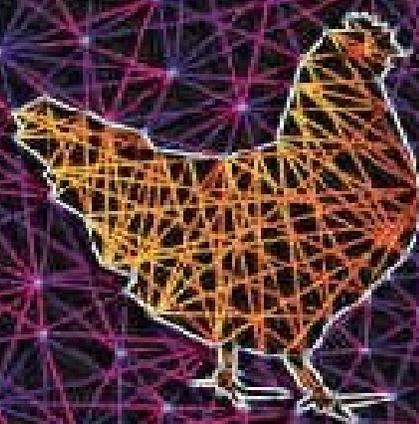


ENGAGEMENT AND ESPIONAGE



PENNY REID

ENGAGEMENT AND ESPIONAGE

SOLVING FOR PIE: CLETUS AND JENN MYSTERIES SERIES

BOOK #1

PENNY REID

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DEDICATION

*To Amanda, thank you for the daily text messages threatening bodily harm if
word counts were not reached.
And to all the Cletus and Jenn stans, this book is most definitely 100% for you.*

CHAPTER ONE

“Dreams do come true, if only we wish hard enough. You can have anything in life if you will sacrifice everything else for it.”

— J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

Jenn

There’s no faking quality.

A thing was either high quality or it wasn’t.

I was convinced Mr. Richard Badcock’s organic, free range eggs were the highest quality anywhere in Green Valley, East Tennessee since Nancy Danvish had retired. Perhaps the whole of Tennessee. Maybe the southeast USA. For that matter, quite possibly in the entire universe.

They were the platinum-diamond Nobel Prize of eggs. Some were narrow, some were wide; some had sage green shells, robin blue, tawny brown, or snow white; some were even speckled. But all his eggs contained firm whites and the most gorgeous orangey yolks, brighter than orange sherbet—*don’t get me started on the yolks!*—that I’d ever seen in all my years of baking.

I didn’t take to broadcasting this much, mostly because folks already thought I was a little off, but I didn’t think anything I made tasted as good if I didn’t use Richard’s eggs. My creations lacked a richness, a texture, one I could only achieve with Badcock eggs. And that was fact.

Which was why I was currently up to my eyeballs in despair.

“What do you mean you don’t have any eggs?” I looked behind Mr. Richard Badcock, searching his huge gated lawn and fancy henhouse in the distance.

It had white gables and eaves, a hand-welded copper gutter, and a cedar

picket fence.

“Just what I said, Ms. Sylvester. I’m plum out of eggs.” His voice was firm and hard and—if I wasn’t mistaken—laced with distrust. “But if you want some fresh chicken, I know the Lee farm just butchered—”

“I can’t put a chicken thigh in a custard, Richard!” I wailed, unashamed in my anguish, my teeth chattering in the early January cold snap. “It’s not a gelatin. Fat and meat and bones won’t do me any good.”

My gaze shifted back to the man, moved over this new Mr. Badcock. I had no idea why he was behaving this way, but I couldn’t spare a thought to that. I was too much occupied by the great egg dearth of the decade.

Mr. Richard Badcock sighed, his eyebrows tenting on his forehead in an arrangement of both compassion—*finally*—and helplessness. “I am very sorry, Ms. Sylvester. If I had some eggs, I’d give them to you.”

“I’m sorry too, but this doesn’t make any sense. You must have a hundred chickens back there, and—”

“We have sixty-one chickens.” He sniffed, looking down his nose at me, once again hostile. “Unlike some folks, we believe our hens need space, autonomy, greens, and serenity to be good layers.”

Good Lord, now I’d offended his serene layers.

“Of course, Mr. Badcock.” I tried to make my tone conciliatory. “And I can’t tell you how much I just love—and I do mean *love*—those eggs. Which is why, please pardon my outburst, I am feeling a great deal of desolation at the prospect of baking without your superior product.”

His shoulders relaxed, apparently mollified, and he quit peering at me, instead sighing for maybe the tenth time since I showed up. “Ms. Sylvester, there ain’t nothing I can do. I *am* sorry. But we had two unexpected—and very large—orders late last night. I’m cleaned out for at least two weeks, and—”

“Two weeks?” I shrieked, completely beside myself, and clutched my chest.

He sighed again, taking off his hat and wiping his brow with the back of his flannel-covered forearm, saying nothing. His old brown eyes moved over me with a look that seemed speculative, and I got the sense he was having himself an internal debate.

Meanwhile, I was going to cry.

I could feel it. The twinge in my nose, the sting behind my eyes, the unsteadiness of my chin. Nothing seemed to be going right. Usually, I could handle a string of bad luck, but I was exhausted from pulling long hours at the bakery between Thanksgiving and New Year’s.

And I missed Cletus. Desperately. I’d barely seen or spoken to him, and we’d had *zero* alone time together since the end of November.

Being close to tears at present was about a lot more than the unfriendliness of the farmer in front of me, withholding the output of his serene layers. It was just the final straw.

I couldn't go two weeks without Badcock eggs. I couldn't. Folks would *remark*. They'd notice. We'd be asked if we'd changed our recipes, and not for the better. Early last month, I'd gone three days without the eggs, using instead run-of-the-mill store-bought ones, and the church choir near pitched a fit about my coconut custard pie.

"It's fine." Mrs. Seymour—the pastor's wife—had said to my momma. "But what I don't understand is, why didn't Jenn make it? We specifically asked for Jennifer's coconut custard pie."

My momma had hemmed and hawed and, in the end, she'd lied. She'd told them an under-baker made it and had eventually given it to them for free.

The thing about the church choir was, it didn't take much to get them to sing, *if you know what I mean*. In fact, one might even say they were gleeful about spreading unhappy news.

Therefore, once I did have the eggs, I made coconut custard tarts with shaved coconut and dropped them off—in person—to the Saturday choir practice. All had been forgiven and the Donner Bakery's praises were sung once more.

But . . . two weeks? With the church picnic coming up? And the first round of entries for the state fair due next week?

Lord have mercy.

I wrestled my panic and nodded for no reason, blinking away the irritating tears. "Well," I croaked when I found my voice, "I guess—I guess—"

Mr. Badcock made a clicking sound with his tongue. "Fine, fine. How about this?" His reluctance was obvious. The reluctance gave my heart hope. "I have four dozen eggs up at the homestead."

"Oh, Mr. Badcock, I would—"

"Now settle down." He lifted his hands, even the one holding the hat. "I'll give them to you, for double the price."

I swallowed again because that was a tough pill. *Double the price?* His eggs were already ten dollars a dozen. Part of me wanted to argue. I told that part to hush. Serene eggs didn't grow on trees.

"O—okay." I tried to smile but couldn't.

"And from now on," he continued sternly, "the Donner Bakery needs to preorder their eggs three months in advance, with a—uh . . . fifty percent down payment. That's right, fifty percent." He nodded as though agreeing with himself.

I found myself momentarily at a loss for words, not because these were

unfair terms, but because Mr. Badcock had always been opposed to preorders or prepayments prior to right this minute, said he didn't like the paperwork.

Nevertheless, it took me less than a second to respond. "Of course. Absolutely, Mr. Badcock. In fact, I'll be happy to place our order for the entire year right now."

He blinked several times, visibly startled. "You would?"

"Yes. I most certainly would. I don't want anyone's eggs but yours."

He blinked some more, standing straighter. "You wouldn't?" His voice cracked like an eggshell.

"No." On a whim, I reached forward and held his hand. He looked between my face and our joined fingers as I spoke from the heart. "Mr. Badcock, your eggs are . . . well, they're magical. And I guess I should have told you prior to now, but all other eggs in comparison might as well be applesauce."

Applesauce being the low-fat, vegan replacement for eggs in baking recipes. In other words, a sad and inferior imitation.

"Oh," he breathed, blinking faster now. A bit of color touched his cheeks. "My goodness. I don't—I mean, I don't know what to say. This is all very unexpected."

I released his hand, stepping away as he watched me retreat. "Just, thank you. Thank you for your eggs. Thank you for taking the time to raise those chickens right."

"You're welcome, Ms. Sylvester." He sounded a bit dazed, but also proud.

As he should be. He should be proud of his serene layers.

"Anyway," I laughed lightly. "Look at me, getting all emotional. Again, I'm sorry for my outburst. Should I send a check over? With the deposit for this year? Or how do you want to handle that?"

"Uh . . ." He glanced at the ground, looking like he was frantically trying to locate his scattered thoughts. "I guess, uh, a check is fine."

"Glorious!" I clapped my hands together. "I'll send my momma over on her way home from the hotel." Hopefully, she wouldn't mind.

Now he stiffened and his face blanched. "Your—your momma?"

"Yes." I tried to give him a reassuring smile. It was no secret in Green Valley that my momma was as well respected as she was feared, especially with the local business owners.

"Mrs. Donner-Sylvester?" His voice cracked again, and he pulled at his open shirt collar like it was too tight.

"It's just Ms. Donner now," I reminded quietly. "The divorce isn't anywhere near final yet, but she prefers it."

"Oh, yes. That's right." Mr. Badcock pushed his fingers through his sweaty

hair, frowning as he glanced down at his clothes. “What time would she be by?”

“About nine, I suspect. As long as that’s not too late or disagreeable to you.” Glancing at my watch, I saw it was now half past three. This egg encounter had taken much longer than I’d expected. I needed to get those four dozen eggs back to the bakery and in the fridge soon. Three new orders had come in—all for custard—and the way I made it, the mixture needed to rest overnight.

Plus, I couldn’t be late for the jam session, not again.

“Well, all right then.” Mr. Badcock, seeming both overwhelmed and resigned by the turn of events, motioned me forward. “Let’s go up to the house and get you those eggs.”

I followed dutifully, happy to have avoided a disaster.

