going to have to move your ass, or else we’re going to be late.”

“What are you talking about?” I groan and rub at my eyes. When my vision un-fogs and I can make out the window, I see the morning light coming in through the dusty blinds looks terribly early for my taste. Like the sun is also just waking up from her slumber. “What time is it?”

“A little after seven.”

“Seven?” I nearly shout. “I thought you said the coffee shop was closed today.”

“It is, but it’s the first day of the Fall Farmers Market.” She says the words like they actually make sense. Like a farmers market is a good reason for this horrendously early wake-up call.

“Fall?” I question as I sit up and grab my phone from the nightstand. “It’s August, Jose.”

I tap the screen and find three missed message notifications from Summer. I’m already smiling as I read the first message that reads, ***we shud get pink purses.***

After we left the hospital Tuesday, during the drive home, Summer mentioned that she’s always wanted to have her own iPhone with a glittery pink case. Bennett reminded her that she had an iPad—with a glittery pink case—because it’s easier for her to use, but she wasn’t having it.

“Everyone has an iPhone,” she said. *“It’s way cooler than an iPad because it fits in your pocket.”*

It shouldn’t be a surprise that once we got her settled at the house, Bennett handed me his credit card, and I was more than happy to run up to the only cell phone store in Red Bridge to make her iPhone—and glittery pink case—wish come true.

Ever since then, whenever I’m not with her and Bennett, she’s been sending me messages.

“Hello? Earth to Norah? Did you hear anything I just said?”

I look up to find Josie staring at me and realize I, in fact, haven’t heard a thing she said. “Mind running that last thing by me again?”

She huffs out a bothered breath. “I said, Red Bridge *always* starts their fall market the last Saturday in August.”

It takes my brain a hot second to recall what we were even talking about, but it only takes one yawn from my lips to remember.

“That still doesn’t explain why I’m getting woken up at seven in the morning on a day I was going to try to sleep in,” I say, but it’s to her back as she walks out of my bedroom and down the hall. *What the hell?* “Where are you going?” I call toward her just as my ears register that her phone is ringing from somewhere in the front of the house.

“Be right back!”

Truthfully, she can take *all* the time she needs. My tired ass is more than happy to go back to bed for another hour or two.

Since leaving the hospital Tuesday, besides sleeping in my bed at night, I’ve spent all my time with Bennett and Summer. And boy, have we been busy. Busy taking Summer to see practically everywhere and everyone in town, and busy soaking her in.

Wednesday, we went to Earl’s for Danimals, but this time, Summer got to come. Bennett rolled his eyes at me—but smiled too—when I had a moment of nostalgia in front of both the milk refrigerators and in the parking lot. We also got ice cream at Joe’s Frosty Freeze and made a bonfire in Bennett’s backyard when we got home. Summer was tired after that much activity, so we didn’t get back after it until Thursday, when we went to Town Square Park, the police station to get an honorary badge from Sheriff Pete, and even to see that busybody Eileen at the paper.

Yesterday, Breezy arrived to find us in Bennett’s studio—a request from Summer herself. We grilled rib eyes and talked and laughed in the backyard for hours. And Summer and I finished the night by making some Taylor Swift-style friendship bracelets because *Duh, why wouldn’t we?*

“Okay, where were we?” Josie announces as she walks back into my bedroom. “Oh, right!” She snaps her fingers. “You need to get your ass out of bed because I need your help.”

“Help?” I furrow my brow. “With what?”

“There’re still a hundred candles that need labels. Not to mention, we have to pack up the car and get to the town square by nine. We’re going to be lucky if we’re there for the early birds at this rate.”

“Candles?” I question and blink a thousand times.

“Grandma Rose’s candles that have now become my candles because I made a promise to her,” she huffs out and turns for the door. “They’re one of Red Bridge Farmers Market’s hottest commodities.”

Since when did Grandma Rose sell candles?

“Josie, you’re going to have to elaborate a little more on the whole candle thing,” I call out toward her retreating back.

“Just get dressed and meet me in the shed!”

She’s nuts if she thinks I’m actually getting out of bed right now. I roll my eyes and lean my back against the headboard to read through Summer’s last two messages.

Summer: pink buddies 4eva!

Summer: tell my dad we shud do sumthin fun today.

I type out a quick response and hit send.

Me: You got it, girl. To the pink purse and the something fun. :)

“Hey, Josie!”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll go!” I yell, realizing what a good idea this actually is. “But only on one condition!”

Her head pops into the bedroom, making me jump with surprise. *Jesus! I thought she was in the kitchen already!*

“What’s the condition?”

I grin. “That I can bring along a few of my friends.”



The sun is shining, the summer heat is rising, and the Red Bridge Farmers Market is unlike anything I’ve ever seen. Booths with crafts *and fake homemade candles* and all sorts of things fill up the town square. And more people than I even realized lived in this small town are here, walking

around and shopping like it's December 23rd and they still have their entire Christmas list to buy for.

It's wild. And busy. And everyone appears hell-bent on grabbing a "homemade" Grandma Rose candle. I'm still reeling over the fact that Josie told me Grandma used to order all these candles off Amazon, relabel them, and sell them as though she made them herself when we were gathering supplies in the shed this morning.

"Oh, Josie, I am so happy I got to your booth before you sold out," our latest customer gushes. "I needed my candle fix."

Word on the street is that if you like to buy in bulk, Amazon can hook you up.

"Aw, Darlene. You're such a doll." My sister smiles and hands the older woman her bag filled with three "homemade" candles.

"You know, the only thing that would make this better is if Rose were her to sell them to me herself," Darlene says with a wistful smile on her lips. "I'm sure she's proud of you for continuing her legacy."

Her legacy? *Ha.*

"By the way," Darlene continues. "How long does it usually take you to make all these candles, Josie?"

"It depends on the scents I'm utilizing, but it can take anywhere from two weeks to an entire month for a hundred."

I have to bite my lip to fight my laughter. *An entire month?* We just packed up one hundred of these things in two hours.

"Oh my goodness. I'm so thankful for all the time and hard work you put into these. Do you think you'll have enough in stock for Christmas this year? Last year, you sold out pretty quick, and I was hoping to get a candle for each of my sisters and cousins."

"I'm definitely going to try."

Darlene looks at me with a soft smile. “Norah, you are so lucky to be on the inside of Rose’s homemade candles now. I begged her for years to show me, but she only let Josie in on the family secret.”

I force a smile to my lips. “Josie is still being pretty top secret about Grandma Rose’s candles. She’s only been letting me put the labels on them, but I’m hoping she’ll show me how to make them soon.”

So, is it a one-click checkout? Do we get Prime shipping with the bulk orders? So many difficult questions my sister has yet to answer.

Darlene smiles at both of us like a woman who really thinks my sister is making homemade candles, bless her. “Well, I better head over to Kelly’s booth before she sells out. You girls have a wonderful day.”

“You too, Darlene!” I answer with a big, fat, phony grin on my lips. “Enjoy those *homemade* candles! I know my sister worked really hard on them!”

Josie discreetly elbows me in the side, a smile still intact on her face, and offers Darlene a friendly wave as the older woman carries her bag of fake-ass candles toward another booth that sells knitted scarves.

Now, does Kelly actually make the scarves or buy them off Amazon, too? I have no idea. Maybe she has to utilize Etsy or eBay.

“I didn’t know our grandmother was a little con artist.”

Josie just grins. “She always said it was a dog-eat-dog world and you have to capitalize on every opportunity you can find.”

I laugh. “She has an entire town believing she could make candles. She was a swindler!”

Josie’s eyes turn wistful, and a little grin lifts the corners of her lips. “Grandma Rose was the best.”

Yeah, she definitely was.

And there’s a large part of me that wishes I would’ve been able to spend as much time with her as Josie did. That I would’ve realized that my life

wasn't my life at all and moved here when I was eighteen like my sister.

But there's no use living in the past. All I can do is move forward and try to savor the memories I do have with my grandmother.

I spot a tall, towering, familiar head through the crowd, and my smile grows by a mile. *My favorite people have just arrived.*

Bennett weaves his way over to us, and I wave my arms in big, theatrical dramatics at my girl Summer when she spots me from her chair in front of him. She's wearing her usual heart-shaped pink sunglasses and smiling so big it turns my heart to butter. Bennett's sister Breezy trails the two of them slightly, getting distracted by every booth she walks by.

My eyes probably linger on Bennett a little too long, taking in his handsome face and his larger-than-life presence as he wheels Summer toward me.

Goodness, that man. I'd sure love to climb him like a tree.

We haven't gone back to our "bookmarked page" since the night we bookmarked it in his truck. Both of us have had our energy entirely focused on Summer, and with so many people always around now, I've also felt like we've been living under a microscope.

Even though we *have* managed a few stolen kisses when saying goodbye, I can't deny my desire for him hasn't waned. If anything, it's only growing by the day. The more I get to know him, the more time I spend with him, the more I know letting myself have this connection with him isn't a mistake. It doesn't matter where either of us came from—it only matters where we're going.

He wheels Summer straight to me, and I greet her with a smile and an air-bump of my hip. She giggles, and I wish for not the first time that I could scoop her up in my arms and hug her tight.

"You guys are here just in the nick of time!" I tell her cheerfully. "We've been so busy all morning, and I really need help figuring out which scents are going to be our best sellers so I can get organized."

“I want to smell!” Summer volunteers immediately, her eyebrows shooting up over her sunglasses.

“Perfect!”

I shuffle through the boxes at our feet, pulling out samples of every scent Grandma Rose got on scam from Amazon. We work our way through them all, Summer giving me the verbal thumbs-up or down each time. Bennett dives right into helping Josie as we’re once again overwhelmed with customers, and Breezy, when she arrives, starts shopping.

I hold up another scent of candle for Summer to smell, and she makes an immediate face of disgust.

Betty Bagley, the little old lady on our side of the crowd, snaps her fingers. “I’ll take that one.”

I’m confused as to why Betty Bagley would want one of the grossest candles, but I pack it up for her anyway, letting Bennett’s sister Breezy, who’s now rounded the table to our side, ring it up on our iPad.

As soon as Betty walks away, Josie starts dancing, and the rest of us look at her like she’s grown two heads.

“What are you doing?”

“Celebrating for Grandma Rose. The fact that Betty herself came over here and bought a candle means she’s officially stuck it to her. We’re the most popular booth at the market today, and Betty is shitting herself.”

“Grandma had beef with Betty Bagley?”

Betty Bagley is about five foot tall and weighs all of ninety pounds. She’s a tiny little thing, and I find it hard to believe anyone could have a problem with her.

“Oh, you have no idea,” Josie retorts on a hoot. “Betty Bagley might look all sweet and innocent, but she can be mean as a snake. Her competitiveness rivals Olympic athletes, and she spent a healthy amount of time tossing shade at Grandma Rose when she was still alive.”

“*Dayum*. I would’ve never suspected that.”

“She’s a wolf in little old lady’s clothing.”

“Pie lady Betty?” Bennett asks incredulously, making Josie and Summer both laugh.

Josie nods. “Oh, you have no idea.”

“Maybe she was just upset that Grandma Rose was involved in a candle Ponzi scheme,” I mutter under my breath. Josie shoots me a glare.

I hold up both of my hands, an innocent lady after all.

“What do you want to do tonight, Sum?” I ask as Josie gets back to helping the next customer in a long line. Bennett squeezes around Breezy at the iPad to join us.

“Do you want some lemonade?” he asks, looking at Summer first, but then glancing to me too. Summer squeals her excited yes, and I settle for a nod and a smile.

“Lemonade sounds great.”

Summer’s face falls as he leaves, and it makes me think about the heaven conversation I had with her in the hospital and how she told me not to tell Bennett about it.

She’s trying to be strong for her dad. She’s trying to hide her pain.

My nose stings with unshed tears as I realize...she knows. She knows what’s coming, but she’s putting on a brave face for Bennett every second she can.

“You okay, Summer?” I ask softly, squatting down so she can look me directly in the eye without having to work for it.

She hums. “Just thinking of what I’d *really* like to see.”

“Did you come up with anything?”

Her smile is slow and soft like a gentle rain on a steamy summer day. “A shooting star. I’ve never been outside at night, at least, not that I can remember, and I’d really like to see a shooting star.”

My head is jerky as I move it up and down.

“And a wedding. I’ve always wanted to go to a wedding.”

That request pulls me up a little short. I mean, the shooting star is possible, but a wedding? I don’t know if I can manage a freaking wedding. It goes without saying that weddings and I haven’t mixed very well thus far.

Plus, I’d need to find a bride and a groom and—

“I want to wear a really fancy dress, and get my nails painted and my hair fixed, and watch a pretty bride walk down the aisle to her groom.” She lets out a dreamy sigh. “I’ve only seen weddings in movies or on TV, and I just know they have to be so much fun.”

My chest nearly convulses.

Forget the complications. Come hell or high water, I’m going to figure out a way to get this sweet girl to a wedding.

33

Sunday, August 29th

Bennett

Summer blinks awake in her bed as I run my fingers ever so gently through her hair, but her eyes struggle to stay open.

“Summer baby,” I whisper. “Come on. We have somewhere to go.”

“Now?” she questions, once again fighting hard to focus enough to stay awake. “But it’s dark outside.”

“I know. But a little bird told me you wanted to see a shooting star.”

“A shooting star?” Her eyes fly open. “Really?”

“Yeah, baby.”

I smile down at her, my mind taking a mental picture of this moment. The way her heart is in her eyes, the way her lips are fixed in my favorite smile—I never want to forget it. The emotion in my throat is hard to clear, but I manage. Tonight isn’t about me. It’s about her.

“It’s clear skies and perfect for looking at the stars,” I tell her. “I’ve got it all set up.”

“Let’s go, let’s go,” she chants, trying to sit up on her own and failing. She hasn’t been able to do much in years, but with the way her breathing is now, she’s weaker than ever.

I put my arms behind her back and knees and lift her as gently as I can, careful of the oxygen line that runs to the tank behind her. I set her in her wheelchair, strap the tank to the back, and slowly wheel my giggling girl down the hallway from her bedroom and out the side door where the chair ramp is, to a waiting Norah.

Pink blankets are spread out over the grass with the picnic basket I packed earlier, as well as a telescope Norah borrowed from Eileen Martin.

It's just the three of us tonight. Breezy is busy in town with nearly everyone else we know, setting up for tomorrow's surprise. I'm still not convinced we're going to be able to pull it off, but Norah was insistent that Summer get this wish. And I don't have the energy to fight anything but my own demons at the moment.

"Daddy! Look!" Summer yells, finally seeing Norah and the setup. "Norah's here!"

I chuckle. "I know, baby. She planned tonight, so I felt like I had to invite her."

Summer scoffs at my joke. "Come on, come on. Hurry up, Dad."

I push a little faster, and she starts to squeal as the cooler night air hits her in the face. Norah helps me lock the chair into place when we get to her and then grabs the tank when I scoop Summer into my arms and lay her flat on the blanket. She groans—in a way that I know all this shuffling must be hurting her—but she never stops smiling.

Norah grabs another blanket from the edge of the ones spread on the ground and gently covers Summer's body up to her neck. She's only in her nightgown, so with the unpredictability of how long it'll take to see a shooting star or two, she's bound to get chilly.

Once Summer's settled, Norah lies down next to her, her curly hair splaying out on the blanket and her hands resting on her stomach. I jog back to the house to turn off all the lights I left on to make it easier to get out here, and I walk my way back to them as my eyes adjust to the newfound darkness.

The sky is black, save the bright spots of stars and swooping softness of the Milky Way, but the sound is vibrant. Norah and Summer together, gabbing and laughing nearly as loudly as the pounding in my chest.

“What’s so funny?” I ask as I return, lying down on the other side of Summer and pointing my eyes to the sky.

“Norah was just telling me about Casso...” She pauses and glances at Norah. “What’s her name again?”

“Cassiopeia,” Norah answers with a smile.

“Right. Her. She said she was a queen who was, like, a total diva, so Pose...” She pauses again, looking at Norah for another confirmation.

“Poseidon.”

“Yeah. That guy,” Summer continues, and I chuckle a little in my head. “He punished her by putting her in the heavens on her throne upside down and with her skirt around her head,” she finishes the story, nearly snorting more than once, she’s so tickled.

“You know a lot about astronomy, Norah?” I ask.

“Only what John Cusack told me.”

Now, that makes me laugh. “John Cusack? As in, the actor?”

Norah chortles. “Yep.”

“I don’t think I understand.”

“Then you obviously haven’t seen the movie *Serendipity*,” she replies. I can hear her smile.

“No, can’t say that I have.”

She hums. “Oh man, it’s a good one. You’re missing out.”

“I want to watch it,” Summer interjects, her voice growing a little sleepy. If we’re going to have a chance of her staying awake to see a shooting star,

we're going to have to keep her talking.