At least, for now.

CHAPTER TWO

“Selfish— a judgment readily passed by those who have never tested their own power of sacrifice.”

— George Eliot, *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe*

Cletus

“**W**hat’s wrong?” Drew leaned toward me as folks closest to our makeshift stage swarmed around my brother Billy, chattering good-naturedly and getting on my last nerve with their vociferous compliments.

Mind, the compliments didn’t ruffle my feathers, it was the talking and ensuing racket that had my back up. If folks could’ve communicated their praise via some other means—perhaps via a silent handshake and shared stare of admiration, or a handwritten note showcasing their superior pen(wo)manship, or a mime routine with or without the painted on face, or an interpretive dance—I wouldn’t have cared. Mylar balloons with tidy messages were an underutilized yet readily available resource, for example.

A *silence ordinance*, that’s what we needed. A day where folks would be forced to keep their voice boxes on the shelf or else pay a fine. I made a mental note to discuss it with the mayor, he’d always been pragmatic about new revenue streams.

“Cletus?” Drew was still looking at me, one blond eyebrow lifted higher than the other.

We'd just finished the last stanza of "Orange Blossom Special." I surmised my friend's unbalanced brow and question were in response to the frown affixed to my features because I should have been pleased. I was not pleased.

I'd semi-coerced my brother Billy into singing with us. A rare achievement. Billy hardly ever agreed to lend his pipes to our Friday night improvising at the Green Valley jam session. Drew was on guitar, I was on banjo, Grady was on fiddle, and with Billy on vocals we sounded like one of those real, bluegrass studio bands.

Again, I should have been pleased. And yet, I was not pleased.

Jenn was late.

Correction, she wasn't just late, she was late *as usual* on a night she'd promised to be early.

"It's time to take a break." I didn't look at my watch again, I'd already read it ten times. "I need to make a call."

Drew's stare turned probing. Abruptly, his expression cleared. He smirked a little, in that very Drew-like way of his. Which is to say, his mouth barely moved.

"Ah. I see." Drew nodded, returning his attention to his instrument, and plucked out a C followed by a G. "Where's Jenn, Cletus?"

A person walked between Drew and I just as the quiet words left his mouth, the man sidestepping and almost knocking my banjo with his knee in his eagerness to reach Billy. Drew lifted the neck of his guitar to keep it safe, tracking the lumbering moron with his eyes.

Usually I'd take notice, add this person to my list of affronters as *One who does not respect the sanctity of the banjo*. But I didn't, because I was fixating.

Billy had finished the song with flourish, which earned a happy gasp from the audience. They'd begun their applause before the strings had ceased vibrating. Several of the spectators had even come to their feet to whoop and holler their appreciation. I wasn't surprised. My brother had a stellar voice, I mean cosmically good.

He should've been a musician. Or he could've been one of those engineer fellas with a mohawk on the TV, telling folks how rockets work. If he hadn't had his leg broken in high school, he also could've been a pro football player.

But no.

Now he was the vice president in charge of everything at Payton Mills in the middle of Appalachia. *And he's probably going to be a state senator next. And after that, a congressman.*

My expression of displeasure intensified. I was officially fixating on my misaligned hopes for my brother, determined to be irritated with his course in

life since I couldn't be content with my present circumstances.

She better not be working.

I swear, if that dragon lady mother of hers was keeping her late at the bakery yet again, I would . . .

I would . . .

I won't do a thing.

Dammit.

I took a deep breath, scowling at the bright red theater chair in the front row. Next to it was a wooden chair that my youngest brother, Roscoe, would've called *mid-century modern*, or something hoity-toity like that.

"Where's Jenn?" Drew repeated the question, apparently convinced the lumbering disrupter was no longer a threat to his instrument, his attention coming back to me.

"I don't know, Drew." I didn't precisely snap at my friend; it was definitely more of a nip than a bite.

He ignored my hostility, strumming out a chord. "She working late again?"

"Apparently." I said this under my breath.

It wasn't my place to say anything to Diane Donner-Sylvester (soon-to-be just Donner) on behalf of her daughter. It was up to Jenn to stand up to her mother, set and enforce boundaries. Jenn needed to be the one to call the shots. I knew that. But I didn't have to like it.

Maybe once we get married . . .

A smoky fire of restlessness rekindled in my stomach. Over Thanksgiving, we'd—

Well, I'd—

Dammit.

The truth was, we'd discussed marriage once. Just once. I'd asked her while we'd been informal. She'd said yes. That was that.

But now it was January, and she hadn't deigned to mention the wedding, or marriage. Furthermore, when she introduced me, I was a boyfriend.

Boy. Friend.

Now I ask, would anyone who'd met me ever use either of those words as a descriptor? Can you imagine? And would a boyfriend have five different engagement rings—all of superior cut, color, and internal flawlessness—sitting in his top dresser drawer, just waiting for the best opportunity to clandestinely ascertain her preference? When would she have five minutes to spare for such an exercise? I had no idea.

In her defense, Jenn's busiest season was between Thanksgiving and New Year's, and, unfortunately, her momma was going through a tough time. Diane

Donner-Sylvester's soon-to-be ex-husband—and Jennifer's daddy—Kip Sylvester, was a sinister pain in the ass.

Thus, I did my duty as her betrothed and administered foot rubs and back rubs, completed her grocery shopping, maintained her homestead, car maintenance, and burdened her with absolutely no expectations.

That's right. No expectations. Merely a heckvalot of anticipation.

In the meantime, Jenn's porch had received two new coats of lacquer, her shutters had all been cleaned, repainted, and rehung, I'd installed two ceiling fans in anticipation of the summer, and I'd replaced her garbage disposal.

But New Year's was last week. I'd gathered all my anticipation and hopes, stacked them in a pile, and stapled them to today's date on the calendar. She'd broken promises before, but that was all in the past, all forgiven and forgotten. Tonight was the night, our night. Finally. She was supposed to leave work on time, come to the jam session, and we'd make up for lost time.

Sitting as straight as my spine would allow, I craned my neck, lifting my chin and peering at the back row of the room, specifically the seats closest to the door. My attention flicked through the faces there. Mr. Roger Gangersworth was wearing unsurprising overalls; Posey Lamont was wearing a bright pink shirt heavy with unfortunate plastic beading in the shape of a rainbow, except it was a calamitous arrangement of RYOGBVI instead of ROYGBIV; and Mrs. Scotia Simmons wore a lemony expression indicative of a woman who'd lived a self-centered existence and was thusly dissatisfied with everything and everyone.

But there was no Jennifer.

I needed to get away from the crowd and their talking.

"Go on with the set if you want. I can jump back in when I return from making my call." Standing, I placed my banjo in its case, and leaned the case against the back corner, away from the threat of any future lumbering morons.

"Fine. Once Billy's fan club clears out, we'll get started again." Drew sounded unperturbed at the loss of my superior banjo skills, which meant he must've sensed the call was important. "Tell Jenn I say hi."

I grunted once, in both acknowledgement and aggravation. Great. Now I had to remember to say "hi" to Jenn from Drew on the off chance she picked up her phone when I called. And if she didn't pick up, I'd have to remember to say "hi" the next time I happened to see her.

Why did people do that? Send salutations through other people? I am not the post office, nor am I a candygram. Why not send a text message if one is so eager to impart a greeting? Why did I have to be a "hi" messenger? Another reason why a silence ordinance was needed: if today had been a no-talking day, the chances of Drew writing me a note, pointedly asking me to say "hi" to Jenn,

would've precipitously decreased my chances of being an unwilling messenger of said "hi" or anything else.

You don't write a note unless you mean the words. Not like talking. Folks often talk just to hear themselves, maybe because thoughts don't exist inside their brains. Talking, I was beginning to suspect, was the root of all evil. The ease of it in particular was an issue.

Talk it out. Talk it over. Talk it through.

Useless.

If more folks thought it out, thought it over, and thought it through instead of talking, then the world would be less cluttered with opinions and assholes.

Navigating the room, I made a point to give Posey Lamont a wide berth, careful to keep my beard far away from her beaded shirt. The last thing I needed was a beard-tangle with an ignorant representation of the visible light spectrum.

Once free of the labyrinth, I strolled down the hall, aiming for the front door of the Green Valley Community Center and the parking lot beyond. It was cold, even for January, and the lot would likely be empty. My head down to avoid eye contact with passersby and hangers-on, I typed in my password and navigated to Jenn's number.

I was just bringing the phone to my ear when I heard a woman shout, "Cletus!"

I halted, only because the voice sounded like Jenn's, anticipation refilling my lungs. And there she was.

Well, more precisely, there was a version of her. She wore a blonde wig to cover her dark brown hair, a yellow dress with a brown collar and trim, and pearls around her neck and at her ears. Frustration grabbed a shovel and dug a deeper well within me.

Jenn jogged to me in high heels, rushing to close the distance between us while I stood stock-still, her expression a mixture of guilt and hope, a bakery box clutched to her chest. My eyes moved from the bakery box to her shoes. I released a silent sigh.

She must've just left work.

As an aside, jogging in high heels really should be added to the Olympics as a sport, but I digress.

When Jenn was about five feet away, her smile—looking forced, or pained, or worried, or some combination thereof—widened unnaturally and she said, "Hey, there you are."

"Here I am." I stuffed my hands in my pants pockets.

She stopped about two feet away, unable to come closer without moving the Donner Bakery box to one side, and that would have been awkward. It was a big

box. I contemplated the big box, which was both a literal barrier as well as a figurative representation of what separated us.

A second ticked by. I felt her eyes on me, but she said nothing, maybe because I was glaring at the box. I didn't want to be the first to speak. I was too persnickety to be trusted to talk—see? I knew when to talk, when not to talk. Why couldn't other folks learn?

But then I remembered Drew's request, and relented. "Drew says 'hi.'"

There. That's done. Message conveyed.

"Oh." The word was airy, like she was out of breath. If I'd just jogged a hallway in high heels, I would've been out of breath too.

Another second ticked by, then another, and that deep well of frustration began to rise, reaching my esophagus and higher, flooding my chest with suffocating disappointment. And maybe a little bit of resentment.

Dammit.

I wanted to sabotage her mother. I wanted to intervene and free up Jennifer's time for nonwork pursuits. All it would take was a few well-timed phone calls to the right people and—abracadabra—the problem would be solved.

BUT I WON'T!

I wouldn't intervene. Modifying or ending lifelong habits—habits that have served me well and have been efficient mechanisms for achieving ends and aims—in an effort to be respectful of my lady love's autonomy was perhaps the most maddening endeavor of my existence.

I felt her shift closer, and the movement drew my attention to her sweet face, pointed chin, and gorgeous eyes.

"Please don't be mad." The hope in her features was now entirely eclipsed by guilt. "I am so sorry. I would've been on time, but Mr. Badcock sold all my eggs to somebody. He treated me like I was a person of suspicion, like he couldn't trust me. Truth be told, he was downright hostile."

What's this? Hostile? A modicum of my frustration eased. I could do something about unwanted hostility from an egg farmer, that was actionable; whereas, forcing Jenn's momma, Diane "Dragon Lady" Donner, to retract her claws of maniacal manipulation was not.

Stepping around the box, I came to her side, my hand automatically lifting to her back. "What did he say to you?"

Note to self, Richard Badcock, add to list: Maim for mistreatment of my Jenn.

"Nothing harsh." She quickly shook her head, holding my gaze and allowing me to steer us down the hall, away from the entrance. "But I did have to convince him to sell me eggs again, and then he'll only sell me eggs with

advance notice and a deposit. And then, once that was settled, it turns out he did have a few dozen in his house, which he eventually gave me. But trekking up the hill and back down again took longer than I'd planned."

I stopped in front of the door leading to the stage area of the old cafeteria and pulled out a key to unlock it, listening intently to her version of events while keeping an eye out for any passersby or hangers-on. I didn't need folks following us or asking me how it was that I possessed a key.

"So when I got back to the bakery," she went on, her words dripping with fatigue, "Momma was in tears, 'cause my daddy had just called. And you know he wants half the hotel and the bakery, even though my granddaddy made him sign an ironclad prenup. He was threatening her with that again."

I grimaced, well aware of Kip Sylvester's pattern of reprehensible behavior and what he was capable of. He'd popped up again this last week after being mostly gone for over a month, making all kinds of threats.

"When she stopped crying, there was still the custard to make, and only four dozen eggs. After some fretting and discussing the issue with Momma, I decided it was best to go to the store and pick up a few dozen eggs there—since Blair Tanner had already left, I was the only one to do it—and use half Badcock eggs and half store-bought to get the most out of the Badcock four dozen. I'll need them later this week."

"Did you make the custard?" I ushered her forward and shut the door to the backstage area, tired on her behalf. Maybe I could do the shopping for the bakery for her? Stop by all her local suppliers so she didn't have to.

Which, now that I thought about it, why the heck was she running all over town picking up supplies? Shouldn't someone else do that?

"Yes. I made the custard, it's sitting in the fridge, used the last of my vanilla. I'll need to order more. I just hope no one realizes about the eggs." She huffed an agitated exhale, allowing me to lead her through the darkness. She couldn't see at all, and I—like all my siblings—could see tolerably well.

I took the infernal bakery box from her grip. I set it on a nearby crate, brought her near a corner, and leaned her against the wall. This particular corner was scarcely illuminated by a sliver of light coming in through the stage curtains.

The cafeteria was just beyond the curtains, and the loud buzzing of town gossip and chatter from earlier in the evening was now a low murmur of scant conversation. Most folks had moved on to the music rooms, likely because all the coleslaw had been eaten. As long as we whispered, we wouldn't be overheard or noticed.

"Is everything settled? With Mr. Badcock?" I studied her expression, noting

the grooves of worry on her forehead and the way she was twisting her fingers.

“I think so. Momma is going to drive out there tonight and drop off a deposit check, try to smooth things over with Mr. Badcock.”

“That was your idea?” I questioned, already knowing the answer.

It was a great idea. Of course it was Jenn’s idea. Diane Donner was one of the most powerful businesspersons in the region. A visit from Diane was a big deal indeed. As well, this would provide Diane a distraction from her divorce woes.

“Yes,” Jenn whispered, her eyes searching for mine, but seemingly unable to settle. My face must’ve been wholly in shadow. “We’re putting in an order for the entire year.”

“That’s good.” I nodded, but part of her story troubled me.

Why would Mr. Richard Badcock treat Jenn with even an ounce of hostility? It didn’t make any sense. Folks who knew Jenn—or of Jenn—considered her harmless, or less than harmless. A novelty, a local celebrity of no real substance or consequence, which was also how they saw me (minus the celebrity part).

I knew better. She’d revealed her genius to me last fall while proving to be the most brilliant opponent I’d ever faced, by far. She’d bested me. Consequently, having no choice in the matter, I’d promptly fallen in love with her and was now besotted. *Obviously.*

But back to Dick Mal-Rooster and his antagonism.

“Did he give a reason for his poor temper?” I asked, studying her.

The question seemed to agitate her, and she huffed, stepping forward and reaching out blindly. “Cletus, can we talk about that later? Where are you?”

My mental processes shifted gears away from her chicken troubles, and suddenly the flood of disappointment returned, rose to my throat. I swallowed, stepping away from Jenn’s searching hands as I stuffed mine back in my pockets.

“Jenn—”

“I am sorry, Cletus. I know I promised I’d be here on time, and I wasn’t here on time, and for that I’m sorry.” She found me, her hands grabbing the front of my shirt. Her warm palms slid over my chest, up to my shoulders, her arms twisting around my neck.

I braced myself for the feel of her body, but I was unprepared for the reality of it. Soft and warm and impatient, Jenn pressed herself to me in a way that felt at once impatient and content. Her lips brushed lightly over my neck, causing me to tense. But her hot tongue coming out to lick a path to my ear made me jump, every inch of me aware of every inch of her.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered, a note of vulnerability in the words, her

breath scorching as it spilled over my skin, a counterpoint to the disappointment still burning my chest. “Have you missed me?”

I was at once inebriated by her actions and incredulous of them.

“You know I have,” I answered gruffly, keeping my hands in my pockets for both our benefits.

Likely she didn’t want our first time together in over six weeks—and our second time together *ever*—to be me ripping off her underwear and taking her against the backstage wall of the Green Valley Community Center. Rationally, I knew this to be true.

Irrationally, however, I wanted to rip off her underwear and take her against the backstage wall of the Green Valley Community Center. I wanted to rip open the buttons of her dress and feast on her body, the smooth silk of her skin, while I filled her and claimed her and satiated myself with what would surely be an unrefined display of possessive carnality.

And also complicating matters, resentment lingered like a hangnail. Part of me wanted to punish her. I know that’s not noble nor gentlemanly, but I am neither noble nor a gentleman.

Yet, I was trying to be. For her.

Probably not a good idea to be intimate until such time as we—

Jennifer pressed her body more fully against me, one arm still hooked around my neck, a hand sliding dangerously lower, from my shoulder to my chest and stomach. I caught her fingers before she could slip them between us and cup me over my pants. Or inside my pants.

“Not a good idea.” My body shook, a surge of covetous mindlessness threatening to overtake my good intentions.

“It’s been *weeks*,” she complained between biting kisses on my neck, bringing my hand to her breast, pressing it there. “Don’t you want me?”

I choked on nothing but air. If she didn’t know how much I wanted her, then either she was stupid—which she wasn’t—or she was pretending to be in order to test my control.

“You’re asking me foolish questions,” I ground out, catching both her hands and holding them between us, forcing her to back away a step. “And you’re not foolish.”

I needed a minute.

“Then what’s the problem?” She pressed forward, not fighting my hold but feeling restless beneath my fingers. “Why aren’t you kissing me back? Why do you keep stuffing your hands in your pockets? Why won’t you touch me?”

Lost for words, I settled on whispering truth, “I’d like nothing more than to rip off your underwear and—”

“No need, I’m not wearing underwear.”

CHAPTER THREE

“If there is one thing I dislike, it is the man who tries to air his grievances when I wish to air mine.”

— P.G. Wodehouse, *Love Among the Chickens*

Cletus

Jenn bent her head and placed a kiss on my knuckles.
Meanwhile, I needed . . . another minute.

What?

“What?” Equal measures of astonishment and lust drove away any of my remaining premeditated intentions, leaving me only with lust.

“I took them off in the car.” Her tongue licked the juncture between my index and middle fingers. “I know I’ve been working a lot and—oh!”

I backed her against the wall, tossing away her hands and clamoring for the hem of her skirt. Sliding my fingers up her legs as I lifted her dress, I groaned when I discovered no material at her hip or bottom. Since I already had a handful of her, I squeezed, resisting the urge to fall to my knees and take a bite of her perfect backside.

I’d wanted us to have privacy. I’d wanted to unwrap her. I’d wanted to take my time. I’d wanted conversation and kisses—many kisses—and a lot more light. *Definitely more light.*

I pressed my forehead against the cold wall, unable to resist touching her,

slipping my middle finger into that hot, silky place.

Her breath hitched, her arms once again wrapping around my neck as her hips rolled forward into my hand. "Please, please."

Damn, but I missed her. Her skin was heaven, her fragrance paradise, I was already drunk with it. Breathing heavy, wanting her all around me, in my lungs. I couldn't think. I just wanted.