"I'll find out where we can rent it or stream it," Norah offers.

"Are you watching the sky, Sum?" I ask. "You've got to stare at it, okay? Or you might miss the stars. They go fast."

"I'm looking, Daddy." There's a short pause, and then she continues. "Do you think that's really what heaven is like? Up there, with the stars? Like, if someone goes to heaven, what do you think it's like for them?"

A sheen of tears coats my eyes, and my throat threatens to close. I have to blink several times to keep the emotion at bay. I reach out to grab her hand, but end up grabbing Norah's instead, and the three of us stay there, our hands in a stack of sorts. "I think heaven is whatever you want it to be, Summble," I whisper. "Whatever your happiest place is, that's what it's like."

"That's like what Norah said too," she says, and I can feel Norah's eyes dart to my face.

I meet her gaze, and her lips turn down in a frown. She feels guilty, but she has no damn reason to. I shake my head at her, silently saying, *It's okay*.

Because it is okay. It's more than okay. Norah has been nothing but good to my daughter. Nothing but kind and caring and maternal to a little girl who has never had a mother figure in her life.

I can't be anything but grateful for her.

"Maybe heaven will be just like here," Summer whispers. "With you and Norah and the stars up in the sky. Except, I think maybe I won't hurt like this. Right, Dad?"

I know my sweet girl tries hard to put on a brave face. I've witnessed her do this for years, and I've always tried to make her feel like she didn't have to. But that's not my Summer. Her soul is pure, and her heart never wants anyone else to feel bad.

And right now, this is her way of telling me she knows what's coming. She knows she doesn't have much time left here on earth.

My eyes sting and my throat burns and I mash my lips together, willing myself to put on a brave face like Summer always does.

"Right, baby." My voice is ragged. "When you're in heaven, you won't hurt at all." Me, on the other hand—I'm going to hurt like hell.

"Dad!" Summer shouts then, her sweet voice the only thing that could break the barrier of my thought's misery. "A shooting star! I saw it! It went streaking by so fast! I can't believe it's so fast!"

"I saw it too," Norah cheers from the other side.

"That was so cool! I want to see another one!"

"Keep looking at the sky, then," I cajole. "They'll come."

The three of us lie there for who knows how long, staring at the sky, waiting for falling stars to shoot by. Summer gabs and Norah laughs, and I listen to the two of them like there'll be a test on their every word. And I take a million mental pictures of my baby's face as she giggles and smiles up at the sky.

It's a long time before their conversation slows, and Summer's labored breathing eases to a steady rhythm with sleep. Norah and I stay there for several minutes even after that, willing the silence and the sky and the heavens to bring us a miracle both of us know won't come.

I swipe a hand down my face, removing the remnants of the few tears I've allowed to slip from my lids. I know my heart is breaking, but surprisingly, I know Norah's is too. Just as I expected, she and Summer fell in love with each other hard and fast, and I'm not in the least bit confused about why.

They're both bright and bubbly and special. And they both make me feel like I could bench-press the entire world if they needed me to.

I climb to my feet slowly, stopping only to give Summer a gentle kiss on the cheek on the way up. I've spent so long avoiding touching her that each

precious touch and kiss I get now is priceless.

Norah follows suit, soundlessly grabbing Summer's oxygen tank for me as I scoop her into my arms and carry her toward the house. We walk all the way instead of getting her chair, hoping she'll be able to stay asleep until she reaches the comfort of her bed.

Her body feels unbearably light, and her skin is growing paler and paler by the day. With her curly blond hair, blue eyes, and white gown, she looks truly angelic. Like she already belongs in heaven with a halo over her head.

I fucking hate it.

Norah attaches the oxygen tank to the stand behind the bed, and I settle Summer into the soft center of her mattress, adjusting the tubes in her nose. She moans slightly but settles when I step back.

Norah's soft hand rubs at my back comfortingly as we leave Summer's room, shutting the door behind us and taking what now feels like a long walk out to the grass to collect all the blankets.

It's only then that I notice the basket of food, untouched as of yet.

"Do you want to sit for a minute?" I ask, placing a gentle hand on Norah's elbow to stop her frantic gathering. Her shoulders sink an inch and then two more as they fall away from her ears.

"Yeah. Let's sit for a minute."

Reaching out purposely, I give her a steady hand as she sinks down to the blanket, and I follow her down, sitting beside her and stretching my legs out in front of me.

I lean back to grab the picnic basket, and Norah's eyes light up when I open it, revealing the pack of cupcakes I picked up from Earl's when we were there a couple days ago. "Oh my God, yes, chocolate. I'm in desperate need of chocolate."

"The way to your heart?" I laugh as I open the plastic packaging and hand her a cupcake with pink icing. I take a blue one for myself.

“It definitely helps,” she says on a snort and takes a huge bite of her cupcake, painting the tip of her nose with a smear of pink.

“You have a little something...” I’m smiling at her like a loon when she meets my eyes. “Just right here,” I say as I reach out to wipe it away with my thumb.

But her next move surprises the hell out of me. With her eyes still locked on mine, she grabs my hand and slowly, *intentionally*, licks the icing off my finger.

“Fuck, Norah,” I breathe at the wordlessly erotic sight. And I punctuate that statement by leaning forward to kiss her.

Her lips part under mine, and I sink my hands into her hair and my tongue into her mouth.

She moans, and I take her back down to the blanket, my body half on top of hers, our cupcakes long forgotten.

We’re both looking for comfort—that’s undeniable—but I can tell by the grip of her fingers on my neck and the pounding of her heart echoed in my own chest that it’s more than that too.

This isn’t a mindless romp between two desperate people. This is a connection that’s been at war with the two of us since the moment we met.

She digs her teeth into her bottom lip, and I have the urge to run my tongue along the seam of her mouth.

She moves her hands to my shoulders, and both of my hands are on her hips. I cover her body entirely with my own, and she opens her legs, winding them around my hips and clenching her ankles together until her heels dig into the top of my ass.

I growl and roll my hips toward hers, my hard cock aching to feel her wrapped around me.

It all feels so good, so right.

She whimpers, and my hands find the hem of her pink shirt, lifting it to get a feel of skin.

When I pull back slightly, searching her eyes for permission, a swirl of steam wafts between us. The warmth of our breath, the heat of our skin, and the cool of night mixing together to make clouds.

“Norah?” My hands shake with need as I slide my hands back into her hair. “I want you.” It’s simple and to the point, but for me—for the me I am now, after the guy I used to be—it’s not enough. “Norah, I want to be inside you.”

“I want that too,” she says firmly.

My grip on her hips is strong as I lift her toward me and slam my mouth down on hers. Her hands grab at my face and my neck and dive into my hair as our kiss turns wild, burning and building with each tangle of our tongues.

I reach down with one hand to undo the buckle on my belt, and then her hands join in, ripping at the leather until it releases from the metal that holds it.

I kiss her neck and her chest and rub a hand over her breast as she arches into me, moaning loudly as I skim my other hand down her hip and into her pants to feel between her legs.

She’s wet and hot and smooth, and a fiery rod inserts itself in my spine. *God, I need her so badly.*

Frantic for more skin-to-skin contact, she grabs for the hem of her shirt and starts to lift it over her head, only to freeze when a flash of headlights passes over the house to our right.

Fuck. “Breezy is home,” I manage raggedly.

“Oh my God.” Norah groans, and her head falls to the blanket-covered ground with a thud. I know exactly how she feels.

Sad, anxious, and completely unsatisfied.

“Bennett, I’m running out of bookmarks,” she whispers as I help her cover up, and a quiet laugh finds its way out of my lungs.

Tell me about it, sweetheart.

Once we’re both dressed and finished cleaning up, I look up to Cassiopeia and pray for a good day tomorrow.

If all is to go well, we’re going to need cooperative friends and family, good weather, a good day for Summer, and if I press my luck, maybe I’ll get to see someone else’s skirt around her shoulders.

34

Tuesday, August 31st

Norah

“Norah, I mean this with the most love I can muster...but what in the *fuck* were you thinking?”

Josie’s hands shake, and her chest is a tie-dyed mess of mottled red. When I woke her up this morning to get her help with final touches for the “big wedding,” I kept one of the most obvious details to myself—Josie Ellis, you see, is the bride-to-be in this whole shindig.

As it turns out, a wedding is one of those events that’s hard to just “throw.” You need a bride and a groom and guests. I briefly considered having Bennett and me pretend to be the ones completing our nuptials, but the implications of a dying girl’s father getting married to a woman he just met pushed my moral envelope just a little too far.

Josie looks down at the New York-thrifted dress I snagged from one of the boxes I hadn’t unpacked and fast-talked her into wearing—a white silk A-line with bright pink flowers stitched into the hemline—and glares lasers at me. I suppose, maybe, that when we left the house this morning, she thought she’d be attending as a guest like the rest of us.

“I was thinking that there’s a sad, scared, sick little girl who wants with all of her heart to see a wedding take place today, even if it’s fake, and I hardly know anyone here, so I figured you could play the bride.”

“Oh. I see. You just thought I could *play* the bride. To *Clay*’s groom. Are you insane?”

I wince. “Well, technically, Bennett and I did not confer on our choices for bride and groom, but now that it’s happening, I suppose it makes sense, given their friendship and all.”

This afternoon, when I saw Clay wearing the groom tux I rented, I realized my faux pas. But seeing as I’ve got a crowd of people and an excited Summer all dressed up and waiting for this wedding to start, it’s a little too late to fix it.

“I already married that man once, and it didn’t end well,” Josie snaps. “I’d have to be round the actual bend to do it again!”

“It’s not real, Jose,” I try to reassure her. “Breezy found some fake officiant on the internet. It’s not like you’re actually marrying him. This is no more serious than a young girl playing dress-up in her closet.”

Josie growls and stomps a foot. I stand there waiting, my eyes wide, hoping she doesn’t punch me in the face. Thankfully, her anger is channeled into ripping the bouquet donated by Fran’s Florals from my hands. “You owe me so big. So, so big, I can’t even think of the size right now. But it’s going to be huge. Bigger than this whole damn continent, do you hear me?”

I nod, soundlessly, afraid any other strategy will end in my death. I still don’t know what happened between her and Clay, but I sure as shit know now isn’t the time to try to find out. This is damage-control time, and my only priority is getting this fake bride down the aisle without her scratching my eyes out in the process.

“Let’s get this over with,” she grumbles then, turning to face the aisle and shooing me out from behind the curtain of the tent Breezy and Earl set up last night in the town square. Thanks to her shove, I trip on the material and end up wheeling and winding into the aisle like a drunk Jack Sparrow.

Luckily, I find my feet without kicking off this wedding by starring as the bridesmaid in the pink dress who face-plants the ground.

I smile and nod at the crowd of townspeople as I make my way to the front of the aisle where Summer is waiting in her chair. She’s wearing a fancy pink dress—just like mine—with a matching pink purse hanging from the

arm of her wheelchair as she waits to be the other bridesmaid in this little soiree.

Bennett stands beside Clay, the pretend groom, who, I'll note, looks a hell of a lot more excited about this than my sister. His eyes are crinkled with a smile as he looks toward the aisle like a man excitedly waiting for his bride.

Despite all that, it's not long before it's all worth it. Every call, every favor I asked for, every single danger to my life Josie proposed.

Summer's smile is bigger than my sister's threats as the Bridal Chorus starts, and a happy tear glistens in her perfect blue eyes.

The guests rise, and Josie walks down the aisle, her face in a painfully forced grin. Sheriff Peeler is escorting her, a happy surprise I didn't know about coming from the old goat, and Clay is rocking back and forth from his heels to his toes. Summer stares at the bride, but I can't help but look at the groom.

Frighteningly, he doesn't look like a man playing pretend at all.

I start to worry that I've made a mistake and glance toward Bennett for some type of indication if I'm going to need to intervene. But when he meets my eyes and holds them, the heat of everything we didn't get to finish last night right there on the surface of his brooding expression, I forget about the possible problem and swoon a little.

Today, here, at this wedding he helped me throw just to fulfill a wish to his sweet daughter, he's never looked more handsome.

His eyes sparkle, and his mouth is upturned in a fixed smile. With an all-black suit and a matching black shirt and black tie, he looks downright suave.

Yeah. I still want to climb that man like a tree.

It's tough, but I drag my eyes away as the Bridal Chorus ends, and Sheriff Pete passes Josie off to Clay. My sister pauses for a long moment before sighing heavily and putting her hand in Clay's outstretched one.

He helps her step up onto the platform, and I turn Summer's chair and back it up so she can watch their interaction from a spot where she can see their faces.

The fake officiant Breezy hired starts his speech as expected with a broad, warm sentiment of thanks for everyone being there, and then works his way into the details.

"Josie, do you take Clay to be your husband, to have and to hold, to love, honor, and cherish, in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live?"

Silence overwhelms us as Josie grits her teeth and swings her head to look at me.

I look anywhere but at her—the ground, the sky, to a bird that's flying by, and then to Summer, whose smile has nearly eclipsed her entire face.

Please, Josie. Just say "I do." I mentally chant as the seconds tick by, and I stare at my pink heels the whole time.

After an entire minute and throat clears from the officiant, Clay, *and* Bennett, Josie finally responds, "Fine. Yes. I do. Whatever." It's low and it's agonized, but it's enough to move this fake wedding along. *Thank everything.*

I have to suck my lips into my mouth to stop myself from laughing, but Eileen Martin doesn't bother. I can hear her peals of squeals all the way from her spot in the back row.

"And do you, Clay, take Josie to be your wife, to have and to hold, to love, honor, and cherish, in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," he declares, his voice strong and steady and way louder than my sister's. "I've done it before, and I'd do it again every damn day of my life."

Uh-oh.

“Great.” The officiant’s smile is nervous, but it’s there. Surely he’s also starting to worry about the waves of anger emanating from Josie’s stern face. “Then how about the rings? Do we have rings?”

Bennett pulls the rings we got from Peggy Samuel’s pawn shop out of his pocket and hands them to Clay.

“Fantastic,” the officiant remarks. “We’ll do the rings with the exchanging of vows. Clay, why don’t you go first this time?”

Clay grabs Josie’s hand and squeezes it, ignoring completely her efforts to pull it away. “Josie Ellis, my heart, my soul, my life. I’ll always love you. I know we’ve been through a mountain range of ups and downs, and that I’ve made a mess of mistakes at every turn, but you are, unequivocally, the only woman for me.”

Okay, yikes, this isn’t a good start to the fake vows that aren’t supposed to be making waves. This is a freaking tsunami of a start if I’ve ever seen one.

“I always knew we’d renew our vows one day, but I also imagined you’d like me a little more than you do now while we were doing it.”

“Renew our vows? Clay, we’re divorced! There’s nothing to *renew*,” Josie interjects, the last inklings of her façade slipping.

The wheels are coming off a little here, so I step up and to the side, ready to pull the secret knife my sister might be carrying out of her hand if I have to.

One good thing—Summer’s glee is still written brightly across her tiny face, her eyes bouncing back and forth between Josie and Clay like a ping-pong ball that doesn’t want to miss a thing.

“Actually, Josie, we’re not divorced. Not officially.”

A resounding gasp from the crowd is the only thing that keeps me from hearing my own.

“What?” Josie yells. “What do you mean we’re not officially divorced?”

“I never signed the final paperwork,” Clay says, and I start to fear for his life. “You and I are still married, and you know what? I don’t regret it.”

“You...you didn’t sign the paperwork?” Josie’s voice is a dangerous screech that goes up in pitch to a level only dogs can hear at the end.

“No, woman. Because despite your constant yellin’, I still love you. So, I’d do it again!”

In the blink of an eye, Josie lunges, her hands going for Clay’s throat, her touch not loving.

I jump toward her, wrapping my arms around hers as they scrap for purchase on Clay’s vital organs. Bennett grabs him and pulls him back too, and Sheriff Pete and Breezy come running to help me when I start to lose control.

Half the town stays in their seats to laugh and watch the shitshow, and the other half files out, confident their obligation in this little favor is done.

Josie wriggles free from my hold with the strength of something superhuman and takes off at a run for CAFFEINE. I start to follow her, obviously, even though it likely means walking straight into my own homicide, but Breezy stops me with a soft and kind hand on my elbow.

“Why don’t you stay here? I’ll go make sure she’s okay, and you know, cool her down a little.”

I bite my lip, at war with myself over what the best option is. Sure, I don’t want to die, but not going myself to check that she’s okay seems like the kind of cold shoulder she might not forgive.

“I promise I’ll tell her you want to know she’s okay,” Breezy adds, correctly reading my dilemma. I swear, she’s one of the smartest women I’ve ever met, and she’s shown it from the second she arrived last week.

“Okay. But please come get me if—”

Breezy nods before I can even finish and squeezes my hand affectionately. “You take care of my brother and niece. I’ll take care of your sister.” One

small smile later, she's off like a flash, out of the square and down the road toward my sister's coffee shop. Bennett and Clay are arguing heatedly about Clay's over-the-top behavior, and Summer looks on from her spot as people funnel in and out all around her.

I check on Summer first since she's basically helpless in the middle of the chaos, but I'm shocked to find she's more than okay.

Her eyes are alight, and her cheeks are flushed as she rushes a ramble worthy of one of my own. "Oh my gosh, Norah, that was the best thing I've ever seen! It was even better than I thought! So much drama, so much excitement! Are all weddings like this?"

I snort through a chortle. "No, baby. No. Weddings are *not* usually like this."

"Well, they should be!" she asserts. "That. Was. Awesome!" Her excitement pauses then, her words spilling into a cough that won't stop and won't let her catch her breath.

I grab the oxygen mask from her tank and switch it with the tubing in her nose, encouraging her to take deep breaths to get herself back under control. Bennett and Clay appear immediately, their arguing no longer the priority.

Bennett squats down to check Summer's pulse, his eyes tearing the air between us as they jerk to mine. I nod.

It's time to take Summer home.

"Let's go home, Summble," Bennett says gently, brushing a loose strand of hair from her watering eyes. She nods slowly, and everything about the strength she seemed to have just a minute ago disappears.

Clay, the bastard, at least recognizes what's going on, offering, "I'll take care of all the cleanup here. You all just go on and head for the house."

I serve him a glower as I rearrange the bottom of my dress and follow behind Bennett and Summer on the way to his truck. Once she's loaded safely, I offer Bennett the option of my company. The thing is, I really don't

want to assume he wants me there every minute if he'd rather have time alone with Summer.

"Do...do you want me to come with you? I'll follow in my car, of course, but I can also stay here and help Clay if you'd rather—"

"No. I want you to come," Bennett interrupts. "I want you to come, and I'm sure Summer does too."

"I just don't want to overstep here, Ben. I can—"

"Norah, get in the damn car."

Argument forgotten, along with our very public location, I get up on my toes and press a single kiss to his lips. Brief, soft—just a whisper. But the feel of his fingertips as they dig into my hip is enough to tell me he appreciates it.

I hustle to the Civic on the other side of his truck as he climbs in and starts his engine. When he's sure I'm ready to follow, he takes off, and I pull out of the space after him. In tandem, we make the ten-minute drive to his house, and by the time we arrive, Summer is fast asleep. He scoops her delicate body into his arms, and I grab the oxygen tank without a word, following him into the house.

Charlie is already there, waiting in the kitchen when we arrive. Her rugged face is soft with compassion as she gets her first good look at Summer. "Was it everything she hoped for?"

"And so much more," Bennett huffs as we walk into Summer's bedroom.

"Sounds like there's a story there." Charlie smiles at me as I secure the oxygen tank behind the bed. "I can't wait to hear about it."

"It was certainly something."

"Yeah," Bennett grumbles. "I could stand to wait a day or two before reliving it."

I have to bite my lip to hide my amusement. Charlie, though, outright laughs. “Man, now I really can’t wait to hear about it.”

“I’m sure Summer will talk your ear off about it when she wakes up,” Bennett says as he sits down on the edge of her bed. She’s deep in sleep, and he takes her small, lax hand into his. With his free hand, he fusses with her sheets and comforter, making sure they’re tucked around her just right.

I use the quiet moment to step back into the corner of the room and text the one person I haven’t stopped thinking about since I got in her Civic and drove here.

Guilt sits heavy in my stomach as I hit send.

Me: Are you okay? I know I’m the last person on earth you want to talk to you right now...well, besides the idiot whom I won’t name. But I just wanted to say I’m sorry, Josie. I’m so, so sorry for what happened out there. I swear to you, I had NO IDEA that Clay was the chosen groom until this afternoon or that he was going to be a total asshat. Please don’t hate me. I love you.

I nearly drop my phone when an incoming text makes it vibrate in my hands.

Josie: I don’t hate you.

Me: You promise? Because I feel like a real asshole for putting you in that situation.

Josie: Promise.

Me: Breezy still with you?

Josie: Yeah. She brought some wine to distract me from killing Clay.

Thank goodness for Breezy.

I can tell by Josie’s short answers that she’s nowhere near ready to talk about what Clay revealed today. No doubt, she needs time to work through the myriad of emotions she’s probably feeling right now.

And I'm sure there's a part of her that's still pissed at me, but that's okay. I can handle it as long as she hasn't shut me out completely. We've done that once, for far too many years, and I never want to do it again. Josie means too much to me. She's the only family I have now. *Besides Bennett and Summer.*

Funny enough, that thought doesn't even scare me. It only makes me send my sister one more message.

Me: Just so you know, you made Summer's day. I don't know if I've ever seen that little girl so excited. She said, and I quote, "It was the best thing I've ever seen!"

Josie: I'm glad at least something good came out of it. Give her a kiss for me.

Me: I will.

Charlie's voice grabs my attention again when she offers, "Ben, how about I sit with her while she sleeps? I'll let you know if there're any changes or if she wakes up."

Bennett nods in agreement, kissing Summer's hand and cheek one more time before rising to his feet. I follow suit when he's gone, giving her two kisses to her forehead and brushing her hair out of her face as I do. "Sleep well, sweet girl."

Charlie takes a seat in the chair next to Summer's bed, and Bennett and I step out into the hall, pulling the door shut behind us.

I'm happy to be here, but there's a part of me that wishes I would have gone home to shower and change first.

Wordlessly, Bennett takes my hand and walks us down the hall. I expect him to go to the kitchen or the living room, or even outside for some fresh air, but instead, we walk deeper into his old farmhouse, straight to his white bedroom.

"Bennett, what are we..."

“I don’t know about you, but I want a shower more than just about anything.”

A small puff of surprised air leaves my nose. “Yeah. A shower does sound nice. Do you want to go first, or do you want me to—”

“I want us to go together,” he interrupts, pulling me into his arms and then walking us backward to shut and lock his bedroom door.

“Ben...”

“I don’t want to be alone, but even more than that, I want to be with you.”

“I want to be with you too.” I don’t know how long I’ve ached and longed and dreamed about what it would be like to be truly *with* Bennett Bishop, but hell, I’m out of patience. Out of willpower. Out of everything but the acute, throbbing need I have for him.

The sound of my dress zipper sliding down my back is the only audible answer I get. The only answer I need.

Bennett walks me gently backward, thumbing the straps of my dress off my shoulders until it falls to the floor at my shuffling feet. We walk over it, his body heat directly engaged with mine as he guides me into the bathroom, and my lace bra rubs against his tanned, hair-sprinkled chest now that he has the top four buttons of his shirt undone.

The silence makes it all the more erotic, my heaving breaths and our racing hearts creating a soundtrack to the moment.

Bennett’s mouth finds mine just outside the shower, and it’s not long before his tongue finds mine too. I don’t bother to withhold access, and I don’t stop my back when it arches my stomach into his.

He feels good and real and so fucking manly I can hardly stand it. His hands are gentle, but the skin is rough with work and life and experience. He’s confident, but he’s not cocky, and the word *rush* isn’t in his vocabulary.

I feel like the most amazing creature in the world as he cherishes the skin of my chest and neck along the lines of where flesh meets bone.

He pauses briefly to reach in and turn on the water in the shower, but as he comes back to me, he cups the sides of my face in his hands with reverence. His movements are poised and measured as he kisses the skin of my cheek and my nose and then both of my closed eyelids too. A gasp takes all the rigidity out of my neck, and my head falls back at once.

Bennett unclasps my bra with ease, his artist's fingers nimble in every way they need to be. As it slides down my shoulders and the cold air of the open bathroom hits my breasts, my nipples peak into points and brush directly against his chest.

"You are so perfect," Bennett says then, his voice filled with awe. I think he's talking about my body, given the nature of his timing, but when he keeps going, his true meaning hits me square in the chest. "I'm sorry it took me so long to realize. I'm sorry I treated you so poorly. But most of all, I'm so sorry I ever thought it would be a bad idea to know you...to let you in."

My next breath shakes so badly, I know it's only a matter of time before I can't find air at all.

"You've changed our lives, Norah. You've changed them so much for the better."

My voice is a whisper—it's all I can manage. "I feel the same way about you. The things I thought mattered before? They don't matter at all. All the things I should've said? I'm going to make sure I say them now."

Bennett grabs my hip with one hand and my face with the other, sealing our lips in a kiss I'll remember for the rest of my life. It's passion and pain and every raw emotion this life has to offer. We're intertwined in each other as he steps us under the spray of the water, and my underwear comes off in a rip.

My chest moves up and down in huge heaves, the feel of Bennett's every muscle against me reminding me of the first and only other time I used this shower.

“Last time I showered in here,” I murmur softly, “I got so lost in thoughts of you that I made myself come.”

Bennett’s grunt of approval runs through my entire body as he lifts me into his arms, and I wrap my legs around his waist. I’m not entirely sure when he got rid of his pants, but I know for sure they’re long gone when his cock presses at my entrance.

Firmly but slowly, he pushes himself until he’s seated inside. And my whole body quakes with the perfectness of our fit—with the perfectness of it all.

Determined to leave no words behind, I say the thing that scares a million men into hibernation on a daily basis. I say the thing, I realize now, I should’ve said all along. Once, we were enemies, but at the root of that was this.

“I love you, Bennett.” Him and Summer. I love them both.

He doesn’t balk at my words. Doesn’t stop touching me, caressing me, moving his cock inside me. “I love you too, Norah. I love you in spite of trying my best not to.”

I understand on an intrinsic level, in a way that I never understood before. I couldn’t see Thomas’s face on my wedding day, not because of his personality or the letter or any of the other obvious reasons there are.

I couldn’t see his face because searching for it in my mind was the first mistake.

When it’s right, you don’t have to search.

You don’t find love. Love finds you.

35

Wednesday, September 1st

Bennett

Norah sleeps soundly in my T-shirt as I kiss her on the shoulder, leave the bedroom, and close the door behind me.

The morning sun bounces rays of light off the hardwood floor of the hallway as I walk to Summer's room first. I crack open her door, and my presence pulls Charlie to her feet. She leaves my daughter's side and comes to me, her face a mask of news I know I'm not prepared to hear. My throat feels clogged as I ask, "She's still sleeping?"

Charlie nods. "Straight through since yesterday afternoon when she woke up to see your sister."

After we came back from the wedding—and after Norah and I made love—Breezy came home, and we cooked some chicken on the grill. Summer woke up just as we were getting done, though she had no appetite for food and only stayed awake long enough to talk with Breezy for ten minutes. I thought she would have woken up at some point during the night, but evidently, her small body is much more tired than I realized.

I nod, the motion rough. "I'm just going to make some coffee, and then I'm going to come sit with her. You can run home if you need to or get some rest in the guest room—whatever you'd like."

"I'll stay."

"Thank you, Charlie." Ever since we got back from Summer's hospital admission in Burlington, Charlie has taken over almost all of the nursing

shifts. Even the evening and night shifts we used to have agency nurses fill so Charlie had time off.

She's made a point to stay by Summer's side as much as she can, even sleeping in the guest bedroom most nights. And selfishly, I'm grateful for it.

Charlie squeezes my arm before heading back to Summer's bedside, and I move into the kitchen with my mind set on coffee.

I'm both frazzled and at ease, and I know the latter is because of the woman in my bed.

I startle a little when the kitchen talks back to me upon my entrance. "Well, hello there."

A newspaper ruffles and folds on the table to reveal my smirking sister sitting there with a cup of coffee already in hand. In typical Breezy fashion, she's dressed for the day in what I can only assume is expensive-as-shit designer jeans and a white button-down shirt. Even her jet-black bob is perfectly set.

"Morning. I didn't think you were up."

"Had a hard time sleeping." She eyes me knowingly, a teeny smile hinting at the corners of her mouth. "There's a pot already made if you're looking for caffeine. I figured I wouldn't be the only one who didn't sleep much."

I roll my eyes. "Easy, Breeze."

She chuckles. "Oh, come on, Ben. I'm not blind, and even if I were, I have ears. My accommodations you've so kindly given me are right next to your bedroom."

"I suppose you're gonna give me shit now, then, huh?"

She shakes her head, surprising me, and then purses her lips. "No, actually. I like her. She's smart. Funny. Nicer than you or I will ever be. And she treats your daughter like the sun rises and sets with her."

I have to look down at the floor to stop the rush of emotion from making it to my eyes.

“She’s a pretty good assistant too, as it turns out, and has all your shit in order.”

“I didn’t expect it,” I admit quietly. “But I love her.”

“I know,” Breezy says with a bob of her head. “I can tell. We few girls lucky enough to know what it means to have Bennett Bishop love you know the look.”

I pause briefly. My sister really is the best kind of person. “Breeze, I’m sorry for all the—”

A knock on the front door stops me midsentence, and my eyebrows draw together. “Who the fuck?”

Breezy stands too, moving toward the door with me as I go. “Maybe it’s Josie looking for Norah? She was doing okay when I left her yesterday, but damn, does that woman have some history with the fella you all tried to make her fake-marry.”

But when I open the door, it’s not Josie. It’s Sheriff Peeler, and his face looks as forlorn as I’ve ever seen it. “Bennett,” he greets before shifting his gaze to Breezy. “Ma’am.”

“What’s going on, Pete?” My stomach sinks with the feeling that he’s not here for a friendly chat.

“I think it’s best if you come down to the station, Ben. There’s quite a bit we need to talk about.”

“Rather not leave, Pete. Summer’s...” I shake my head and swallow. “I’d rather not leave.”

Pete’s face turns tortured. “I’m sorry, Ben. I really am. But...the part about you coming down to the station, well, it’s not really an option.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Breezy asks then, the angry, New York side of her coming out on my behalf. “Is my brother under arrest?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m afraid he is. Seems someone in New York wasn’t satisfied without ruffling some more feathers.”

That motherfucker *Thomas Conrad Michael King III*. I knew he wasn’t going to stand there and piss into the wind.

Fuck.

“Can I go get dressed, at least?”

Pete frowns. “Sorry, Ben, really sorry. But I barely held ’em off from coming to your house with me. The sooner we get down there, the better.”

“Don’t say anything, Bennett,” Breezy commands, a finger in my face as I slip on the closest pair of shoes. “Not a damn thing. I’ll get our lawyer here on the next plane.”

What else can I do at this point?

“Take care of Summer and Norah,” I say as I walk over toward Pete. “Charlie’s still here, in the guest bedroom if you need her.”

Breezy nods. “Don’t worry, Ben. I’m going to take care of everything.”

For far from the first time in my life, I’m thankful for my big sister and her even bigger metaphorical balls.

Sheriff Peeler walks behind me to the cop car and puts me into the back seat, his gentle hand on the top of my head. He climbs inside and starts the car, and then, before we really get moving, tosses a set of handcuffs through the small hole in the cage between us.

“Just...put these on yourself when we get close. It’ll be easier if they don’t make a fuss.”

“Jesus, Pete, who the hell did that fucker get involved in this?”

Pete winces, and I sit back in the seat with a thud of disbelieving proportions. As we pull down the driveway, I look back just in time to see Norah rushing out the front door, my T-shirt the only thing on her body. Breezy holds her close with an arm around her shoulders, and for the second time since we met, I drive away in the back of a police car while she looks on.

The only difference is that this time, I know she's worth the trouble.

36

Bennett

With my handcuffs locked in place in front of me, I make the walk from the parking lot of the sheriff's department into the building with Pete's hand on my shoulder. I don't ponder and I don't look around, instead using my time to figuratively stoke the fire now burning inside me.

I'd be pissed about all this shit on a good day, but today is not a good day. Summer's time is dwindling by the minute, and Norah and I have hardly had a chance to breathe in the exchange of I love yous.

I want to be at my house, with my girls, making sure I'm doing everything in my power to make them feel loved.

But I'm not, and it's all because of that motherfucker who dared to think he was good enough for someone like Norah Ellis.

Stomach hot and throat tight, I make my way through the main lobby of the station and around into the small bullpen with the sheriff, where I instantly recognize the back of Thomas Conrad Michael King III.

Black slacks and a finely pressed gray-check shirt camouflage his altogether slimy character, but I know what he is, and I know it well. The truth is, I used to be a version of him—rich, conceited, careless with other people and their well-being—but I'm not anymore. I left that man behind a long time ago, and these days, I wouldn't even recognize those parts of myself.

A primly dressed woman with an overbearing but small stature stands next to him, her red-nail-tipped fingers draped over his shoulder proudly. There's

a commotion as they turn in excitement to see my march of shame, but when they finally get turned around, I understand who she is right away.