I took her mouth with mine, no preamble or gentle invasion, but a frenzy. She moaned. Jenn's nails scratched down my shirt, her fingers shaking as they found my belt, tugging and pulling frantically while I greedily nipped and licked and kissed her jaw and neck, stopping at the fabric covering her breast to place a wet, biting kiss at the center, feeling her bead and stiffen beneath my tongue, and continuing to work her slowly with my fingers.

Her hands faltered as I devoured her collarbone and neck, preparing to lower to my knees, lift her skirt completely, take a bite out of that ass, spread her wide. My mouth watered.

But then her phone rang, and I froze.

Reba McEntire's, "I'm a Survivor" chirped between us. That was her mother's ringtone, the woman had programmed it into Jenn's phone.

Squeaking, fumbling for the device, Jenn's face was briefly illuminated by the small swath of light just before quickly rejecting the call.

"Don't stop." She reached for my belt again, this time completely undoing it, the button of my pants, and my zipper at world-record speed.

Her phone buzzed. Then it chimed. Then it buzzed and chimed two more times. Then it rang again. *Reba*.

Cursing, Jenn pulled the phone from her pocket, once again her face illuminated, murderous rage in her eyes. Her finger moved to the *power off* button. She blinked, hesitating. Her eyes widened, her body stiffened, and she gasped.

"Cletus!"

Something about her tone, like she was horrified, and maybe a little afraid, cut through the heavy haze of lust inertia, and my hands stilled. Shaking myself, it took me a few moments to realize she was showing me the phone screen, and another few to bring the content of the text messages into focus.

Momma: Jennifer Anne Sylvester, pick up your phone. If you're with Cletus, I need his help. Please.

Momma: ALL THE CHICKENS AND ROOSTERS ARE DEAD! PICK UP

YOUR DAMN PHONE!

Momma: I'm calling you in a second, pick up the phone. Mr. Badcock's chickens are dead. All of them. I got here and he's running around, deranged, yelling about his dead chickens! I called the police and they're on their way. Please, please, please pick up the phone!

At some point, I must've taken the phone from Jenn and stepped away, because I glanced up upon reading the messages for the third time, finding the phone in my hand and Jenn fixing her skirt.

"This is nuts." Her big eyes searched mine imploringly. "Who could have done this?"

I shook my head, having not yet managed to fully shift head gears—you know, from *that* head to the one on my neck—and my gaze dropped to the wet patch on the front of her dress just visible in the swath of light. My erection throbbed.

So we're . . . not having sex?

"Why? Why would they do it? And WHO?" She snatched her phone back, her tone bewildered, distracted, and distraught. She was distraught because of the dead chickens, like any normal person would be.

I was distraught also, but my distress had nothing to do with farm animals.

"We have to go." Jenn grabbed my hand and began walking toward the direction of the hall. Meanwhile, it took me until her hand found the door handle to realize my zipper and belt were still undone.

"This is crazy." She paused as I zipped up, her tone halting and distracted. "Poor Mr. Badcock. And those poor chickens." A sound of distress escaped her throat. "This is terrible."

It was terrible.

And I was going to hell.

Because all I could think was, *Talk about a cock block.*

* * *

"How'd they die?"

Jackson James glanced at me. "According to Mr. Badcock, cervical dislocation."

"You mean they were strangled?" I asked. We stood shoulder to shoulder in Mr. Badcock's living room, Officer Jimmy Dale in the kitchen, pouring himself

coffee while Officer Fredrick Boone hunted for clues outside.

Jackson tilted his head back and forth. “More or less.”

“I see.” I made a fist, narrowed my eyes. “A chicken choker.”

Jackson James immediately scrunched his face, his chin falling to his chest in a clear attempt to hide his laughter. Mr. Badcock lived in one of those houses that might also claim log cabin status, the rooms segmented with curtains or furniture instead of interior walls. I could see Officer Dale from where I was standing, also trying not to laugh.

“Talk about a clusterflock,” I added, nodding at the assertion.

Jackson covered his mouth with his hand and Dale did the same.

Me? I wasn’t in any danger of laughing. I never laughed at my own jokes, even if they were as funny and timely as this one.

But Jenn . . . *Uh oh.*

“It’s not funny,” she whispered harshly, stepping close to both of us and pausing on her path back to Mr. Badcock. “Someone losing their life’s work and livelihood is not something to laugh at.” Jenn turned her glare of disappointment fully on me, and it hit me like a punch to the stomach. “How would you feel if—if someone broke all your tools and you couldn’t fix cars?” Her glare cut to Jackson. “And you. Shame on you. You’re here to help. Have some respect for the badge you wear.”

“Sorry,” Jackson whispered tightly, his cheeks now tinged pink.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” I nodded solemnly, clearing my features of expression while an odd sensation slithered into the vicinity of my chest. I had a notion that the sensation was guilt, but since I rarely succumbed to it, I couldn’t be sure.

“Where am I going to store all these chickens?” Mr. Badcock’s wayward anguish drew our collective attention to where he sat on the floral-patterned sofa. He held his forehead in one of his hands, the other gripped a baseball cap to the knee of his threadbare overalls.

Jenn and I shared a look—one which I knew meant she’d *deal with me later*—just before she turned on her heel and crossed to Mr. Badcock. She knelt in front of him, placing a hand over his gripping the hat.

“There, there, Mr. Badcock. We’ll—we’ll figure something out.”

“Sixty-one chickens is a lot of feathers,” Jackson said just loud enough that I could hear.

This wasn’t a joke, and his point was a good one. Plucking all those chickens without the aid of modern machinery was going to take a while, anywhere from five minutes to a half hour, depending on who was doing the plucking. Regardless, the task was much too cumbersome for Mr. Badcock to attempt on

his own.

And it had to be done soon if he wanted to salvage the meat. An idea formed

...

“Mr. Badcock, I think I might be able to provide some assistance.” I walked over to where Jenn was kneeling, and she turned her head, giving me a sidelong glare.

She hadn’t yet forgiven me for the chicken choking comment. Nevertheless, I would prevail in her good graces. Eventually.

“Huh? What?” The poor man glanced at me, blinking his confusion.

“Now, us Winstons, we know how to pluck chickens. My sister, Ashley, can pluck a chicken in two minutes flat. Why don’t I call my kin, and we’ll converge on your abode this evening. I’ll even have my brother Beau bring over our dipping pot and outdoor stove.”

“What’s that for?” Jackson asked from behind me. “You planning to make chicken soup?”

I slid my gaze to his and let him see my displeasure before answering, “No. Jack. You dip the bird into boiling water for a few seconds, to make the plucking easier.”

“But that only solves half the problem.” Mr. Badcock fretted, his face a grimace. “I don’t have freezer space for sixty-one birds.”

“There’s only forty.” Officer Boone’s young voice interrupted from the propped open front door. He was holding a notepad in his right hand, a pen in his left. *I didn’t know he was left-handed.*

“Forty?” Jenn stood and tilted her head to the side. “Forty what?”

“Forty dead chickens.” Boone looked to Jackson, who was technically the senior officer on the scene. “I only found forty chickens.”

“Someone stole twenty-one of his chickens?” Dale asked, bringing the coffee cup to his lips. “Why not just take them all?”

“Y’all can talk this over at a later date.” I lifted my voice. “Right now, we need to get the forty chickens outside plucked and frozen if we want to salvage the meat.”

“Like I said, Cletus.” Mr. Badcock rubbed at his forehead. “I don’t have space for that many chickens—not for sixty-one, not for forty.”

“How many do you have room for?” Jenn asked softly.

He wiped the back of his hand across his nose. “Maybe ten. I’m ruined.”

A charged hush fell across the room as we all stewed in Mr. Badcock’s despair, Diane Donner’s voice cresting and then fading away. I assumed she was outside talking to someone on the phone, not carrying on a one-way conversation with forty dead chickens.

Jenn's eyes locked with mine, hers pleading and full of expectation, giving me the sense she expected me to swoop in and save the poor man from ruin. But what could I do? We didn't have freezers at the auto shop, and—

Wait a minute.

I snapped my fingers. "Beau just fixed up two industrial-sized fridges that can also be converted to freezers. He donated them on behalf of Genie's bar to the church."

"Oh!" Jenn also snapped, her gorgeous eyes moving from me to Mr. Badcock. "That's right. And I know those fridges are empty. With the church picnic coming up, they cleaned them out in preparation. Plus, I can store any overflow at the Donner Bakery, in the walk-in. There's not much space, but I think we can find a few nooks and crannies."

Mr. Badcock appeared to be undecided. Or overwhelmed. Or both. "I don't know—"

"And you could probably sell a few to Mrs. Seymour, for the picnic. We could spread the word, so folks know to buy their hens from you—for the chicken salad, and fried chicken, and such—instead of the store. And I know my momma will buy some for the hotel. And I'm sure Cletus wants some too." Jenn glanced at me beseechingly.

"I do?"

Her eyes widened meaningfully. I didn't know precisely what the meaningfulness meant, but I did know—in general terms—I needed to agree with her.

"I mean, that's right. I do." I nodded once.

Jenn's features brightened. She exhaled and gave me a small smile. "For some chicken sausage, maybe?"

Chicken sausage?

I didn't grimace, and that was a miracle.

Chicken sausage was akin to turkey bacon, an abomination.

CHAPTER FOUR

“When you love you wish to do things for. You wish to sacrifice for. You wish to serve.”

— Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*

Cletus

The chickens had been left where they died, scattered all over the inside of the henhouse, several still on their nests, a few out in the yard. As such, the first thing we did was round them up and put them in a pile on a tarp, set to one side of the big, fancy chicken coop.