The similarity of looks is undeniable, even with the sour expression on her face. It's Eleanor Ellis, Norah and Josie's mother, and it's a real mystery how two women as amazing as them came from something as snaky as her.

Figuring I don't have a hell of a lot to lose, I open my mouth to ask Thomas if he's here to get his ass clocked again, but Sheriff Peeler stops me with a hard nudge to the shoulder and a shake of his head. "Be smart, Ben," he whispers then.

I don't want to be fucking smart. I want to let loose on these assholes with everything I've got. Generally, I would never even consider hitting a lady, but Eleanor Ellis, with the history I've heard, is so far removed from that title it's not even funny.

I sigh heavily but comply, keeping my mouth shut in the interest of getting back to my daughter as soon as possible.

Being robbed of these final moments with her is worse than any hit to my ego could be.

Sheriff Peeler keeps walking past Thomas and Eleanor, straight to his office, surprising the shit out of me. I was expecting some kind of confrontation or, at the very least, for the duo to attempt to put their two cents of jabs in.

But for all intents and purposes, they're left behind with their dicks in their hands.

Pete opens the door to his office, instantly revealing the back of a blond woman and a man in a suit. The man—whom I don't recognize—stands at the sight of me and then taps the woman on the shoulder to get her attention. The first glimpse of her face knocks my world on its side.

No fucking way.

"Jessica?"

She shakes her head as she looks at me, her mouth turning up in disgust. “Well, well, Ben, you sure have changed. You tight on money these days or something?”

My anger flares. “I should ask you the same thing, Jess. Because that has to be why you’re here...to beg for more. What’s the matter? The first twenty-five million I gave you wasn’t enough?”

Her eyes sparkle, her gaze jumping from me to the fancy suit guy and back again. “So, you admit it? You bribed me to leave our daughter behind?”

“Ben, don’t answer that,” Pete advises before taking a seat behind his desk and staring the two of them down. “Now, I’ve done what you’ve asked and brought him in, but we’re not trying this thing like it’s a court of law. If you’ve got something to accuse this man of, you can do it through the proper channels and take it to trial.”

My whole body shakes as I try to control the rage inside me. Norah’s mother and her motherfucking ex had the nerve to dig up Jessica from whatever hole she’s been hiding in and convince her it’d be a good idea to fleece me for more money—or whatever the hell this is—just so they could have the upper hand.

Fuck. That. They don’t have it. No matter how much they think they do. And I sure as shit know someone who has the ultimate upper hand over them. “Pete,” I say, steeling my voice to keep it from thundering. “Call Norah, please. Tell her I need her to come down here with her letter. Tell her I need her to do it now. And tell her...I’m sorry.”

“Ben—”

“Just do it, Pete.”

The sheriff picks up the phone on his desk, scans through some of the phone numbers written on his calendar, and then starts to dial. While I wait, the reality of what I’m asking of Norah sits heavy on my shoulders. I know I shouldn’t ask her to do this.

I *hate* that I’m asking her to do this.

My stomach churns over the fact that I'm robbing Norah of her choice—something that's been done to her her whole life—but when it comes to Summer, I don't have one either.

I don't have time to mess around. I don't have time to fight this any other way. I need to be with my girl, and I need these assholes gone.

"Norah, honey, it's Pete... Uh-huh... Listen, I need you to come down to the station. Ben says you've got some sort of letter he needs you to bring... Yep... Okay, darlin', see you soon."

As he hangs up, Jessica's face turns bitter. "Who's that? Your newest whore?"

"Ben, don't say it." Sheriff Peeler stands up and throws a finger toward me, already anticipating the worst.

I close my mouth and sigh again. Evidently, Pete is bound and determined to keep my foot out of my mouth today. I'll have to remember to thank him later.

"Look," the man in the suit says, speaking for the first time. "We're here because my client was coerced, bribed, and extorted into signing away her parental rights so that Mr. Bishop could have full custody. My client was desperate at the time, but she's had time to consider how wronged she was and, further, has shared with me that Mr. Bishop is not, in fact, the biological father. We move to submit for DNA testing immed—"

"Bullshit!" I snap, Sheriff Peeler's advice wearing off in a blink. "Summer is my daughter."

"Ben, calm down," Pete coaches, rounding the desk to put a hand on my chest. I glance through the glass on the top half of his door as he spins me around and find Thomas and Eleanor smiling. "You getting riled up is exactly what they're after. Now, Miss Norah says she's coming with the letter, whatever that means, and she says your sister is on her way too. Evidently, she's spoken to your lawyer. So, just stay calm, all right?"

“I’m not calm,” I reply instantly. “I’m not calm at all, Pete. Summer’s... time is running out, and I’m here. Do you understand me?”

Pete nods, the motion jerkier than usual. “I understand, Ben.”

Gently, he urges me out the door of his office and over to the other side of the empty bullpen. He pulls out a chair, and I sit in it, facing out the window rather than wasting any of my precious sight on the clowns and their puppet Jessica.

Time feels like it takes forever, but in reality, the clock on the wall only moves forward twenty minutes before I see them coming, dust kicking up from the gravel lot as they slide into a space in Breezy’s rental. Clay’s truck is right behind them and pulls into a spot with a skid of his brakes. Norah jumps out of Breezy’s passenger’s seat, still wearing my T-shirt but having added a pair of pants. My sister folds out of the driver’s seat, and Josie climbs out of the back.

When Clay is out of his truck, he and Josie walk into the police station right beside each other without their usual anger-fueled tension. If anything, the four of them appear to be a single unit, ready to come to my rescue together.

I guess my being taken in to the police station brings even the most unlikely together.

Spinning my chair, I stand and walk toward Thomas and Eleanor, concern for Norah when she sees them my primary concern. Thomas’s eyes widen at my approach, and he scrambles back, bumping first into a desk and then into an empty chair.

I smile at his fear.

“Sheriff!” Eleanor yells, pulling Thomas to her side. “Your prisoner is approaching us!”

Pete actually laughs. “I can see that, Mrs. Ellis.”

“Well, then do something about it! And it’s *Mrs. Ellis-Prescott!*” She smirks like that means something to Pete, but New York society last names mean fuck all in Red Bridge.

Pete just shrugs. “Ben, step back, would you?”

I sigh and step back a foot or two, just as my crowd of protectors comes barreling into the bullpen.

Breezy is first in line, her face a harsh mask of New York Fuck You.

“What the hell is going on here?”

“Thomas...Mom?” Norah cries as soon as she sees them. “This is *your* doing?”

Clay comes to my side. “You okay, man?”

I nod. “Just want to get home.”

Clay slaps me on the shoulder and nods. “I know.”

“You’ve truly lost your mind, Eleanor,” Josie spits unchecked. “Siding with an *abuser*?”

Eleanor snorts. “Thomas is hardly an abuser, Josie. Be serious.”

“I am serious,” Josie snaps back. “He put his hands on Norah and left a mark. Nearly dragged her out of my shop and would have if Bennett here hadn’t stopped him. He’s a piece of shit, and everyone here knows it.”

“Folks, folks,” Pete tries to interject, but the train has already left the station.

“He’s a lot more than that,” Norah cuts in, pulling a manila envelope from under her arm. Her voice is shaky and nervous, and I hate that I’m the reason for it. “I have evidence here of blackmail and coercion and a pretty good feeling that there have been multiple girls the two of you have forced into abortions and other things.”

Thomas’s voice is seething. “Where the hell did you get that?”

Norah shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter where I got it. What matters is that I have it. And I’m going to pursue it to the fullest extent of the law, even if that means a long, drawn-out trial against you.”

Josie wraps an arm around Norah's shoulders in comfort. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that this is the very last thing Norah wants to do.

As the commotion picks up, Jessica and her lawyer come out of the sheriff's office, and as soon as Breezy spots her, her eyes go round. "What the hell is she doing here?"

"I'm here for my daughter."

Josie and Clay gasp. Norah turns tearful eyes to me.

Breezy, though, she's not having any of it. "Don't give me that bullshit, Jessica Folger. That girl is not your daughter. Your role was giving birth, and that was the extent of it."

"Because he paid me to leave!" she shouts.

"He paid you a generous sum of money, yes, but you didn't need any convincing to leave, Jess. You and I both know you didn't want anything to do with that baby."

"She's saying I'm not the biological father," I choke out somehow, causing another round of gasps that suck almost all the air out of the station.

Breezy, though, she doesn't even blink. "Is that right? Well, I guess it's a good thing we did a DNA test before Bennett ever left the state with her, then."

"You have DNA?" the lawyer bumbles, an instant fool.

"Yes," my sister declares. "We have DNA, a signed affidavit swearing the money was not a bribe, and a signed transfer of full rights to Bennett for Summer. I don't know what you think you have, but you don't have jack shit."

"You signed an affidavit?" the lawyer questions Jessica, his eyes widening in incredulity.

"I signed a lot of things, but I was coerced!" Jessica wails at the top of her lungs.

“Exactly!” Thomas shouts, and Breezy turns on him like a mama bear.

“You stay out of this!”

I chuckle without humor. “He’s having a hard time staying out of it because he’s the one who convinced Jess to come. Right?”

Thomas and Jess are both silent for a long moment, and Eleanor sees fit to fill it. “This is preposterous. Sheriff! This is all lies, every bit of it!”

Josie guffaws. “Don’t act like you’re innocent, mother. You’ve had your hand in all of it.”

“Listen, folks, from what I’m hearing, Bennett is free to go,” Sheriff Pete interjects, coming toward me to take the cuffs off. “If there’s anything else to be settled, I suggest you file suit with the appropriate court.”

“This is bullshit,” Jessica cries, pointing at Thomas. “You said I could get more money! That’s the whole damn reason I even came!”

Her lawyer, mind you, is already packing up his briefcase.

I shake my head at her antics and run my tongue against my teeth as Sheriff Peeler frees me. I rub at my sore wrists lightly. The only thing that keeps me from regretting ever knowing Jessica is the daughter I got out of it.

“The money’s gone, Jess,” I say as simply as I can manage. “All that’s left is the daughter you never wanted. The daughter I would give *anything* to keep. So, I suggest you go back to wherever you’ve been because the only place you’re going in the company of this guy is prison.”

The entire time she’s been here, not once has she asked to see Summer. Not one single fucking time. She has no idea what her daughter has been through. She has no idea that Summer’s life is hanging by a thread. She doesn’t know and she doesn’t care, and the tragedy of that scenario makes me thankful my daughter has lived a life without this woman.

Thankful that the only maternal figure she’s experienced in her life is Norah.

I seek out Norah, ignoring the bullshit Eleanor and Thomas are still spewing into the air. She's standing there, her shoulders sagging, her mouth set in a firm line of discomfort.

She looks destroyed, and I hate myself for it. Hate myself for what I pulled her into. For what I asked her to do. But I can't change any of it. The only thing I can do is get the hell out of here and go to the one place I need to be. The one place I should've never been forced to leave—Summer's bedside.

I step through the crowd. "Pete, I'm leaving."

He doesn't stop me. "Okay, Ben."

"I'll drive you," Clay offers, already pulling his keys out of his pocket and heading toward the exit door.

Norah can't look me in the eye as I approach, and my chest burns with the loss of her trust. I stop in front of her, lowering my voice to a whisper. "I knew it wasn't fair, what I was asking you to do. I knew it would damn near ruin you." Her eyes shoot up to mine. "But I did it anyway."

"I know."

God, I don't deserve her. I never did.

Norah watches me silently as I leave with Clay, but I don't look back. Because time is a thief, and the chunk of it I've spent here at the station has already taken more than enough that I won't get back.

37

Thursday, September 2nd

Bennett

Music comes softly from the radio in the corner, the sounds of Summer's favorite station playing the oldies of the fifties, sixties, and seventies. Her hand is limp in mine, but I hold it securely enough for the both of us.

She hasn't stirred at all since before I left for the police station yesterday, and I know that means it's almost time. Her sweet body is tired, and I have to let it rest, no matter how desperate I am for more days, weeks, years.

"I love you so much, my little Summblebee." I lean my head to her hand and squeeze my tired red eyes shut against the overwhelming pain the sound her labored breathing brings. "I don't want to be without you."

Her voice is small, but the effect is like a gunshot, I'm so surprised to hear it.

"You're...gonna...be...okay...Daddy."

"Summer? Summer baby, you're awake?" I ask frantically, kissing her hand and her cheek and her forehead. She coughs and her eyes struggle to make the effort to blink, but the corners of her mouth still lift a little into her beautiful, amazing smile.

"Why...are...you...yelling?"

I laugh. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Sum. I just thought..."

"I'm...sleepy...Daddy," she says, every word a struggle.

“I know, baby. I know you’re tired.” My face crumples, tears falling as silently as I can manage down my face. “You’ve been so strong.” My throat feels like it’s closing. “But it’s okay now. You don’t have to be strong anymore. I’ll be okay.”

“I...know...Daddy...”

I swipe at the tears with the back of my hand and try to smile down at her. “You do?”

“You...have...Norah,” she says and then coughs again, just barely catching her breath. “She...makes...everything...okay.”

I nod. *Yeah, my girl and I fell hard, just as I suspected we would.* The only problem is that *I* don’t make everything okay for Norah. She deserves to be happy and safe and with someone she can trust.

“Yeah, baby. She does.”

“I...want...to...see...her.”

“Okay,” I agree without hesitation, knowing Norah would want to see her too.

“Charlie!” I call out, and it’s only five seconds before she’s popping her head into the room and coming to take my place. I don’t know how she knows, but I don’t even have to ask her to sit with Summer for her to understand that’s what I want. With another kiss or two or three to my daughter’s precious face, I leave the bedroom and head for the kitchen to find my phone.

Breezy is there again, and I’m almost delirious enough to believe the whole police station thing was a fever dream and Norah is still asleep in my bed.

“You okay, Ben?” Breezy asks, jumping up from her chair when I turn from side to side, trying to figure out what the hell I was doing.

“I...” I shake my head. “Summer wants to see Norah. I was looking for my phone, but I don’t know where it is.”

“I’ll call her. I have her number,” Breezy offers straightaway.

“That’s good.” I nod. Nod again. “Probably better anyway.” I don’t even know if Norah wants to talk to me at this point. “Tell her...if she needs me to leave, I can.”

“Bennett,” Breezy replies, her intonation meant to chastise me with just my name.

I wave her off. “No, Breeze. I... Just let her know. Whatever she wants. But...she should come soon.”

Breezy’s mouth is a firm line of everything I’m feeling inside.

The seasons are changing, and our beautiful Summer is almost gone.

38

Norah

Breezy's call was simple and to the point—I should come now.

Josie is the only reason I'm even wearing shoes, I rushed out the door so fast. Truth be told, I've been sick to my stomach since Bennett walked out of the police station yesterday afternoon.

The look in his eyes as he professed his supposed sins was a window into the bleak depths of his suffering soul. Not only with Summer, but with the way he views himself and all the things he's worthy of.

I don't mind that he called on me at the station, and I don't mind that he did it at the expense of my free will. It felt like the least I could do with all the strife I've brought on him since arriving, and beyond that, it was for the very best of reasons.

How, I wonder, would he expect me to love a man who could put a woman he's known for a short time over the daughter he's spent her whole life fighting for? Because, for as much as I was the victim of his actions, I was also the victor.

Bennett Bishop is the kind of man you search your whole life for. The kind of man most women never find.

I can't tell you how many times over the past twenty-four hours I've stopped myself from going to him. From showing up at his house and telling him all the things he needs to hear.

And I've cried to Josie about a million times since yesterday, warring with myself over what to do, but I know now isn't the time to invalidate

Bennett's feelings. He feels he committed a transgression against me. To forgive him while he's in the throes of his daughter's last moments on this earth would be written off as an act of pity or mercy, and I refuse to have him believe it's either.

So, I'm here. Silently. Wishing I could reach out and hug him and find a way to make it okay.

But losing a child is the kind of thing you can't fix.

Bennett's bedroom door is closed as I walk carefully down the hallway toward his daughter's room. And when I enter the room, only Charlie and Summer are inside.

Charlie's smile is sad when she meets my eyes from across the room, and I don't have to ask why. Summer's small chest moves up and down in big, shaking puffs, the space in between them alarmingly long. Her face is pale, and her lips are the faintest hint of blue. The oxygen tubing is still in her nose, but as she struggles to find the air for every breath, I can only imagine it's no longer helping.

Charlie clears her throat as I sit down at her bedside and grab on to Summer's hand, willing her body to fight a little harder. I know it's not right to ask of her, but I'm not ready to let her go.

Charlie clears her throat once more, and this time, I force myself to look up. She's holding out a folded piece of paper and Summer's pink heart sunglasses, and her eyes are a watery mess. "She...she asked me to write down her thoughts for you while we were waiting for you to get here. It's... it's pretty hard for her to talk right now, and honestly, I don't know if she was confident she'd be able to talk at all."

"Charlie," I whisper, my whole heart breaking.

"I know, doll. But you should read the note. Maybe even read it aloud. And then tell her what you think. She'll hear you."

I nod swiftly then, wiping at the rivers streaming a path down my cheeks. I can't stop them now and can't control the speed of them either.

I open the paper and turn to Summer, and Charlie steps outside the door to the bedroom, pulling it closed. Lightly, so as to assure I'm not hurting her, I dust my fingers over the skin of Summer's closest arm, hoping she can feel me.

"Hey, Norah," I read aloud, working my lips over my teeth in between words until they feel raw. "I've only known you for a little bit, but I love you so much. And I'm so glad I got the chance to meet you and even more glad for my dad. You're a special person, and my dad needs special. He can be grumpy and loud and he can even be annoying, but he's the best dad there is, so I know he's the best guy there is. I know he's going to miss me, but I'm going to miss him more. I need you to be there for him when he needs you and even when he thinks he doesn't, okay? I'll think of you every time I see a sunset from heaven, and I'm really hoping I get to say hi to Cassiopeia."

An unexpected sob bucks my back, but I swallow the sound down into the depths of my despair so Summer won't hear me.

"I'm pretty tired now, but thanks for everything. Tell my dad I love him, and then tell him you do too. Pink buddies forever. Love, Summer. PS: Keep my pink sunglasses safe? Wear them for me when it's sunny outside."

I shake my head and wipe at the wetness on my face with the back of my hand before using it to grab Summer's and hold. "I love you too, Summer. And you're the special one, sweet girl. You've changed my life forever. I promise to take care of your dad and think of you every single day. I promise you that pink is and always will be my favorite, favorite color. I promise I'll wear your sunglasses when the sun is out and think of you. And I promise that we'll see each other again. One day, in heaven, and I'm going to hug you so tight. So, so, so tight."

I want to stay here forever, to hold her hand until I can't hold it anymore, but I know with everything inside me that if I do, Bennett won't be able to.

So, even though it takes every fiber of strength inside me, I stand, kiss Summer's cheek, and walk away for what I know will be the last time.



When my phone rings in the middle of the night, Josie jumps up from her spot next to me—having come into the tiny full-size bed with me so that I wouldn't be alone—and grabs it.

I don't have to ask who it is, and I don't bother to stop my tears.

"It's Breezy," Josie says, a soft hand on my hip. I nod into the pillow, a sob of agony ripping all the way through me.

Summer's pain has finally stopped. And because of that, the rest of us know a hurt that'll never end.

39

Bennett

“Let me do it, Charlie.”

She looks up from where she stands at Summer’s bedside. Her eyes implore mine. She’s uncertain about my request, and I know that’s because the instant my daughter took her last breath, the moment her soul left her body, I cried harder than I’ve ever cried in my life.

Head bowed and her tiny hands clutched in mine, I stayed at her bedside for hours. I caressed her hair and kissed her fingers and gazed down at her sweet, angelic face, selfishly hoping that a miracle was still possible.

That she hadn’t really left me.

That I hadn’t just lost half of my fucking heart.

I don’t know how long Charlie and Breezy let me stay like that, but eventually, they found a way to get me to walk out of Summer’s bedroom just as Dr. Brock had arrived to make the official pronouncement of death.

“Bennett, why don’t you just pull up a chair and sit by her bed while I—”

“No.” I shake my head again. “I need to do this.”

She’s still hesitant, I can tell by the way she slowly steps back to let me take over, but I know with every cell of my body, with every ounce of love I have for my daughter, I need to be the one to do this.

I need to be the last one to give my sweet Summer a bath.

I take the washcloth from Charlie's outstretched hand, and I start the process of preparing my baby for her final rest.

I wash her arms and her hands, taking extra time to gaze at her small fingers. I wash her shoulders and her belly. Her legs and her feet, smiling through my tears when I see the glittery pink nail polish on her toes.

I wash her hair, and when I need to reach her back, Charlie helps me gently turn her on her side.

I dry her skin with a fresh towel, and Charlie helps me put a new gown on her body.

Once I'm done, once my Summer is clean, I climb into the bed beside her.

"You are the greatest gift I have ever been given, and the one thing that I will always be most proud of is being your dad," I whisper into her hair, kissing the top of her head as I stifle the sob that wants to vibrate out of my chest. "I hate that you had to leave me so soon, but I'm so happy you're no longer in pain. I'm so happy that you're free from the constraints of a disease you didn't deserve."

I take one of her tiny hands in mine, admiring how small it looks within my big one before I hold it against my lips. "Oh, how I'm going to miss your smiles and your giggles and the way you roll your eyes at me when you think I'm being annoying."

"I'm going to miss you being in the studio, telling me to use the color pink, and taking rides in the golf cart. I'm going to miss the way the room brightened the instant you were in it and how the sound of your sweet voice was always music to my ears." I can barely breathe, but I keep talking. "I'm going to miss you so much, Summlebee."

My voice chokes on a sob as it barrels out of my lungs. And when tears start to flow unchecked down my face, I wrap Summer into my arms, and I hug her.

I hug her in the way I've always craved to hug her but couldn't.

I hug her like this hug will make up for all of the hugs we missed out on.

I hug her like it's the first and the last hug I'll ever give her.

Because it is.

My Summer is gone. But by the grace of God, so is her pain.

40

Friday, September 10th

Norah

Mayor Wallace and Sheriff Peeler carry the back of the casket while Bennett and Clay carry the front, the whole town gathered together to put one of the best people I've ever known to rest.

There are so many people here, if I listed them off, I'd be doing it until next week. Even Lillian is here from New York, rearranging her schedule to come as soon as I told her about the arrangements.

Starkly missing, however, are Bennett's parents and brother Logan. I suppose, given his history with all of them, it's probably a good thing, but in my heart of hearts, I cannot imagine being so callous toward my son or brother.

The wind carries a frigid chill, and it's just as I imagined a Summer-less world would feel. I pull my black cardigan around my body tighter, and Josie steps closer to wrap an arm around my shoulders.

"You okay?" she whispers.

I shake my head. I've never been less okay in my life.

After allowing myself a deep breath first, I steel my spine and lock my knees to keep them from collapsing. Bennett's face is sallow, it's so sunken, and the tips of his fingers are white with the painful grip he has on the casket. His hurt only confounds my own, and I have to look away when they set the wooden box on the lift that will lower it into the ground because it takes him more than a long moment to let go.

Clay and Sheriff Peeler stay with him until he forces his legs to move, to the side and away, only to take a seat in the front row across from me and right beside Breezy. Choosing to stay standing, Josie and I shuffle to the side as Clay and the sheriff squeeze in next to us.

I haven't seen or spoken to Bennett in a week, but it's not for a lack of trying. I've called and texted, and even showed up at his house one day, but all of my efforts have gone unanswered. I don't blame him, though, and Breezy has done a beautiful job of keeping in touch with me despite his reluctance. He's in a dark place, one I can't even begin to fathom. I only wish he would let me sit in it with him.

A cloud falls across the sun, casting us in shadow as Reverend Bob, the pastor at the only church in town, begins the formal graveside ceremony. "Welcome, everyone. I'll start by thanking you all for being here on this momentously difficult day. We're here to pay our respects to sweet Summer Bishop, taken from our earthly world far too soon."

Bennett looks down at his hands, his head sinking below his shoulders like a cement block tossed into the ocean. I stare—because I can't do anything else—willing some measure of comfort to teleport across the space to him.

"We are all suffering, but we must take solace in the fact that Summer is not. Her impact will be felt by all of us for the rest of our lives. And for our time with her, we are thankful. Because in that time, we were privileged to learn the value of seeking and living in joy. Summer took her misfortune and turned it around, finding pleasure in the simplest of gestures. A cookout at the church, a wedding in the square, a day with friends at the town festival. Over the years, I've personally had the occasion to laugh with Summer more than a dozen times—even, I'll admit, when my own mood was sour. She was a vibrant embodiment of our most innocent happiness, and I will miss her most dearly. But I know heaven will welcome her with an open gate and even warmer arms, and I know that God—my compassionate, loving God—will give her an afterlife free of pain and full of happiness. An existence she more than earned."

Bennett's body shakes, and Josie has to grab me by the elbow to keep me from diving across the damn casket to get to him. Breezy's eyes find mine

while her hand finds his and squeezes. Just as she's told me every time we've spoken, she's got him. For now, she will bear his burden, she will walk it with him, until he's ready for me to be there for him again.

Pastor Bob places his Bible on the casket and his hand on top of that as he bows his head and prays directly for Summer. "Your life, we honor, your departure, we accept, your memory, we cherish. Although we are filled with grief today, tomorrow, and the rest of our days, we will be grateful for your life and the privilege of having shared it with you. Rest now, sweet Summer, and live on in both God and the hearts of those who love you. Blessed we are to have known you. In Jesus's name, Amen."

"Amen." The world is a broken collective of a tortured crowd and a hope for everything the pastor said all at once.

I inhale a shaky breath, and Josie rubs at my back. And across the space, Breezy pulls Bennett in for a hug. He goes willingly, and I look on as his body shakes with the overwhelming physicality of his grief.

"I invite you now to say your goodbyes to Summer's corporeal body and to facilitate the passing of her spirit to heaven by placing a pink rose on the top of her casket. We'll start with the back row and work our way forward, and Hank here will be passing out flowers as you approach."

I don't move or blink as I witness Bennett watch his world disappear. Flower after flower, he stares as his friends and acquaintances and even a couple of his pseudo-enemies help to lay his only daughter to rest. His eyes are icebergs in a tumultuous sea—a vivid difference from their usually warm, inviting blue waters.

It feels like hours pass before Pastor Bob invites our row to step forward, but when he does, Pete and Clay are the first to go. Two heavy-handed, brusque men moving with a gentleness I can hardly fathom. After their roses are placed, they round the casket to the other side, taking Bennett's hand to shake and then pulling him into a tight hug, one after the other.

I take the gesture as an opening, cutting Josie off to be the next at Summer's casket. With one hand to the wood, I close my eyes and imagine her face to make it easier to speak with her. Silently, I vow to keep my promises and to

keep pushing to be there for Bennett until he lets me in. I can imagine her smile and even feel the warmth of her skin under all the kisses I was privileged enough to give her.

Ignoring the wind, I pull off my black sweater to reveal my pink dress and slide her pink sunglasses over my face. “Pink buddies forever, Summlebee.”

Bennett’s gaze follows me now as I step away from Summer for a final time and walk toward him, a fire burning inside it that’s liable to set my whole body ablaze.

Heart racing and breaking at the same time, I stop in front of the love of my life and wait. For permission, for a sign, for something I don’t fully understand until I have it.

It’s a gentle sway—a closing of a gap between Bennett’s chest and mine—but it’s all the signal I need. Without delay, I wrap my arms around his shoulders and pull his body to mine, soaking in the raging heat of his anguish with all I have. He hugs me back, crossing his arms at the back of my waist and digging his face into my neck. I feel the salty sting of his fresh tears, and without thinking, I squeeze him tighter.

My whisper is a desperate plea. “I still love you, Bennett. I’ll be here when you’re ready.”

On the surface, it feels inappropriate and trite. But in the depths of my being, I know it’s the right thing to say. Bennett doesn’t want some hollow apology from me today any more than he wanted regrets for spilled milk. He wants his daughter, and by God, so do I. But what his daughter wanted was for the bond she formed with the two of us to carry on without her, and Bennett needs the reassurance that it’s a promise I intend to keep.

His face is startled as I break from the hug and step away, so I hold his eyes just long enough to settle them. When I step away and Josie steps in, I don’t look back.

With my chin high and my chest aching, I make the long walk from the cemetery to my waiting car and climb inside. Only then do I let my tears

free.

I can't think of anything I should've said; I can't think of anything I regret at all. Because even knowing this is how it would end, I'd do it all again.

The truth is, Summer changed my life, and she'll still be changing it long after the leaves fall.

41

Saturday, September 18th

Bennett

“You know I don’t want to have to say this, Ben, but I’m going to need your keys.”

“Whatev-er, Clay. Fuck they keys.”

Clay sighs, and I laugh. “Yeah, I need them now, Ben.”

I dig in my pocket for a while, but I don’t feel anything on my fingers until I check the other pocket. It’s sharper. I pull them out and toss them on the bar, except they don’t land where I’m aiming and instead shoot over to the other side, crashing against the bottle of Pappy’s bourbon with a clink.

Damn, it tastes good.

Clay’s face is a mask of too many emotions for me to read as he pockets my projectile keys and pours me another glass of amber liquid. I shake the glass at him happily before turning it upside down and relishing the burn as it fills my throat.

Clay looks at me for a long moment, his face way too sad for how good this liquor tastes, and I shake my head at him. “Stop mopin’, wouldya?”

He sighs again, turning away and heading to the other end of the bar to help someone else.

Thank fuck.

I don't need some miserable fucker reminding me that my daughter's dead—trust me, I remember all on my own. That, of course, is what the bourbon is for. So I can fucking forget, just for a little while.

There's a college football game on TV, between Clemson and LSU, and I start laughing at a bunch of tigers fighting one another. Clay steps back in front of me, a towel in his hand.

"What's so funny, Ben?"

"Clemson and LSU!" I practically shout. "All those fucking tigers!"

Clay glances up at the TV and then back at me. "That's not LSU, bud. That's the University of Washington."

"Pssh. UW would never play Clemson during the regular season."

Clay snorts. "Yeah, well, neither would LSU. But there was that whole fan lobby thing last year, remember? *Sports Illustrated* got involved. So, UW is gonna play some different teams this—"

I wave him off. Who gives a shit about football.

Clay nods and then glances up behind me, his eyes softening in a way that makes me turn around. Norah is standing there looking at me, and the skin on my neck starts to feel hot.

"What the fuck, *Clay*?" I snap, my intonation more than a little nasty.

They both ignore me. "Thanks for calling, Clay."

Clay nods and smiles, the fucker. "You bet, Nore. Sorry it's so late."

"That's all right. Josie's waiting in the car. She's going to help me get him in the house."

"I can woolk," I protest loudly. "I don't need any fuck-ing hep."

Clay sinks his teeth into his lip as Norah puts a shoulder in my armpit and starts to walk. I try to keep up, but my damn feet keep tripping on each other. Her wild hair is even wilder than normal, sticking out at the sides

around her face a little bit and framing her perfect sparkling eyes. I try to watch the way the gold flecks inside them wink in the light, but I end up tripping us both as we're getting to the door. Norah has to grab on to the wall to steady us.

God, she's beautiful, even more beautiful than I remember her being the last time Clay called and tattled on me a couple of days ago.

I try my best to walk without tripping us again, and next thing I know, she's holding me under the armpits as Josie pulls me into the car from the back seat.

I go willingly since it's not worth fighting at this point, and I let the booze work its way through my veins in the hopes that I'll get sleepy.

Norah climbs into the back with me and pulls me over in her lap, and Josie climbs behind the wheel to drive us out of town. I'm amazed at how patient the two of them have been dealing with my drunk ass for the last four days. I would've started drinking sooner, but it took that long for Breezy to leave to head back to the city, and she never would have allowed it while she was here.

The car rocks and lulls as Josie turns onto the main road, and I feel my eyes start to close. In between languid blinks, I notice Norah looking down at me, and when they finally shut for good, I swear I feel the faint brush of her hand in my hair.

As I enter dreamland, I allow myself a moment to lean into it, soaking in the feel. *God, I love her.*

I just wish I deserved to.

Norah's dream hand pauses on my head and then starts up again, sweeping over my cheek and my chin too. I swear I even feel a gentle touch from something soft to my lips, but the spins are starting up, and I don't trust myself to know what my own head feels like at this point.

After that, I don't feel anything.

42

Sunday, September 19th

Norah

I check the time on my phone—2:03 a.m.

On a huff, I drop it back down on the nightstand and turn over, pulling the comforter over my head and forcing my eyes to close.

But when I find myself turning over to check the time again—2:06 a.m.—I crawl out of bed and tiptoe down the hallway and into the kitchen to make a cup of tea.

Tonight was rough. Truthfully, the last few nights have been rough. Like clockwork, Clay calls at a little after midnight, and Josie and I go get a drunk Bennett from the bar and bring him home.

His grief over Summer's death has him in a choke hold, and I want so badly to be the salve for his pain, want so badly to be there for him, but he won't let me. I call and text him every day, but he never responds. And now that Breezy has gone back to New York, he's alone in that big farmhouse. Alone with his thoughts. Alone with his sadness.