Meanwhile, since neither Mr. Badcock nor any of us Winstons owned a scalding, Shelly and Ashley built a wood fire in Mr. Badcock’s bonfire pit, set an iron grill plate about three inches above the highest flame, and heated several gallons of water in our two big lobster pots. This took forever.

We used the time to set up chairs and tables around the fire and created an assembly line. Drew Runous was the only one I trusted to keep the water at the ideal constant temperature of 149 degrees. Consequently, he got the job of tying up the legs and dipping the chickens in the hot water. He passed them to either Ashley, Roscoe, Beau, or Billy—our four pluckers.

Since I was well acquainted with the butchering process and didn’t get queasy at the sight of innards and such, the birds were then handed to me. I cut off the heads and feet, cleared out the cavities, and saved the livers for frying

and the remaining organs for gravy or stock. I then passed the carcasses and essential bits to Jethro and Shelly for final cleaning and wrapping.

“I can’t believe Mr. Badcock doesn’t have a motorized plucker.” Roscoe frowned at the chicken he was almost finished defeathering.

“He only raises them for eggs. I got the impression he never killed one before. He has a gravesite for the ones that have died,” Officer Boone said, flipping through his notepad.

“A gravesite?” I lifted an eyebrow, certain I’d misheard.

“Yep. In the past, if one of his hens died, he’d bury them. They all have little crosses. Hand carved.” Boone and I shared a look, and I suspected we were sharing the same thought. *Who has time to hand carve crosses for chicken graves?*

“The man really loved those chickens,” Boone added, like he was answering my unspoken question.

I knew Boone from around town, good fella, fair, smart, best investigator on the force. He was quiet unless he had something of value to say, and I appreciated this about him. He stood outside of the working circle next to Jackson James, but Officer Dale had left, offering to escort the Dragon Lady—er, I mean Jenn’s momma, Ms. Donner—back to her house and Jennifer to the bakery.

“They’re pretty birds,” Ashley said with a sad sigh, studying the feathers she was plucking. “I should give him some of my hens.”

“Y’all only have six hens.” This protest came from Roscoe. “And if you give him yours, where are we going to get our eggs for Sunday breakfast?” Of course Roscoe was concerned with Sunday eggs, not Monday eggs, or Wednesday eggs. We only saw him on the weekends as he was still in veterinary school.

“Roscoe, did you know they sell eggs at the store?” Beau grinned at Roscoe, his infernal blue eyes sparkling even in the middle of the night. My redheaded brother had too much charm and charisma, and I suspected he’d been born with the innate ability to catch starlight and radiate it outward, or some such nonsense. “You just give the grocer your money and they let you take the eggs. A whole dozen at a time if you’re real nice.”

Roscoe chuckled at Beau’s teasing, which I noted. Roscoe didn’t chuckle, laugh, or otherwise seem amused by my teasing. I felt confident everyone would agree, my teasing was superior to Beau’s in both comedic timing and poignancy.

Masking my irritation, I glanced around the circle, my attention settling on Billy and his . . . *What the heck was he doing?*

“Have you seen those power plucker attachments for a drill?” Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jethro, my oldest brother, hold a lung scraper in his grip

as though it were a drill. “It’s supposed to pluck a chicken real fast, save you from those nasty pin feathers.”

I shook my head absentmindedly, distracted by Billy’s slow plucking progress. He was older than me by a year, and the hardest working person I knew—aside from Jennifer—but he’d plucked just one chicken in the last half hour, and not for lack of trying.

Obviously sensing my attention, Billy asked, “Can I help you, Cletus?” He wore a small smile, but his baritone was as flat as a bookmark.

“What are you doing?” I continued surveying him from beneath lowered eyebrows and behind narrowed eyes, not disguising my dissatisfaction at his inefficient feather elimination technique.

He adjusted his grip on the bird and wiped a gloved hand on a towel hanging over his thigh. “Plucking this chicken.”

“That ain’t chicken plucking,” Roscoe muttered under his breath.

Loathe as I was to agree with Roscoe, I agreed with Roscoe.

“Leave him alone,” our sister Ashley called over. “Let Billy figure things out on his own. Besides, his fingers are too big for this kind of work. We’ll get these done, no problem.” She sat between Roscoe and where Drew dipped the chickens. Drew Runous was Ashley’s not-yet-fiancé, and their lack of formal engagement was a source of great turmoil for me, but that’s not pertinent at present. It was warmer over there, but that wasn’t the reason we’d insisted she and Roscoe sit closest to the pots.

It was a little-known fact that my sister was the fastest chicken plucker in Green Valley, maybe even all of Tennessee, and Roscoe was a close second. This was likely because they used to do it together when we were growing up. Giving them prime spots closest to the pots made the most sense.

“First of all, you’re supposed to start with the legs, move to the breast, leaving the wings for last,” I instructed Billy.

“Cletus. Leave Billy alone,” Ashley said again, making an irritated face.

“He needs to do it right, otherwise he’s just wasting his time and ours.” I held my sister’s stare, which grew increasingly peeved.

“Stop your meddling.”

“But if he would do it right—”

She made a frustrated sound, turning her attention back to the bird in her own hands. “You think you always know what’s best, and sometimes you don’t. Let him alone and quit meddling.”

Now I frowned at my sister, getting the sense she wasn’t talking about plucking chickens. Quit meddling? Not likely. She might as well ask me to make a batch of substandard sausage.

“Let me show you,” Roscoe offered gently, demonstrating on the chicken still in his hands, which was already good and thoroughly plucked. “A hen ain’t going to cooperate if you spend ten minutes plucking the wings. Get your fingers between the legs first.”

My brother Beau, sitting on Billy’s right, nodded at Roscoe’s advice.

I lifted my chin toward Roscoe. “Or between the legs and the breasts at the same time, if you got the skill, like Roscoe.”

“What do you mean? Cooperate? How can I get the hen to cooperate?” Billy affixed a mystified stare on his bird. “The hen is dead.”

“Listen, the point is, you pluck a bird when it’s wet and hot,” Beau said, giving the dead hen he was holding a saucy looking grin. “Everyone knows that.”

Ashley snorted, rolling her eyes.

Ignoring Beau’s miserable attempt at a double entendre, I refocused everyone on the task at hand. “In summary, if you dawdle with the big feathers at the wing, the bird will dry out, and won’t welcome a plucking. And you can’t get it hot, not if you want it to stay raw.”

Ashley snorted again, but this time her shoulders shook with unabashed laughter. Both Drew and Jackson, I noticed, watched her with rapt interest, slightly dazed smiles on their faces.

“You are exactly thirteen years old, Ashley Winston,” Billy grumbled, ignoring our advice and continuing to pluck at the wing.

“And you are too stubborn and serious for your own good, William Winston,” my sister tossed back at him good-naturedly. “Stop being an old man and have some fun for once. Live a little.”

“Now who’s meddling?” I said under my breath, earning me a glare from Ashley.

“Live a little? By plucking chickens?” Billy’s questions were monotone and likely rhetorical.

Beau, a big grin on his face, opened his mouth as though to respond, likely with another tasteless observation. Thus, I lifted my voice and spoke over him, “After we’re done here, Billy, I’ll need your help getting these birds into the freezer at the church. I don’t have the trunk space in my Geo.”

“Can’t, Cletus.” Billy removed several more wing feathers, tossing them into the paper bag between his legs. “I have a meeting in Knoxville tomorrow midmorning. I’ll need to head home in a bit to get some sleep. But you can take my truck if you want.”

“I do want. Thanks,” I said, shifting my attention to Beau. “That means you’re helping me load and unload.”

“Fine, as long as I can take a nap after in your room at the homestead.” The redhead spoke around a yawn.

The homestead to which Beau referred was our family ancestral home, an old Victorian farmhouse with a wraparound porch Jethro was in the perpetual process of restoring for his pregnant movie star wife and their future seventeen children. Set several acres backing up to the Great Smoky Mountain National Forest, the house was worth restoring.

“What? Why sleep in my room?” I wiped the knife I was using off on a towel and searched the tabletop for the sharpener. Cutting all those heads and feet were making it dull.

“Your room is darker,” he said, like the matter was settled.

“But your room is empty of people whose name is Cletus, and my room is not.” Finding the whetstone, I slid it along the edge of the knife, frowning my most ill-tempered frown at my brother. Beau’s old room, which he used to share with his surly twin Duane before Duane ran off with his lady love to Italy, was untouched on account of Beau and Shelly having all but moved in together just before Christmas.

Seemingly unperturbed, Beau spoke around another yawn, “My room doesn’t have custom blackout shades on the windows. You want me to help you move the chickens in Billy’s truck? Fine. Then I sleep in your room after—where it’s dark—and you sleep in mine.”

“What about Shelly?”

“Shelly’ll go back to her place right after we finish here and can take the GTO. You don’t need more than me to help load up those chickens, and she needs her sleep. That okay, Shell?”

“Fine by me.” Beau’s tall, taciturn lady friend was using the lung scraper on a big, fat hen. She didn’t seem too happy about spending hours she’d usually be sleeping cleaning out chicken innards, but I suspected that had more to do with her soft heart toward animals than anything else. She fostered dogs, birds, cats, anything that needed fostering, and though she sought to hide it, I could sense the scene when she arrived upset her.

I didn’t get a chance to press the bedroom/sleeping arrangements issue with Beau because Ashley said to no one in particular, “What I find interesting is the method of death.”

“Whose death?” Roscoe glanced at Ashley.

“The chickens.” She gestured to our surroundings with her chin. “Seems like a weird way to kill birds you aren’t planning to eat. Chickens, bless their hearts, are idiots. You have to work hard to keep them alive. Even just leaving the door to the coop open overnight would be enough to kill most, if not all. Find a stray

dog, let it in the coop, and you're pretty much guaranteed to kill every bird inside, and no one will even suspect anything. Why strangle them?"