Tears prick my eyes, and I pinch the bridge of my nose to keep them at bay. Desperate for a distraction, I unlock the screen of my phone with the intention of browsing social media, but a missed text notification from Lillian pulls my attention.

It must've come in when Josie and I were getting Bennett home.

Lillian: Have you talked to Bennett's lawyer? Something big is going on with Thomas and Eleanor...

Below the message sits two links. I click on the first, and an online gossip magazine reveals that my stepdad **Carlton Prescott Has Filed for Divorce from Eleanor Ellis-Prescott**. And when I click on the second link, an article from a major national newspaper pops onto the screen.

Thomas King Spends Day in Questioning

NEW YORK, September 18 – King Financial wonderboy Thomas King and Eleanor Ellis-Prescott, wife of wealthy businessman Carlton Prescott, were escorted into the New York City police station to answer questions under oath on Friday. The District Attorney's office is not giving any details regarding what they are being questioned about at this time, but they state information will be released to the public at a later date.

It's a shock to see my mother's name in the paper and have it not be about some event she's attended or charity function she's hosted. Both she and Thomas are being questioned by the police, and it makes me wonder how much they've found on them—and just how bad it really is.

After they left Red Bridge, I gave Bennett and Breezy's lawyer everything I had—Alexis's letter, along with the proof inside. Last I heard, they had turned everything over to the New York DA, and it was being investigated.

I can only assume my suspicions of there being more girls are correct, and it doesn't make me feel good, that's for damn sure. It only makes me feel really sad. Sad that I was so naïve about them. But mostly, sad that it's possible they ruined other people's lives. Sad that there could be another girl like Alexis who was forced into an impossible situation and fear made her follow through with something she didn't want to do.

Without even thinking, I tap out of the article and head to my contacts to call Bennett. But just as my finger hovers over his name, I realize it's after two in the morning, and while he's the one person I want to talk to about this, he's the last person who wants to talk to me.

God, I miss him.

Thoughts of him and Summer swirl inside my head like a tornado. A hundred different memories flash behind my eyes. *Bennett's smile. Bennett's laugh. Giggling with Summer in his studio about Kim and Kourtney and Khloe while he painted. Turning Summer's nails sparkly pink before the fake Josie and Clay wedding. Eating sandwiches surrounded by grass and butterflies while Bennett fielded business calls with his sister. Looking for shooting stars with them in the yard.*

Before I know it, tears are dripping down my cheeks and I'm peeking inside Josie's bedroom to see if she's still asleep.

When I confirm I'm the only one awake, I head back into my bedroom and slide on a pair of sandals, grab my phone and the keys to Josie's Civic, and walk out the front door in only my pajamas as quietly as I can manage.

I get in the car, start the engine, and silently pray the sounds of the Civic roaring to life don't wake up my sister. I don't know why I don't want Josie to know what I'm doing. Maybe I'm afraid she'll judge me. Maybe I fear she'll derail my plans.

Or maybe I'm unable to really face what I'm about to do.

The sky is dark, and the road is only illuminated by my headlights as I drive over the gravel driveway and take a left onto the main road.

I don't even bother turning on the radio, my pounding heart the only thing vibrating in my ears.

And that heart of mine keeps pounding away as I drive, growing louder and more persistent as I close in on my destination.

A big white farmhouse comes into view, as well as the barn that I know still showcases the wall I painted. The wall that Summer begged him to keep forever.

Summer.

God, how I miss her.

The brakes squeak as I pull the Civic to a stop and shut off the engine. The house is dark, besides the porch light, and I sit there for I don't know how long warring with myself on whether this is a good idea.

A light flicks on from the side of the house, illuminating the walkspace to the studio. And the tall, muscular frame of a man I can't stop thinking about, can't stop worrying about, can't stop missing—can't stop craving, needing, wanting—comes into view as he walks from the big house to his favorite place to paint.

He doesn't notice the Civic in his driveway or me in the driver's seat. And when he walks into the studio and shuts the door behind him, I hop out of the car and follow.

Not even a minute later, I find him inside, roughly tossing one of his finished paintings onto a stack of another three. He still hasn't noticed my presence, but the bourbon he consumed tonight is probably still flowing through his veins.

When two more canvases are carelessly added to the pile, I find my voice.

"Bennett?"

He stops on a dime but pointedly doesn't turn around to face me. "Go home, Norah."

Go home. The words are the nails, and the stern intonation of his voice is the hammer, driving a piercing pain straight into my heart.

"What are you doing?"

"Go home," he repeats and yanks an abstract painting he painted before Summer passed away off an easel. With a sickeningly rough toss, it gets added to the pile.

When he pulls out a box of matches and stands over the discarded canvases that sit in the center of the room, concern clutches my chest.

"*Bennett,*" I say, trying my own hand at stern.

He ignores me and pulls a match out of the box, his eyes solely focused on the paintings, and his intent is unmistakable. The concern in my chest blooms into fear.

I jump into action then, running over to him and swatting the box of matches out of his hands. They hit the floor with a slap just as Bennett's gaze finally meets mine. His blue eyes are sad and red-rimmed, and dark circles mar the skin beneath them. It breaks my heart into a million tiny pieces.

"Why, Norah?" His voice is harsh as he grabs my arms, but his touch is tender. "Why?" he repeats.

His question has nothing to do with the paintings. All I can do is look up at him, locking his devastation-ridden gaze with mine.

"I miss her too, Ben," I whisper. "I miss her too." *And I miss you. So, so much.*

His breathing is ragged, and emotion shines within his eyes. And when one lone tear drips down his cheek, I reach up to wipe it off with my thumb.

He leans into my touch, his strong jaw nuzzling into my small hand.

"I don't deserve you. I never did." His words are so quiet, my frantic, overactive mind questions if they even exist.

He starts to pull away, starts to put distance between us, and real words or not, I can't handle it.

The last thing I want right now is space from this man. In a short time, he's become everything to me. And all I want more than anything on this earth is to be there for him. To be *here* with him.

I push my body against his, wrapping my arms around his neck and lifting myself up until I can wrap my legs around his waist. He is stone, still as a statue, but his chest moves up and down against mine in heaving waves.

I touch my forehead to his, trying to bring his eyes to mine again, but they stay fixated on my shirt.

“Bennett,” I say, urging him to look at me. My bottom lip quivers with the emotion that’s now clogging my throat. “Bennett.”

His blue eyes fight to avoid mine, but they lose the battle. Tear-stained blue to tear-stained brown, we stare at one another.

“I love you,” I whisper, my voice one decibel over silent. *I love you.*

He crashes his lips into mine, his movements erratic and unsteady as he thrusts his tongue into my mouth. His fingers slide into my hair, and I tighten my grip around his shoulders and waist as I kiss him right back.

We’re a messy, desperate mix of mouths and breaths, and when the taste of salt reaches my tongue, I don’t know if it’s from my tears or his.

His hands move down my back until he grips my ass with his big hands. “Norah.” My name is a grave rasp on his tongue. “My Norah. I need you so fucking bad.”

“Bennett, I—” A sob strangles my voice, vibrating my chest against his, as he slams his mouth down on mine again.

I don’t care that he still has alcohol in his system. I don’t care if this is a bad idea. I don’t even care what happens after this moment. All I know is that I need him just as bad. I kiss him back with everything I have.

I don’t even realize he’s moved us until my back is hitting the sofa in the corner of his studio.

I respond by reaching my hands out to rip his T-shirt off his body. He follows suit by removing my sleep shorts and panties and freeing his cock from his jeans.

He pushes himself inside me on a grunt, and my eyes fall closed when he fills me completely.

My breathing is ragged and tears stream down my cheeks and my hands claw at the bare skin of his back, silently begging him for more.

Our mouths taste and lick and breathe each other in, while our hands don't stop touching skin. It's as if we're trying to crawl inside each other, unable to get close enough without morphing into one. All the while, he keeps thrusting himself inside me with heavy, rough strokes of his cock.

When he presses his forehead against mine and our gazes lock, his tears drip from his face and mix with my own on my skin once again.

"You deserve me," I whisper into his ear, but he shakes his head and thrusts himself deeper inside me.

"No, Norah. Don't fucking say it."

I grip his chin and try to force his eyes to mine, but he refuses and buries his face into my neck. A guttural sob vibrates from his lungs, and the heavy strokes of his cock inside me become harder and deeper and faster.

This moment is nothing like the first time we made love. It's raw and animalistic, and despair hovers over us like a dark cloud.

This is fucking, pure and simple.

I should probably hate myself for being the catalyst for getting us to this point. I should be pissed at myself for coming here tonight when I knew what kind of state he was in. But I can't bring myself to do anything but savor every second of this moment I shouldn't have stolen.

And the reality of what I'd do for him is clear—anything.

I'd do anything for this man.

I love you, my heart cries.

I want to take away his pain.

I want to tell him that he's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

I want to tell him that I'd never ask him to choose his daughter over me and that I'm not mad he asked me to bring that letter to the police station that day.

I want to tell him a million things, but I know he's not ready for that. I can see it in his eyes and feel it in the desperate way he moves.

I don't stop kissing him when he pushes us both over the edge and comes deep inside me. And I don't stop kissing him when he lies down on the couch and pulls my body over his.

I only stop kissing him when his eyes fall closed and his breaths grow slower with sleep, then I dress myself and steal away into the night just as I came.

Without invitation, without answers, without any sense of closure.

I love Bennett Bishop. But he's still not ready to love me.

43

Bennett

My head throbs and my hands shake as I wake up sharply, sitting up on the sofa in my studio. I don't know when I came in here last night or why, but the stack of paintings piled in the center of the space and the box of spilled matches beside it give me a sense that I had some big plans for an actual bonfire.

Thank God I didn't follow through.

Every muscle inside my body hurts as I get up, head out of the studio, and back into the house. But when I step inside, I'm overwhelmed by the silence. The morning birds chirp outside my window, but other than them, the world is painfully, soundlessly bleak.

There's no noise from my sister in the kitchen, no giggles from Summer as she talks to Charlie in her room, and no soft sighs from a woman in my bed.

I'm alone for another day.

I sink my head into my hands and beg for a sign. A direction to go, a solution to carry out, a vision to follow. Practically, I know I can't have Summer back, but every other part of me is hoping for some kind of miracle.

Something that makes me feel like I can breathe again. Something to let me know that Summer is all right.

Norah.

It's a barely there whisper in the back of my mind and the smell of her perfume on my shirt, so faint that I have no trouble ignoring it.

Memories of her being in my studio last night start to flit around inside my head, but I can't distinguish fantasy from reality.

Was she here last night? Or is it nothing more than another night of tortured dreams?

I head into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee and choose the only real option I have—to stop thinking about it at all.

She's better off without me.

44

Saturday, September 25th

Norah

Last night was the first night in ten nights that Clay hasn't called me to come pick up Bennett from the bar, which means it's the first night in ten nights I haven't heard him tell me he loves me.

While I'm hopeful this means he's on the way out of his grief-filled stupor and headed toward finding a way to move on, I have to admit, I'm still going to miss the sound of his drunken confessions.

And since he's still leaving my texts and calls unanswered, I have no idea if he remembers me coming to his studio that one night. I probably should regret doing that, but I don't. I don't regret anything when it comes to Bennett.

Finished walking, I set out the pink blanket I brought with care, making sure I don't mess up the flowers on either side of Summer's headstone. Once the blanket is in place, I lie down on my back, just to the side of the center, adjust the pink sunglasses on my face, and imagine for the fifth time in the last week that Summer is lying next to me.

As I look up at the sky, the sun moves behind a small cloud, and its rays shoot out from the sides in what looks like a halo. I smile, tears stinging my nose at the overwhelming sense that this is divine timing.

"Hey, Sum," I greet softly, rubbing at the empty blanket next to me with a mindless hand. "I've got good news about your dad. I think, maybe, he's getting it together."

I pause briefly to put a hand to my upset stomach and lift the other to my mouth as an overwhelming sense of sickness threatens to make its way up and out. It takes a minute of lying absolutely still, but eventually, it passes, and I go back to chatting.

“I haven’t been feeling the best, but I think it’s just one of those bugs you get when you’re run-down, you know? I haven’t been sleeping all that well, and Josie says it seems like my appetite is off too.” I let out a huff of laughter. “But I don’t know. I’m sure it’ll all settle soon.”

I roll over to my side so that I can trace the letters of her name on her headstone. “We all miss you around here, but I hope you’re having fun and making friends. I’ve been keeping up with all your dad’s social media and emails and stuff, but I’m really missing the studio time too. I don’t know when he’ll feel up to painting again, especially without you there, but I’m hoping I’ll be invited.”

Strategically, I think for a minute, pondering what else from my life I can share with her while I’m here. The more I’ve been coming here, the more I find myself telling her everything. Even the things a seven-year-old might not fully grasp. But Summer was wise beyond her years, and there’s a part of me that feels like she understands.

“Oh yeah,” I whisper when more updates filter into my mind. “I also talked to Breezy the other day, and she told me it seems like Thomas and my mom are going to be in really big trouble. I guess there’re a lot of things you can get away with paying someone off for, but that, combined with what they found on the USB drive I got from Alexis, is pretty creepy in a criminal way.”

I shake my head. “I can’t believe I was engaged to marry someone like that. That I didn’t see it. Sometimes I feel guilty for being so clueless. But most of the time, I don’t. I’m getting better, you know. Apologizing less. I think your dad will be proud of how far I’ve come when he’s ready to come back to the land of the living.”

I smile. “I can’t freaking believe it’s been over three weeks of knowing I’m in love with—”

I sit up straight so quickly, my head spins a little, but I don't bother giving it a moment before I try to finish the math. This is too important to pause for nausea.

Over three weeks. Over three whole weeks since the first time we made love was at least two weeks after my period, which means it's been five-plus weeks since Lady Flow has shown herself. A whole week longer than my very regular normal cycle.

My stomach roils again, and just like that, the gravity of the fact that we didn't use a condom—twice—hits me square in the nose. Both times, *I didn't even consider it.*

Holy shit.

Shaking hands cover my mouth as I turn to Summer's headstone once more and beg her for a sign. A signal that I'm not crazy and a reason to believe—something to tell me that she's there, that she's watching, and that this isn't the kind of thing that'll put her father right into an early grave.

"Please, Summer," I beg. "Show me something, anything, that means this is going to be okay."

With timing so perfect it feels summoned, a leaf hits me in the face, bright green in its entirety except for seven bright pink spots. It's too early for the leaves to fall, and it's too rare for a leaf in the middle of making its change to be so green and pink at the same time.

This sweet little leaf has to be Summer.

I tuck it close to my cheek and breathe it in as emotion overtakes me. I know the next step is a test, and I know, in my heart, I can't do it alone.

Packing up slowly, I say my temporary goodbyes to Summer's headstone and head for CAFFEINE to find my sister.

This isn't the kind of thing you do alone if you don't have to.

This is the kind of thing you do with the people you love. People are the only important thing in our lives. Summer taught me that.

45

Monday, September 27th

Bennett

Today is the fourth day in a row I've been sober, and I can still smell the booze fermenting through my pores.

Clay came by to check on me the first night I didn't show up at his bar, worried I was dead, and Norah has texted at least once a day. Earl brought me soup for dinner Saturday night, Pete came by with a casserole baked by his wife yesterday, and Breezy has called almost every hour, on the hour, since she left for New York.

But as much as there's been no shortage of compassion and friendship, I've still never felt more alone. I only stopped drinking because I woke up Friday morning covered in puke and the corresponding shame from it.

Usually, I'd paint to deal with my emotions, but I can't bring myself to paint just yet. It's not the same in my studio without Summer. *Or Norah.*

So, needing a viable outlet that doesn't involve reckless behavior, I've taken to chopping wood. And as a result, I've acquired quite the pile, and I'm sure it doesn't come as any shock that I'm thinking about burning it tonight.

With an aggressive swing of the axe, I cut through another large log and pick up the remaining half to chop it again. I swing, releasing all of my anger and frustration on the piece of wood, and it shatters into a dozen tiny fragments.

I wipe sweat from my brow before setting up again, but when I rear back to swing, the sound of a car crunching its way up the gravel drive stops me.

Out of a dozen people I expect, I'm surprised to find it's not any of them.

Charlie pulls her Jeep Liberty to a stop next to the house, shuts it off, and then climbs out, putting a hand above her eye to shield herself from the glare of the sun. I haven't seen her since Summer's funeral, and truth be told, I never expected I'd see her again.

Something shifts inside me at the sight of her, and the very real, very numb weight I've been carrying around in my stomach starts to tingle. Her walk is slow and steady as she approaches, but it's not until she's standing in front of me that I find the ability to speak. "Charlie."

Her smile is small but wholesome. "Hi, Ben."

My lips feel dry as I lick them, willing the burn in my chest to ease. "I...I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but I wasn't expecting to see you."