"Unless the bird murderer wanted to send a message." Jackson piped in.

"In a very strange and risky way? Like, it takes time to catch and strangle several dozen birds. And why strangle? Why not decapitate?"

"What do you mean?" Boone asked, looking up from his notepad.

"I mean someone knew what they were doing, breaking their necks. Cervical dislocation isn't a novice way of killing a chicken. Either the person works in medicine—veterinary or human—and knew enough about anatomy to know where to break, or the person is an old school chicken farmer and has done this before."

"Why do you say 'old school'?" Jackson was looking at Ashley with curiosity rather than his typical moony-eyed worship. We all knew he'd only stuck around so he could get a few moments basking in her presence. Jackson James had been ankles over ass gone over my sister since elementary school.

"Most chicken farmers these days use the cone, right? Subdues the bird, keeps them from moving around. But this guy—or lady—didn't. Breaking the neck is a faster, less messy, quieter way of killing birds, if you know what you're doing. But it also requires more strength, it couldn't have been a small person." While she spoke, she stood, finished plucking her fifth chicken, and walked over to where I was busy at the butchering table.

"Unless they used the broomstick method." Roscoe also stood, placing his plucked chicken next to Ashley's.

"What's the broomstick method?" Jackson asked, and I was reminded that Jackson's family had never needed to source their own food. His father had been the sheriff of this county for as long as I'd been alive. They'd never had to worry about putting food on the table.

Roscoe reclaimed his seat. "Broomstick method is where you put the bird between your—"

"Do we really need to know?" Billy asked, making a face of distaste.

One thing was for certain, Billy would never be a farmer. The man could get lost in a sparsely wooded traffic circle. He'd never been friends with the outdoors, and he liked his custom cut suits too much to voluntarily dirty his hands with soil and livestock. Don't get me wrong, he'd do it—like now—if he had to, and he wouldn't complain either, even though he'd rather be anywhere else.

"No." Ashley held out her hands to receive another chicken from Drew. "But Roscoe makes a good point. The broomstick method can be done by a smaller person. They wouldn't need as much strength if they broke the neck that way."

“Interesting.” Boone scribbled something in his notepad.

“Also, seems like it was maybe someone the birds were familiar with?” Ashley directed this question to Roscoe. “Since several of the chickens were still in their nests instead of fleeing to the yard.”

“Maybe.” Roscoe shrugged. “Or someone who is used to working with chickens and knows how to keep them calm.”

“Why would anyone do this?” Shelly frowned at the dead bird she was cleaning like it had disorganized her toolbox. In the five months she’d been working at the shop with us, I knew there wasn’t much Shelly loathed more than a disordered toolbox.

“That’s a good question.” Billy, *finally* finished with his second bird, brought it over to the butchering table. “Any ideas, Boone?”

“Hey now. We can’t share thoughts about an ongoing investigation,” Jackson spoke up, and all my brothers rolled their eyes.

“Does Mr. Badcock have any helpers on the farm? Part-time employees?” I directed my question to Boone as—despite Jackson’s temerity—Boone seemed to be the only one taking this investigation seriously.

Officer Dale hadn’t taken it seriously. Before he’d left to escort Diane Donner home and Jennifer to the bakery, he’d said, “Mr. Badcock has both the farm and his birds insured. Investigating this would be a waste of time, he’ll get back on his feet.” Then, nudging me with an elbow, added, “No harm no *fowl*. Get it?”

In case y’all were wondering, it is possible to tire of bird jokes. But I digress.

Regardless, on the one hand, Dale was right. Mr. Badcock could always buy and raise new chickens, using the insurance money to see him through. Why should the sheriff’s office spend valuable hours investigating the death of forty chickens and the abduction of twenty-one when there were much more pressing crimes deserving of their attention?

Boone shook his head, frowning at his notepad. “Mr. Badcock said he had some help a few years ago, but not anymore. Just him for the last seven years or so.”

A man and his chickens, alone, for seven years. No wonder he’d carved those crosses for their graves.

Mr. Badcock loved his chickens. The events of the evening had clearly been devastating for him. Jenn had tucked him in before she left for the bakery, promising someone would ensure the chicken maligner—whoever that might be—would be brought to justice.

Butchering Ashley’s latest fully plucked chicken, I didn’t attempt to mask my frown at the memory of her words. Jenn didn’t make promises lightly. If she

promised Mr. Badcock the culprit would be discovered, then she meant it.
Even if she'd have to solve the crime herself.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Tereza's mother never stopped reminding her that being a mother meant sacrificing everything.”

— Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Jenn

After I left Mr. Badcock in Cletus's very capable hands, I did my best not to dwell on Cletus's very capable hands.

I'd felt guilty on the drive to the bakery. I'd felt guilty as I made the last of the special orders. And I felt guilty now as I cleaned up, yawning every two minutes.

When my momma's call had interrupted Cletus and me at the community center, part of me—a part I didn't understand, and akin to the part responsible for the daydreams about Cletus Winston on repeat for the past few months—wanted to ignore her texts. My first feeling upon reading them had been resentment, and my first thought had been, *Why are you calling me? It's not like I can revive chickens!*

Though the cleaners had already been by at 3:00 AM, I wiped down the counter again with a sterile solution as the first rays of sunlight peeked in from the high windows at the back of the bakery kitchen. I still felt like a terrible person for my initial callousness and selfishness. Nevertheless, resentment lingered like a virus.

It had quieted while we were at Mr. Badcock's, formulating a plan to help him, but with each completed special order and closed bakery box, the bitterness had ballooned, it had become life-sized, a blowup doll, and I'd been mentally wrestling my feelings.

Which was probably why, when my mother showed up tracking mud on the floor after the sun had fully risen in the winter sky, sending beams of sunlight through the panes of glass and illuminating the sparkling clean interior of the kitchen, I surrendered to the blowup doll of bitterness.

"All those orders finished yet?" she asked, fluffing her hair while taking the mud on a walk from the back door to the island prep station.

"You have mud on your shoes," I said, not kindly.

She widened her eyes at me, rimmed with impeccable eyeliner and shaded with hues of blue and green. "Well, it is wet and muddy outside."

"You're cleaning that up." I pointed to the tracks behind her while simultaneously marching to the broom.

She sputtered. "I—what? Jennifer!"

I shoved the broom handle at her and her meticulously painted pink lips. She'd had enough time to carefully apply her mask of makeup, but I hadn't slept. Last night backstage at the community center had been my first chance to be alone with Cletus in ages where one of us wasn't near exhausted, and she'd clearly taken her time this morning picking out accessories that matched her outfit.

She looked stunning, and I looked how I felt, which was like I'd spent half the night wrestling with a blowup doll come to life—and not in a good way.

Forced to accept the broom to keep it from hitting her in the head, my mother gaped at me. "My goodness! What has gotten into you?"

Not Cletus. Cletus hasn't gotten into me. *AND THAT'S THE PROBLEM!*

I pressed my lips together, knowing I couldn't say that. My relationship with my mother had improved over the last several weeks. She no longer commented on what I looked like, at all. No passive-aggressive remarks when I dyed my hair brown, no silent looks of reproach when I wore jeans or yoga pants. I still didn't wish to discuss such matters with her.

Tutting, she set the broom against the counter and came to stand next to me. "How you doing, baby?"

"I'm . . . okay."

"Did you get any sleep?"

I said nothing because I didn't wish to snap at her. I hadn't slept on a Friday night in over a month.

"Jenn, you need your rest. Busy time is over, you should take the day off and

get some sleep today. Blair Tanner can stock the bakery case."

"Take the day off?" What was she talking about? I glanced around at all the special order boxes that were finished and packaged. I'd worked eight hours already and she wanted me to take the day off?

Her eyes followed mine and she ducked her head a little. "I guess, take the rest of the day off."

"Momma—"

"Honey, don't fight me on this." She lifted a hand to rub my back. "You've earned it."

I stepped away from her. "I wasn't going to fight you. I was going to tell you that I can't keep doing this."

"Doing what?"

"Not sleeping. Working so many hours. I can't. I'm exhausted."

"Of course you're exhausted." She made that tutting sound again, her smile sympathetic. "You keep insisting on going to the jam session on Friday nights. If you didn't go, you could get some sleep and—"

I lifted a hand, my resentment now the size of a hot air balloon. "The problem isn't the jam session."

She stared at me, long and hard, before asking quietly, "I suppose that means I'm the problem?" Her chin wobbled, vulnerability in her voice. This was a new version of my mother, one I'd never seen before I'd revealed that my father had been cheating on their marriage for years with his secretary. It had been unsettling to watch her go from being the strongest, most stubborn and focused person—good and bad—to someone who cried at the flip of a switch.

I never knew when something I might say would leave her in tears, and I hated it. I hated seeing her brought so low by my undeserving father.

Firming her lips, she breathed in harshly through her nose. "I'm not a mind reader, honey. If there's a problem, you gotta let people know so they can fix it."

Covering my face, I turned away and muttered mostly to myself, "I feel so guilty and I shouldn't. I said I was going to set boundaries, and what did I do? I just kept on, just like before, working overtime."

"I pay you time and a half for overtime," she reminded gently. "If you want a raise—"

"It's not about being paid! It's about having a life." I spun back to face her. "I want to have a life. I want to go to the jam sessions on Fridays *and* sleep on Friday nights. Being there for Cletus is important to me."

My mother studied her nails, her voice turning brittle, wobbly. "Men just take and take, Jennifer."

"Not all men." My heart twisted, thinking about Cletus last night, standing in

the hallway of the community center, looking disappointed—so disappointed—and I absolutely hated that I'd let him down. Again.

My mother snorted, rolling her eyes heavenward. "I guess we'll see."