Her mouth flexes, just a tiny impression of a curve at the corners. "I know. But I made a promise to Summer that I'd come."

My jaw locks, and I have to look away as the sting of tears becomes more than just a nuisance.

"Two weeks," she says simply then, bringing my attention back to her. "She told me I had to wait *at least* two weeks. Enough time for you to *feel your feelings*, she said."

My head begins to shake, the mystery of how my sweet girl managed to get so smart in seven short years confounding me.

Charlie chuckles softly. "She knew you well, Ben, and loved you so, so dearly. She had me write down this note for you and wanted you to have it after the initial impact had passed."

I stare at Charlie so hard the power of my gaze could split her in half, and she actually has the good grace to laugh. "I know, I know. But I'm just a messenger. You know that old saying about not shooting them?"

I shake my head. "Charlie, I don't know if I can—"

“You can. Read the note. Hear what she says. *Live your life*. None of it will be easy, but I promise it’s all possible.”

I nod, a shaky, frightening motion from even my own point of view, and she hands me the folded piece of paper.

And then, with a sweet wave and a friendly hug of a smile, she walks back to her car, gets in, and drives away. Almost like she was never even here in the first place.

I toss the wood I was about to chop to the side and set down the axe before taking a seat on the big log I’ve been using as a block. My skin is clammy with sweat, and the dusty pieces of fine wood stick to my skin. I ignore the feeling, opening the fold of the paper to reveal the note on the page.

It’s written in Charlie’s handwriting, and it only takes the first two words to send me into a full-blown crying jag that makes every muscle in my face hurt with overuse.

Hi, Daddy.

Hello, my sweet Summblebee. By God, I have missed you.

It’s hard to let go, isn’t it?

Fuck.

It sure is for me. You’re the best dad on the planet, and every time I think of leaving you, I don’t want to go. But now that Norah’s here, I feel like I can. She’ll take care of you, and you’ll take care of her, and hopefully up in heaven, someone will take care of me. And it’s okay if you’re scared because I’m scared too. Just like you always said, it’s okay to be scared sometimes because sometimes the best stuff happens right after the scary part leaves. And well, I’m thinking that, for you, this is a really scary part, being without me. But that means the good part is coming. Don’t miss it, Dad, okay? Get to the good part. And if you can’t do it for you, do it for me.

Love you forever, Summer

Ten pounds of stress and ten more of uncertainty leave my body in a wave,
and my head falls back, the paper and my hands landing in my lap.

Get to the good part.

Summer took my meager little whisper and turned it into a shove. As of
today, I can't ignore Norah anymore.

46

Wednesday, September 29th

Norah

Josie stares at me while I stare at her, her position in her bed disturbed only by my psychotic, uninvited entrance into her room.

“Let me get this straight,” she says through a sleep-clogged, scratchy throat. “You called a doctor two towns over and made an appointment before normal business hours—before dawn—because you’re worried about someone seeing you going to the doctor and blabbing to Bennett about the impending bundle of joy before you get the chance?”

I follow along with her entire ramble, counting off the words for validity and completeness on my fingers, and then pause briefly when she’s done to consider before replying, “Yes. Exactly.”

“Norah—”

“No, no, Josie. You don’t get to tell me I’ve lost my mind when I’ve already been in the newspaper three times after living here for less than half a year, okay? You know I’m right to do it this way.”

“But today was my only day to sleep in while Todd opens. Whyyyy?”

“Because this was your only day to sleep in, silly. And I need you to go with me. Plus, this is the absolute earliest I could bribe this doctor into opening for me, and I had to promise a one-of-a-kind Bennett Bishop painting to her in order to do it.”

“Norah! And just exactly how are you going to follow through on that one, huh?”

I shrug. “Easy. I’m still doing all the legwork for Bennett’s day-to-day, and Breezy likes me. I’ll tell her where the painting is going, and she’ll send me the label to ship it.”

“Bless it. I need just an ounce of your energy for insane ideas.”

“Please.” I roll my eyes. “So says the woman who is furthering our Grandma’s legacy by selling mass-produced candles in a handmade Ponzi scheme.”

“Norah...”

“Josie, get up. I need a support person with me, okay?”

Josie sighs. “What? Handing me the stick with your pee on it four days ago wasn’t enough for you?”

“I need official confirmation. I need a reason to get up the courage to tell Bennett. I need...this. Can you just get out of bed...please?”

Josie shakes her head, but this time, she smiles. “Okay. But seriously, I’m not looking forward to the harebrained ideas you’re going to come up with while you’re hormonal.”

Twenty minutes later, just as the sun is rising, we’re in the car and on our way to Burlington. The last time I drove this way, I was in Bennett’s truck, following Summer’s helicopter to the hospital. I expect it to hurt like hell, but instead, I feel this weird sense of kismet. Almost like Summer herself is guiding me through this crazy time.

Finally, Josie pulls into the parking lot and shuts off the engine. I make a move to get out of the car, but she just sits there, a blank stare on her face. When I glare at her, she flinches out of it, teasing, “Oh, did you want me to go inside with you?”

I snort and she laughs, though it sounds a little forced. And when I look at her face again, something feels off, but I can’t put my finger on it.

“Are you—” I start to ask if she’s okay, but Josie is quick to cut me off as she hops out of the driver’s seat.

“Come on.”

I don’t hesitate to follow.

It’s a quick walk and no wait, thanks to the hour, so before I know it, we’re in the exam room, and the doctor is coming through the door. Josie sits up straighter in her chair and puts away her phone, and I tuck my arms across my plastic-drape-covered lap.

“Hi, Dr. Vesper. Thanks for agreeing to this.”

Dr. Vesper is a stout woman with a warm smile and a smattering of wrinkles right at the corners of her lips. She’s probably in her late fifties, judging by her skin, but I have to say, she looks to be aging really gracefully.

“Yes, well. I’m used to desperate moms-to-be on the phone, but I have to admit your desperation sounded a little different.”

I cringe a little. Yeah, I imagine it did, seeing as I’m not entirely sure I’m not hallucinating all of this at this point.

“All right, so we ran the urine sample you gave us, and you are definitely pregnant, my dear. HCG levels look good, but since you’re only six weeks or so, we’re going to hold off on the ultrasound. I don’t like to do them until at least eight weeks. That way, we can feel confident we’re going to hear a heartbeat.”

I know Dr. Vesper is still talking, but my brain is too busy doing a buzzing bounce on the words *you are definitely pregnant*.

I’m not crazy. This isn’t a hallucination—I am carrying a baby that Bennett Bishop and I made together.

Josie covers her mouth with a hand, and tough B that she is, I still see the glisten of a tear in her eye. I swear, if I’ve actually found the way to break through her normally hard shell by getting preggo, I might have to scream.

“So, today, all we’re really looking to do is get some information about family medical history, for both you and the father,” Dr. Vesper updates. “I’ll need you to fill out some paperwork, we’ll get you started on prenatals, and then we’ll get another appointment set up for you in a couple of weeks.”

Family medical history. For the first time since seeing two pink lines days ago, I am struck by the fact that I don’t know what the genetic history of Summer’s diagnosis was. Was it because of a gene carried by her mother? Or Bennett? Or was it a combination of the two?

Josie sees the look on my face and reads it correctly. When she speaks up so I don’t have to, I’m thankful. “The, uh, father has one other child who was diagnosed with Osteogenesis Imperfecta Type III.”

Dr. Vesper’s face is incredibly kind. “Okay. We’ll plan to do a full genetic panel then, at around ten weeks, and that’ll tell us everything we need to know. Until then, I don’t want you to worry. Though osteogenesis imperfecta is a genetic disorder, it’s often caused by a mutation in the type 1 collagen genes. If no one else in the father’s family has OI, it’s likely to have stemmed from the maternal side.”

Dr. Vesper finishes up the appointment with a smile and a packet of information, and I sit there reeling. From low to high and low again, I wish I could find some footing in this wild, unsteady storm.

I mostly just cry, and when I manage to stop crying, it only takes one thought of Summer or Bennett or this little baby growing in my belly to start crying all over again.

Josie tries to comfort me on our way out and on the drive home, but the truth is, I need Bennett. I need him present and strong and back on his high horse talking some sense into me about all the silly decisions I make.

I need him to tell me that he loves me and that he wants me and that, no matter what happens, we’re going to go through it together.

He’s still on my mind when my phone rings with a call from Breezy as we’re pulling back into Josie’s driveway nearly forty minutes later.

“Hello?”

“Norah, honey, I need you to do me a favor. There’s a painting in Bennett’s studio I need you to go pick up for me. Believe it or not, I’ve convinced him to donate something to an auction happening next week, and I need it overnighted. I know this is a shaky time for the two of you, but do you think you can run over there today? We’re in a time crunch.”

Shaking off all the mixed emotions of the morning, I smile into the phone. “Of course. That’s what you pay me for.”

Breezy laughs. “Thanks, Nore. And listen, I talked to Chet Smith, our lawyer, again this morning, and he says the DA is salivating. Turns out not only were ole Tommy and Eleanor bribing and traumatizing a bevy of young girls who worked for him, they were also involved in a high-end prostitution ring that included underage girls.”

A prostitution ring? With underage girls?

My jaw goes unhinged. “Holy shit, you’re kidding me!”

“What?” Josie asks, overhearing. “What is it?”

“I hate to say it, but I’m not all that surprised.” Breezy is still in my ear. “Too many of these rich frou-frous are sickos behind closed doors. And they’re sooo good at hiding it until they’re not. Anyway, I’d say they’re going to get what’s coming to them, and when I have more updates, I’ll let you know.”

“Jesus. Thanks, Breezy.”

“Of course, babe. Let me know when the painting is with the courier, okay?”

“I will,” I agree, hanging up when she does. An eager Josie is waiting for the news with perked ears.

“What? What’s going on?”

The whole thing is so crazy I don't know any other way to deliver the news besides just saying it as it is. "Thomas and Eleanor...they were running an underage prostitution ring."

"That is so fucked up."

"It's sick," I whisper, and my heart feels heavy thinking about all of the victims, all of the poor girls whose lives were ruined because of Thomas and our mother.

"But it's almost shocking how a large part of me isn't all that surprised."

My head whips toward her. "*Josie!*"

"I know, Nore. I know." She reaches out to grasp my hand. "But don't you dare blame yourself for any of it, you hear me? If you hadn't taken off from that wedding and made all the moves you have, they might still be at it, you know?"

I nod. I know. And if Alexis hadn't been brave enough to hand me that letter on my wedding day, who knows what would have happened? Who knows how long they would've been able to keep doing what they were doing?

I climb out of Josie's car and then clamber straight into my own, leaving her standing beside the Civic dumbfounded. "What are you doing? You're going somewhere?"

The words are almost unbelievable as I say them. "Yep. To Bennett's house. Wish me luck."

Josie shakes her head. "You don't need luck, babe. You've got Summer."

Damn straight.

I punctuate the sentiment by pulling her pink sunglasses out of my purse and sliding them on my face.

47

Bennett

Candles litter the studio, and Norah's painting—the one I've spent the last two days straight making—hangs casually on the wall. Pink and orange and peach all blend together in a swirling line and end in a chocolatey-brown center. It's warm and inviting and perfectly encapsulates everything Norah Ellis is to me.

Thanks to Breezy's involvement in my scheme, she should be here any second, and my heart is a Thoroughbred beneath my rib cage at the thought of seeing her.

Painstakingly long minutes pass in the flickering light as I will my ears to hear the sound of crunching gravel, so much so that when they finally do, I nearly convince myself I'm making it up.

But when moments pass and the sound of a car door slamming echoes across the walls, I steady myself for whatever this wild, loving troublemaker has to throw my way.

I deserve all of it, I'm sure, and maybe even more than that. But with Summer's adoring affection on my heart and mind, I'm bound and determined to get to the good part, no matter what scary parts lie between me and it.

Norah's head is down as she pushes through the door, the lack of overhead lights probably falsely assuring her that no one is in here. She slides Summer's pink sunglasses off her face and into her purse, and the fact that she's still wearing my daughter's favorite lenses makes my heart feel too big to fit inside my chest.

I wait for her to notice the candles, and as she does, a gasp falls from her most perfect lips, and her brown gaze jerks up to meet mine.

I try on a smile, though I have the supreme feeling it's haggard and shaky, and a magic light flares in her eyes.

"Bennett? What is all this?"

I step forward slowly, willing myself not to scare her by going too fast. She deserves to be cherished and romanced, and in order to do that, I have to find a way to be measured in my excitement.

"It's what's long overdue, Norah."

She looks from me to the candles and back again, and then she jerks her head to the side when she sees the painting.

"What is that?" Her voice is a whisper.

"It's you," I say simply. "It's what I feel, what I see, what my heart says when you're around."

She licks her lips. "It's beautiful."

"You have no idea."

"Bennett, I don't understand." She's looking at the painting again. "Breezy said—"

"Breezy was doing me a favor to get you here. See, I wasn't sure you'd answer a phone call directly from me, seeing as I've been such a dick and all." Her eyes jump to mine, and I smile. "Isn't that what you called me in Earl's that day?"

"Something like that." She snorts. "And then you made some crass remark about how big yours is."

"Yeah, that was pretty bad." I groan, but I quickly move the conversation toward the whole reason she's here. "Norah, that day, at the funeral, when you told me you still love me, I should've said it too. I love you—and have loved you, I'm pretty sure, since the moment I met you."

“The moment you met me, you kicked me out of your truck.”

I smirk. “Self-preservation.”

She shakes her head, and I move. Forward and fast, I grab her hand in mine and sink down onto one knee.

Her whole body locks up, and her eyes grow unbelievably wide. “Bennett, what are you doing?”

“Norah Ellis, love of my life, you came blazing in when I thought I needed you the least. You were fancy and fresh, and you had the kind of compassion I didn’t think anyone possessed. You ramble more than almost anyone I know, you are absolutely fucking terrible at coffee, and you’re a pain in the ass fifty percent of the time, but hell, so am I. I want days with you, not without you, and even in my darkest hours, you gave to me without any expectation of anything in return. You loved my daughter like I did, and now, I want to love you like she did. With my whole heart, my whole soul, and my last breath.”

Her knees shake, and so does her breathing.

“Norah, please, I’m begging you...would you do me the honor of marrying me?”

“Bennett...I...I have to tell you something.”

It’s not the answer I’m expecting, but I’ll be honest, I was expecting a no. This...I think I can handle.

“Is the thing you have to tell me ‘Yes,’ by any chance?”

“Bennett...I’m...I’m pregnant.”

A candle blows out in the corner and then another one at the side, and before I know it, the whole room is cloaked in darkness. And then, just like it never happened, the candles are lit again.

“What was that?” Norah whispers, scared. And that’s when it hits me that this is Summer’s way of saying hello.

My throat is thick as I choke around a ball of emotion. “Pregnant?”

“I just found out,” she whispers. “And I know this is probably not the best time for you to hear this news, and I know—”

“Norah, I love you,” I tell her and rise to my feet. In an instant, I pull her into my arms. “Marry me. Be with me. Raise our baby with me.”

“You’re...” She pauses and leans back to meet my eyes. Tears stream down her cheeks, and her bottom lip quivers with her words. “You’re okay with this?”

“Okay with this? Norah, I want it all, and I want it with you.” I press my lips to hers, taking her mouth in the kind of kiss I’ve been desperate to feel with her for what feels like forever. “Marry me,” I say again, my lips just barely grazing hers.

And this time, she answers.

“Yes, Bennett. Of course, yes.”

My life and all its scary parts flash before me like a blinding light. And then, peace.

Just like that...we’ve made it to the good part.

EPILOGUE

Tuesday, November 9th

Norah

With Bennett's new paintbrush tucked in my mouth, I grab the mug of coffee I just made in one hand and my laptop in the other and rush to the side door of the house to get to the studio.

For the past few weeks, he's been back in his studio and painting. And with the pace he's been going lately, I know he's been up and working for hours. But when it comes to me being able to wake up in the mornings and start my day when he starts his, this pregnancy is kicking my ass.

I'm halfway there when my phone rings in my pocket, and I have to shuffle to figure out how I can free up a hand. Bennett's log-splitting station is nearby, so I make a quick jog, set down the steaming coffee, and grab my phone out of my pocket just as the ringtone is coming to an end.

There's no time to look at the caller, so on a wing and a prayer, I put it up to my ear and say, "Hello?"

"Hi there. May I speak with Norah Ellis, please?"

My eyebrows knit together slightly. "This is she."

"Hi, Norah. My name's Amanda. I'm Dr. Vesper's nurse, calling from Burlington Women's Group. Dr. Vesper wanted me to call to let you know that we got the results of the genetic testing back from your blood work."

Tears sting my eyes as every emotion flashes through me in a blink. Hope and worry and happiness and a sad, deep longing for Summer. Missing her

is just part of who I am now. And I know that goes for Bennett, too, but on an even deeper level.

Two weeks after he proposed and we reunited, I had my first ultrasound, and the audible sounds of our baby's heartbeat brought us both to tears. It felt like Summer was in the room with us. Like she was right there, watching the screen, and witnessing her little brother or sister move around in my belly.

But ever since then, in the back of my mind, I've been waiting on pins and needles to find out the results of my blood work.

"Do you have a minute for me to go over them with you?"

I inhale a deep breath and brace myself. "Yes."

It doesn't matter that I'm standing in the middle of the frigid outdoors of Vermont in November or that I was already running behind. I'd stop in a pool of fresh lava to hear this without delay.

"Okay, great. Let's see. As far as genetic abnormalities...we didn't find any. With the risk of OI, we'll likely do another ultrasound at eighteen weeks or so to be conclusive, but Dr. Vesper is fairly confident we're looking at a happy, healthy baby."

I swallow hard, putting a hand over my mouth to stop a sob. Everything inside me feels like it's just been released from a vise. "We can also tell you the sex, if you'd like. Is that something you're interested in knowing, or would you like to wait?"

Truly, I hadn't even considered whether we'd find out or not, but right now, in this moment, I know with absolute certainty. "I want to know."

"Well then, congratulations. It's a girl!"

It's all I can do to get out a shaky, "Thank you," and hang up the phone before stumbling through fallen leaves the rest of the way into Bennett's studio. His coffee cup is forgotten, and if the dang thing wasn't so expensive, I definitely would have left the laptop behind too.

As it is, I carry it just inside the door and ditch it as soon as I can. A leaf sticks to my bare foot, and I lean down to pull it off.

Like a lightning bolt, it hits me.

The leaves that've hit me in the face every time I've gone to Summer's grave, the leaves at my feet, the leaf I just pulled away... Summer may be gone for now, but our sweet girl made sure to bring us the next season.

"Autumn," I say, startling Bennett from his work as he notices my red-mottled skin and altogether rattled exterior for the first time.

"What? Jeez, Norah, are you okay? How long were you outside like that?" He rushes toward me, putting down his brushes and wiping his hands before pulling me into his arms and rubbing at mine vigorously to encourage more circulation.

"I'm fine. I'm good. Actually, I'm great. I...well, I stopped to take a phone call from the OB's office."

Bennett's entire body freezes.

"They were calling to tell me that the genetic testing came back normal." His eyes fall closed, and I swear I feel the sting of his tears in my own nose. "And they also told me it's a girl."

He pulls back slightly, his entire body rigid, but his blue eyes warm with emotion. "A girl?"

"A girl." I smile through the tears that are now making their way down my cheeks. "And I want to name her Autumn."

His voice is a whisper. "Norah."

"This baby is a gift from Summer, Ben. I know it in my heart and soul. Our Summer brought us Autumn."

Bennett nods, his throat no doubt too clogged to talk at first. When he finds the words, they're noticeably raspy. "It's perfect."

His lips find mine, and I give in to the feeling I get every time they do. It's comfort and happiness and right on the edge of passion. It's the kind of kiss that you want to repeat over and over and over again for as long as you live.

I giggle softly when he finally pulls back, and his lips find my neck, working a line from my chin down to my collarbone. "I have to go make you a new cup of coffee. I left the first one out in the cold."

He snorts, and the vibration of air is enough to make me tingle all the way to my toes. "Probably a good place for it."

I guffaw. "Excuse me! I've gotten a lot better at coffee-making, I'll have you know."

He laughs. "Not better enough."

"Fine, then. Get your own coffee, why don't you?"

Bennett smiles. "I will. But I'm going to get something else first." He lifts me up by the hips, and I gasp, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and my legs around his waist.

My heart races with excitement as he carries me to the drop cloth in front of his current work in progress and lays me down. Slowly and reverently, Bennett works his way from the top of my body to the bottom with his lips, worshiping every inch of exposed skin and pulling back my clothes to reveal the rest. I shiver once, but when the heater kicks on in the small space and Bennett removes my panties, I don't feel cold anymore.

And then his lips seal over me between my legs, and the whole notion of being anything but incredibly hot ceases to exist.

"Ben," I moan softly, letting my thighs fall open as much as I can so he has room to work. It's not my natural inclination—normally, I'm a thigh-clencher—but I've been trying to work on it for the good of the reward.

I sink my fingertips into his hair as he swirls his tongue around my clit, and my back arches off the floor in silent applause. Over and over, he uses his tongue to stimulate my nerves, and I wriggle my back against the makeshift

pallet restlessly. All that tension I released is back, but this time, it's like the sting on Cupid's bow, fighting for release.

Bennett's groan of pleasure at my excitement vibrates against me, and in a blaze of glory, I come in a huge, overwhelming wave that arches my back off the floor.

It's bliss.

The orgasm, the moment, but more than anything, the life this runaway bride with a dark secret managed to find.



Wednesday, June 9th

I wake up with a start and look toward the crib beside our bed. It's empty and I sit up, utterly confused. My head whips toward Bennett's side, but when I find that empty too, I crawl off the mattress and head out of our room.

My bare feet tap against the hardwood floor as I head down the hallway, but the closer I get to the kitchen, the more my ears can make out the soft sounds of music.

With only a dim light filling the room, Bennett is holding our almost-two-week-old Autumn against his chest, and a song by Depeche Mode plays from the wireless Bluetooth speaker on the island. She looks so small against his big frame as he sways her back and forth to the beat and quietly sings the lyrics into where his lips rest on the top of her tiny, blond-hair-covered head.

I've never taken the time to really listen to the poignant lyrics of this song, "Enjoy the Silence," but as I hear Bennett's deep voice caress around them, one tear slips from my lids and down my cheek.

This is all I've ever wanted and needed, too.

I think about Bennett's wild past. I think about what he is capable of and how Thomas looked when he was on the receiving side of his anger. I think about Summer and the precious bond she had with him. And I think about Autumn and me and how safe and protected I feel because of Bennett.

Little girls really do have the power to tame the baddest of men.

The more I watch them, the more I watch Bennett press kisses to the top of Autumn's sleeping head and the way his big hands tenderly hold her against his chest, the more I feel myself falling in love with him all over again.

I love this man with every fiber of my being, and I swear, that love only grows each day, only roots itself deeper into my soul.

I don't know how long I silently stand here or how long it takes Bennett to notice me, but when his eyes meet mine, a smile lifts both corners of his mouth.

"Our girl was a little fussy, so I fed her a bottle, but I was hoping you'd stay sleeping," he whispers toward me.

I walk over to join their little dance, wrapping my arms around his shoulders so that Autumn is carefully hugged between the two of us.

"I love you so much," I whisper toward him, and he leans forward to press a kiss to my forehead.

"I love you too."

"I want to marry you."

He smirks. "Well, that's good news, because that's the plan."

"No." I shake my head. "I mean, I want to marry you now. As soon as possible."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I want to get married in July. In summer."

His eyes search mine. “Norah, I really love the sentiment, but you just had a baby, sweetheart. Don’t you think we should wait until next July? I’m sure our sweet Summer wouldn’t mind if we wait another year to say ‘I do.’”

“I don’t care,” I answer honestly. Because I don’t. I don’t care that I’ve just had a baby or that my body isn’t anywhere near how it was before I got pregnant. I don’t care about anything besides my future with Bennett and our sweet baby Autumn and keeping the memory of our Summer alive as much as we can. “I want to get married this July. It’s what I want, and I know in my heart it’s what Summer would’ve wanted to.”

“This July?” he questions, and I nod.

“Yes. This July, I want to marry you in our backyard, in the same spot where we watched shooting stars with Summer.”

His smile is soft, and his kiss is even softer as he places one to the top of Autumn’s head before pressing one to the top of my head too. “I want that too.”



Saturday, July 9th

Bennett

Today, with my precious baby Autumn in my arms, I say “I do” during the prime of the hottest season.

My wife-to-be picked this date on a whim of symbolism and the inclusion of our sweet Summer, and to be honest, I can’t think of any better way to do it. Autumn is just over six weeks old, and when it comes to making our family complete, it feels like I’ve been waiting forever.

Clay stretches out on the tan chaise in the corner of my studio, and I bounce up and down and all around to keep my girl happy.

Breezy, Josie, and Lillian are in the house with Norah, getting ready for our backyard wedding. I know, without a shadow of a doubt, she's got to be laughing at how opposite it is from the aisle she didn't go down.

"You think Josie's going to like me in pink?" Clay asks from his reclining position, fiddling with the silk fabric running down the center of his shirt, and I roll my eyes.

"Clay, I swear to God, if you make a scene with that sweet woman today, I'm going to have to kick your ass."

"You can't threaten to kick my ass while you're holding a baby," he replies through a scoff. "That's, like, illegal."

"Illegal or not, I'll do it. Give Josie some peace for the day, for fuck's sake, okay?"

"That's easy advice for you to give, seeing as you've got the woman of your dreams walking down the aisle to you today, bud. But I'm still missing mine. Cut me some slack."

"Yeah, she's walking down the aisle today, but we've walked through fire to get here. Why don't you start by making whatever you did to fuck it up with Josie right in the first place? I feel like that'd be a better strategy than constantly getting in her face."

"Fourth of July wasn't my fault. They practically sealed us up together in that fireworks tent!"

"Right." I guffaw. "And Easter? What about that? Was that your fault?"

Clay sits up and shrugs. "I maybe coulda hid the eggs somewhere other than her shop."

"And who can forget New Year's in the square and Halloween at Earl's party?"

"All right, all right, I get it. I'll let it be today."

I smile, holding Autumn's head close and breathing in her baby smell. "Thanks. I appreciate it. I want today to be perfect for Norah."

Clay jumps up and comes over to give me a pounding slap on my free shoulder. "It will be, dude. Whole town's been working all night to make sure of it."



I stand at the altar, and a drape of bright pink fabric Norah made from the blanket we lay on with Summer to see shooting stars hangs over a golden bar behind me. It blows in the breeze, carrying heavenly memories with it, and the bulk of the town sits in white folding chairs down the slight hill of my pasture. Norah and her bridesmaids wait in the barn for the beginning of their march, and Clay holds our sweet baby Autumn at my side.

Breezy steps out first, carrying a bouquet of vibrant pink roses and wearing a matching pink dress, and I imagine Summer smiling down at all the touches of her that Norah's made sure to include everywhere.

I take a deep breath and then another, waiting impatiently for my bride as Lillian and then Josie make their way down the aisle too, forming a line on the other side of the altar and waiting.

Finally, as the music changes, Norah steps out in a white lace dress that falls off her shoulders, her natural, wild, curly hair floating all over the place. She has a pink belt at her waist and a pink bundle of flowers too, and her bare feet showcase glittery pink toenail polish.

Sheriff Peeler smiles like a loon at her side, an elbow linked through hers as he escorts her down the aisle.

The whole town is here again, just like at the fake wedding we had for Summer last year. But other than our sisters, people linked to us by blood are noticeably absent.

Her mother Eleanor wasn't invited. Though, I don't imagine she could have made it even if she had been since she's awaiting her trial, set to start this fall, in a Manhattan correctional facility, along with Thomas Conrad Michael King III. Clearly, they're not wearing pink today, but instead, orange.

Just the thought gives me a zing of joy I can hardly describe.

Of course, I'd never invite my asshole brother. And my parents couldn't be bothered, busy flitting through their meaningless lives. I wish I could say I was surprised, but after they missed Summer's funeral and Autumn's birth, I didn't expect them here. And if it weren't for Norah, I never even would have asked them to be.

Norah's smile is big and bold and beautiful, and her eyes shine in the powerful sun. Butterflies dance throughout the tall grass around us, and I have to clutch at my chest to ease the warmth inside it.

She's everything I never knew I wanted. She's everything I thought I didn't need. Norah Ellis is the love of my life.

"Who gives this woman to be married?" Pastor Bob asks from behind me as Pete and Norah come to a stop just in front.

"I do," Pete boasts proudly before placing her hand in mine.

Norah's smile is soft as she kisses Pete on the cheek, and an unbelievable blush hits him right underneath. I didn't know the old goat had it in him.

Norah hands her bouquet to Josie, and Lillian steps forward to fix the back of her dress as Norah turns to face me. I take her hands in mine and immediately have the urge to skip all the formal stuff and go straight to the kiss.

Norah smiles and winks, and I swear she knows exactly what I'm thinking.

With a small shake of her head, she puts her hands in mine.

"Welcome, welcome, everyone," Bob recites, scanning the crowd with his signature smile. "Thanks for joining us today to celebrate this magical

occasion.” His focus turned back to us, he carries on. “Norah and Bennett, today we gather to join your lives together—though the baby probably did that pretty well already.” The crowd laughs, and I roll my eyes. “Anyway, let’s get started, shall we?”

I nod eagerly, making Norah’s smile soften with affection.

“Norah, will you take Bennett to be your husband, through thick and thin, sickness and health, for richer or for poorer, until your dying breath?”

“I will,” Norah answers quickly, and my fingers spasm around hers.

“Bennett, how about you? Will you take Norah to be your wife, through thick and thin—”

“I will.”

“Bennett, I didn’t finish.”

“It doesn’t matter, Bob,” I say simply. “I’ll take Norah through anything.”

Norah licks at her lips as tears moisten her eyes, and I reach up to catch the first drop before it falls. “I love you, Norah.”

“I love you too, Bennett.”

Pastor Bob laughs. “Well, I’m not sure that you two need me here, but just in case, let’s do the rings, okay?”

Norah nods through a laugh, turning to Josie, and I turn to Clay to get my own. “Now, Norah, you’re going to slide your ring on Bennett’s finger and repeat after me. With this ring, I thee wed.”

“With this ring, I thee wed.”

“Good. Now, Bennett, same to you. With this ring, I thee wed.”

“With this ring, I thee wed,” I repeat, sliding the ring, but stopping abruptly when I see it. Tattooed around Norah’s ring finger just like mine—**Summer**.

“Norah.” Her name is a whisper.

“I did it last night. I wanted to do it earlier, but I was afraid you’d see it and it’d spoil the surprise.”

I pull her body to mine, slamming our lips together in a kiss. She tastes perfect and feels perfect and is...perfect.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride,” Pastor Bob says so quickly the words practically run together. Lips dancing over Norah’s, I chuckle as her mouth pulls up into a laugh.

“Sorry, Bob. I just couldn’t wait a second more.”

The wait from the moment I saw her on that yellow bridge has been long enough.

Finally, Norah Ellis is officially my wife.



Norah

I dance and sing to myself as I finish washing my hands in the powder room, my cheeks filled with a perfect, happy glow.

I can’t help but notice how different this trip to the bathroom is from the one I had in a wedding dress a year ago.

The door bumps me in the butt as it closes behind me, and I laugh a little, my buzzed brain enjoying all the little things today.

As I make my way back outside, I take a minute to let all the goodness soak in. Bennett and Breezy are in the middle of the dance floor, swaying together with a sleeping Autumn in their arms.

Sheriff Peeler is flirting with Eileen Martin, of all people, and Betty and Earl are cutting one hell of a rug. Lil has found a group of old men to entertain over by the bar, and lover boy Lance has more than one teen girl

hanging on his every word. It's a perfect smattering of every walk of life and a reminder of the joy I feel living here every day.

The only people missing are two I'd never expect together, and that fact alone makes me feel suspicious in a way I can't ignore. Walking the perimeter of the party slowly, I glance into the dark shadows with avid eyes, searching for my sister and the one man who always seems to be trying to get her attention these days.

It's a moonless, star-filled night, though, and the bright lights of the party make it way harder to see than I expected.

On my third lap, I'm about to give up, but the sound of a slap gets my attention and does it right quick.

Searching the area of the sound, I finally catch a glimpse of Josie's back and Clay's surprised face, a trail of red lipstick on his lips.

Holy shit. Looks like I might not be the only Ellis to do the slap-and-kiss combo in this town.

I walk toward them carefully, ready to intervene if necessary, but I don't make it more than a step and a half before the need to stop fills me right up.

"Dammit, Clay," Josie whisper-yells, her heartbroken voice making me put a hand to my chest. "You can't fix this. You can't will it away. You can't turn back time."

"Jose—"

"No!" she snaps, making the hair on the back of my neck stand up. "After it happened, you kept right on living, but I'll *never* be the same."

I don't know what's going on, but I know one thing—it's time Josie and I *really* talked about her divorce.

Time's up, sis. It's your turn to do the talking.

THE END

It's safe to say, Josie and Clay's story is more than overdue. Between their tumultuous history and the sheer number of secrets they have, you're not going to want to miss this one!

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XOXO,

Max & Monroe



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