"This isn't about Cletus. This is about me and what I want."

"And you want to stop baking Saturday special orders?" Her features grew pinched. "Well then, we might as well close down the bakery."

I drew myself up to my full height, angled my chin, set my hands on my hips, and blurted, "I need help! Can't you understand that? Can't you see that?"

The blowup doll of bitterness promptly deflated, leaving me feeling spent and . . . like a failure.

But needing help was the real issue, wasn't it? Mr. Badcock's dead chickens weren't the problem. My momma interrupting Cletus and me last night with frantic phone calls, the constant barrage of special orders, the holiday season—none of that was the problem. In retrospect, anyone could see the truth. My momma should've seen it. I needed help!

So why did admitting it make me feel like a failure?

Her head tilted to the side, splitting her attention between me and the broom handle leaning against the counter. "You need help with the cleaning? I've told you a hundred times, you can leave it for first shift."

"No." Tears pricked behind my eyes and I sighed tiredly. "I need help with *everything*. I need someone to pick up the eggs from Mr. Badcock, and someone to do the dairy run with Miller Farm, and someone to get the honey from Old Man Blount, and someone to talk the Hills into saving the best preserves and berries for us, and all the other suppliers. I need someone to keep them happy so I can bake and keep our customers happy."

"What? What are you talking about? That's what you do?" She reared back. "Have you been driving to all those places?"

"Yes. Every week since the fall. I can't get it all from the same place like I used to. Since Nancy Danvish retired—"

"Ugh! Don't talk to me about Nancy Danvish. That woman." Her lips curled into a sneer, her eyes mean. "Do you know what Scotia told me last week? Nancy Danvish is working with your father!" She paused here for effect, nodding rapidly. "That's right. They're putting together some sort of business venture to compete with me, with *my* lodge." Lifting her hands, she hooked her fingers and made air quotes, "A 'boutique farming experience bed and breakfast' sort of thing. Can you imagine? Who is going to want to stay on a farm for their vacation?" Sudden tears sprung to her eyes, and she heaved a watery breath. "Will this torment never end?"

This was usually the point of the conversation where I backed down and

consoled this new version of my mother, agreed with her that my father had done her wrong—was still doing her wrong—and that she could always count on me.

I wasn't going to do that this time.

I missed Cletus. I physically ached for him, his small, knowing smiles. His hands, holding me. His eyes, how watchful and clever. I missed the way he looked at me, like I was the butter on his bread, the frosting in his cake, the cream in his puff.

And I missed his family. I missed Shelly and Ashley. We were supposed to make soap, I was going to teach them how, and I hadn't a spare moment even to do that, to spend time with my new friends.

Laying my palm flat on the counter, I worked to keep the volume of my voice steady. "I am sorry Daddy is a villain and has been treating you poorly. But I am no longer driving around half of Tennessee picking up baking supplies."

"Of course." She swiped at her eyes, sniffing. "We could order from distributors. It would likely save a lot of money too."

I held up my palm. "Nope. I'm not doing that either. I refuse to use substandard ingredients."

"Jenn—"

"No. Do you remember what happened in December with the choir? When I didn't use the Badcock eggs?" I lifted my eyebrows.

She relented at once. "Yes. I see your point."

"You will hire someone to interact with the farmers and make them feel valued. And that person will remember their birthdays and their children's names—except Old Man Blount. He doesn't like to talk."

Her expression softened and her eyes lost focus as she vacillated between self-pity and problem-solving mode. "I—I'll do it, until we get someone hired. I'll take over."

It was on the tip of my tongue to object, to tell her she was crazy, that she had enough to do without ferrying around butter and eggs and honey. I bit my tongue.

She peered at me, like she was waiting for me to say something. I stared at her, waiting. Waiting. Cletus once told me that being quiet can be louder than shouting. I'd never thought of my silence as loud and I didn't quite understand what he'd meant at the time.

But now, in this moment, I understood.

Eventually, her chest rose with a deep breath. "Fine. I'll ask Monsieur Auclair to open a position with the lodge. We could probably use a courier

anyway, for running errands for high profile guests.”

“Good.” I nodded once. “And I need help baking.”

Her gaze sharpened and came back to mine. “Well, now, I don’t know.” She sounded equal parts panicked and hurt. “Running errands, cleaning, helping manage vendor expectations—that’s one thing. But you know people order from us exclusively and so often because they’re expecting you, your cakes and creations.”

The look she was giving me now would’ve smarted a few months ago, made my heart twinge with guilt, made my hands a little sweaty. I felt none of that at present. Not a twinge, not a flutter, none of it.

“When I agreed to come back to the bakery, you promised me things would be better. They are not better.”

“Going through this divorce with your daddy, keeping up a good front, it’s been real hard for me, Jenn. You know what it’s been like. So far, folks have been impressed with how nothing has suffered at the lodge, how unaffected we seem to be, and that includes the bakery. I can’t let them think I’m falling apart. I can’t let him think I’ve been affected.”

I shook my head, gritting my teeth. “But *I* have been affected.”

She winced, more panic surfacing. “You’re going to abandon me.”

I balled my hands into fists to keep from reaching out to her. *Stay strong! Do not apologize!*

“No. I’m not going to abandon you,” I said softly. I would stay strong, I would not apologize, but there was no reason to be harsh with her. I knew she was going through a trial, and I had no desire to kick her while she was down. “But I’m not working myself ragged anymore either. You’re going to hire another baker. And you can clean up those tracks or wait for first shift to come in and mop it up. Before I leave, I’m giving you a list of all my vendors, all the farmers who supply our bakery. The dairy run with Miller Farm has to be done today.”

“And the bananas?”

“No, I’ll keep picking up the bananas. They need to be inspected, and I honestly don’t trust anyone else to do it.”

She exhaled loudly. For some reason, this statement seemed to make a big difference. Her expression cleared of panic, but about a second later, remorse took its place.

“Oh, Jenn. Of course. I’m so sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I should’ve offered. I’ve been so blind and selfish. I’m—”

“Stop it. Just stop.” I held up my hand again. “I don’t want you to feel bad. I just want you to—to—”

"Help you. I see that now. I'm sor—" She stopped herself, rolling her lips between her teeth.

"I'm setting boundaries. This time, I'm sticking to them. No matter what, I'm not baking on Saturday mornings. No matter what. In fact, I want Saturdays off, the whole day, and Sunday too."

"But we already have special orders for the next six months. Wedding cakes and parties."

"Okay, I'll give you six weeks to find a second baker, and then I get the weekends off. Until then, I get Mondays and Tuesdays completely off. Blair Tanner can do the regular orders and the bakery case."

My mother nodded fretfully. "Okay. Okay."

"But starting now, I'm no longer picking up the supplies—except bananas."

"Except the bananas."

"That's right. Except bananas."

"That's fair. I'll figure it out." She pulled a hidden handkerchief from the sleeve of her dress and dabbed at her eyes before closing them. Standing silent for a few moments, she inhaled, breathed out. She did this twice more, and then opened her eyes again. My mother had collected herself, resolve and steel in her gaze, grit, and determination.

Oh no.

I braced myself for an onslaught of guilt trips and pushy arguments.

But she said, "I—I'm going to do right by you. I'm proud of you, baby girl."

"You are?" I stared at her, making no attempt to hide my bewilderment, too wrung out to do much else.

Squaring her shoulders, she smoothed her hands down the front of her outfit, affixed a confident smile on her face, and tucked the handkerchief back in her sleeve. She then walked to me and opened her arms. "I'm glad we talked. I'm glad you are telling me what's on your mind. You drive a hard bargain, and I plan to rise to the occasion."

I was so confused. Her mood swings were confusing. One minute she was angry and stern, the next she was worried, then she was crying, and now self-assured and proud of me? I supposed going through a contentious divorce likely messed with a person's mental health. Or maybe I was just too tired to keep up.

Resolving to just go with it, I stepped into her embrace. The hug was tight. Extremely tight. The strength in her arms squeezed the air out of my lungs.

"I love you, Jennifer."

"I love you too." I wheezed, wiggling a little, hoping she'd loosen her hold.

Her constricting eased a little. "Don't you ever forget that."

"I won't."

“Good.” Her hand moved up and down my back. “I better get moving,” she muttered, sounding resigned, “if I’m going to find a pastry chef by March.”

I stiffened, rolled my eyes, drawing away. “No. February, Momma.” Giving her a glare and using a tone I’d seen her employ a million times with troublesome staff at the lodge, I crossed my arms. “You have ’til the end of February.”

CHAPTER SIX

“But no man would sacrifice his honor for the one he loves.”

“It is a thing hundreds of thousands of women have done.”

— Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*

Jenn

Nursing a half cup of coffee, I made a list of all the vendors my mother needed to contact, adding notations about pickup times and the peculiarities she could expect from each local supplier. I then drove home, took a shower, pulled on a pair of thick yoga pants, a long-sleeve T-shirt, and climbed into bed.

I couldn't sleep.

The whole day was open to me and I couldn't sleep. I kept seeing Cletus's handsome face from last night, the way his enigmatic and gorgeous eyes darted away from mine, like he'd been working to keep his thoughts and feelings—his disappointment—from me.

And, gosh, that was just unacceptable.

Turning on my side, I stared at the wall of my bedroom, recalling how he'd stepped up at Mr. Badcock's, with all the good ideas, saving the day, just because I'd asked. He never let me down, and that was a fact. I knew he'd been taking care of my house without me asking, doing my grocery shopping, leaving me

meals in the freezer. He'd been taking care of me, and I'd been too busy to take care of him. The truth of it made me feel sick with remorse. *I will make it up to him.*

And to myself. I would make it up to myself too.

The bedside clock read 9:15 AM. Flinging off the covers, I knew I needed sleep, but there was no reason I needed to sleep here.

Dressing in a plain black circle skirt that ended just above the knee—and no underwear, since he seemed to appreciate my initiative last night—I whipped up a batch of blueberry pancake muffins and drove over to the Winston house. I also tucked a pair of underwear in my purse, for *after*. Going all day without underwear felt entirely too bohemian—that is, brave—for me. Although, maybe one day, I'd be bohemian enough to attempt it.

Since we lived close, I was on their porch by 10:30 AM, fitting my key into the back door lock while trying to keep my skirt from flying up and flashing their wildflower field. It was an unaccountably windy day.

The interior of the house was quiet. I assumed Cletus was still asleep, seeing as how they must've been plucking those chickens most of the night. My plan was to prep a pot of coffee, set the timer for noon, and leave the muffins on the counter as a surprise. I would then climb into bed with him and we would sleep together, wrapped in each other's arms. And then we would *not* sleep together. And then we'd have breakfast—or brunch, or lunch, or whatever mealtime it would be when we finally left his room.

Coffee pot prepped and timer set, I moved to arrange the muffins on the kitchen island, removing the foil from the plate and restacking them for best aesthetic presentation. I'd just toed off my shoes by the back door and picked up my purse to head upstairs when Billy Winston walked in, doing a double take when he spotted me.

"Jennifer." Cletus's older brother stopped midstride, his hand coming up to his dark brown beard. He seemed to be touching the unkempt new growth of it high on his cheek. "I didn't know you were here."

"Billy." I found enough energy to give him a smile. Billy Winston was one of the sweetest, kindest, and most compassionate men on the planet and always deserved a smile. Plus, on a shallow note, he was just so darn good-looking, it was difficult not to smile when he spoke. "I just arrived a few minutes ago. No one seemed to be up, so I set the timer on the coffee for twelve."

Billy's blue eyes moved between me and the plate of muffins.

"Those for Cletus?" He took a step back, like they were dangerous.

"They are, but you're welcome to one, if you'd like."

He pushed his hands into his pockets in a way that reminded me of Cletus

when he was trying to hold himself back from something he wanted. "Uh, I better not."

Before I could insist, the back door opened, and Roscoe entered on a burst of wind. My hands flew to my skirt, holding it down and in place.

Why hadn't I just worn the underwear over and taken it off in Cletus's room? What is wrong with my brain?

You're tired. You've been up for over twenty-four hours and you're tired.

"Jenn!" Cletus's youngest brother grinned his huge grin and sauntered over. His nose and cheeks were red, and he was dressed in workout clothes. "Are those for us?"

Billy made a sound, like a breath but with meaning. "Obviously not, Roscoe. And you know what kind of mood Cletus is in. It's in your best interest to avoid Jenn's muffins if you don't want Cletus to change all your phone settings to Russian again."

Roscoe chuckled, but then his expression sobered, like he was remembering something unpleasant. "Yeah, I just got back from a run with Drew. I should probably steer clear of muffins in any case. Do you want some coffee, Jenn?"

"I believe she prepared the coffee too?" Billy looked to me for confirmation. I gave him a short nod. "Again, if you don't want Cletus's wrath, make a new pot when you're done."

Roscoe's grin morphed into an irritated frown. "You know, tiptoeing around Cletus and his moods gets old."

"No one is asking you to tiptoe." Billy's voice softened. "Just replace what you take." Billy sauntered further into the kitchen, walking to the cupboard where the coffee cups were kept.

"Well maybe someone could talk him into doing his dishes?" Roscoe pressed the *brew* button on the machine, fully absorbed in his complaints. "Those dishes have been piled up here since I got home on Thursday."

Anxious to get upstairs, I slipped out of the room unnoticed, Billy's reasonable words following me out, "He'll get to them when he has time."

I heard Roscoe just as I placed my foot on the first step, "Why does he get to leave his stuff all over the place and no one cares? When is he going to get a place of his own?"

Roscoe's frustrated questions followed me up the stairs. By the time I'd crept to Cletus's door, their conversation had dissolved into just faint murmurs, but I could still sense the irritation in Roscoe's voice. It wasn't a secret that he and Cletus often quarreled. I didn't know why Cletus picked on him—and let me be clear, Cletus picked on Roscoe—I'd never had that kind of relationship with my older brother. We'd never teased each other that way. You know, not mean, but

not nice either. Isaac and I only ever had good-natured teasing between us.

He didn't talk to me at all these days, just the one time in the Piggly Wiggly last fall, and those harsh words hadn't been meant to tease. I hadn't spoken to or seen him since, and I wish I could say I was glad about it, but I wasn't. Despite his meanness, I still missed him with my whole heart.

Ugh. I don't want to think about this.

Why was it that grief could sneak up on a person? Most emotions don't sneak, they build. But not grief. *Stupid grief.*

Breathing through the tears pricking at my eyes, I paused outside of Cletus's door. I refused to think about Isaac right now, or anything other than spending time—quality, sweet, sexy, dirty, graphic, erotic time—with my man.

Oh gracious, now I'm all hot. But at least I wasn't sad.

Ignoring the electricity of excitement zinging around my insides, I carefully twisted the doorknob, wanting to be as quiet as possible. He needed sleep. I needed sleep. Sleeping with him would be nice. Plus, I needed him well rested for what I wanted to do once we woke up.

Yep. Still hot. Hot like a furnace.

Entering the room on silent bare feet, I closed the door behind me and waited a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the dark room. He had all the curtains drawn, blackout curtains, but I knew his bed was in the far corner. Assuming his room was tidy—which it always seemed to be—I should be able to walk in a diagonal line to his bed, slip in, and curl around him.

So I walked that diagonal line, smiling when my knees brushed against the bed. I could barely see the line of his body under the covers, but I saw enough to see he was facing the wall. Slowly, I let my purse drop to the floor, lifted the comforter, and arranged myself next to him.

I thought I heard someone call my name beyond his door, maybe downstairs or outside. It sounded far away, and I couldn't be sure. I ignored it. Cletus—shirtless, his back to me—shifted only a little as I wrapped my arm around his middle, the back of my mind noting that he must've lost weight over the last few weeks. His bulky muscle still felt hard and smooth, just . . . less. Leaner.

I frowned, wishing I'd made two batches of muffins, and closed my eyes, snuggling closer to his back, but then frowning. He smelled different, like he was wearing cologne, maybe? And not the stuff Sienna—his sister-in-law—had bought him for Christmas. Something else.

A soft sound rumbled out of him, distracting me from this smell mystery, and I worried I'd woken him up.

"Shh," I soothed, sliding my hand down the hot skin of his torso to his hip, expecting more bare skin and surprised to find the thick elastic band of . . .

underwear? Or boxer briefs? *What?*

He rolled to face me before I could determine which—boxer briefs or briefs, neither of which Cletus wore. His calloused hand was suddenly on my leg, lifting my skirt.

Before I quite knew what was happening, he kissed me, just a brush of lips, but I felt him smile against my mouth as he said, “I missed you.”

And that’s when I realized, this was not Cletus.

I sucked in a startled breath, scrambling to turn and push myself away.

Beau’s hands caught me. “Shelly? What’s wrong?”

“You’re not Cletus!” I whisper-screamed as my head fell to the floor, my legs still on the bed tangled in the sheets and comforter, my hips hanging over the side.

Footsteps, heavy ones, thundered down the hall.

“Jenn?” Beau reached for me as though to help, but when his hands came in contact with my bare ass, I sensed him rear backward as though burned. His head hit the wall and he cursed.

“Jenn? What the—?”

The bedroom door swung open and I kicked my legs, desperate to be free of the bed before the light flicked on, and I mooned Beau and whoever had just opened the door.

“Ow!” Beau made some movement that pulled the covers with him, likely trying to evade my wild legs, or maybe help me untangle, but it was too late.

Light filled the room and, momentarily blinded, I had no idea who’d flipped the switch. I hurried to push my skirt over my bare bottom, but it was no use. Gravity was my enemy, and the front of my skirt was trapped between my hips and the side of the mattress.

“Oh my God!”

“Oh shit!”

“Jenn?” That was Cletus’s voice.

I turned my head toward the door, blinking against the harsh light until three figures came into view. Cletus stood at the entrance, Billy and Roscoe behind him. I whipped my head around to the bed and found Beau sitting up, rubbing his eyes.

“Jesu—”

“Beau!” That was also Cletus, but he was closer now.

The next thing I knew, Cletus rushed over and unceremoniously tore the comforter off the bed, sending his brother Beau’s head back against the wall. Shielding me from view, he eased me down to the floor and wrapped me in the blanket, clutching me to his chest. His heart was pounding, just like mine.

But when I chuckled at the absurdity and insanity of the last few moments, he did not.

Had I just climbed into bed with Beau? And wrapped my arm around his body? And touched his underwear? Fallen out of the bed and flashed three of Cletus's brothers? Had that just happened?

Kill. Me. Now.

Except . . . not Beau. I hadn't flashed Beau because he hadn't looked yet. But he'd certainly gotten a handful.

KILL ME NOW!

"Jenn." I felt Cletus's chest rise and fall with a deep breath. "Are you okay?"

"I thought you were in here, asleep." I don't know why, but now I was laughing harder.

"No." Came Beau's groggy voice. "That was me."

I peeked at Beau. He sat in the bed in nothing but Tarzan underwear, his red beard, and a sleepy, sorry smile. I kept on laughing. Beau joined me.

Cletus, again, did not. "Well she knows that now, don't she?" The question was harsh, and his next words held the sharp edge of a threat. "I'll deal with you later."

"Deal with me? About what? I didn't do anything!" Beau stopped laughing and now sounded completely awake.

I looked to Cletus. He'd lifted his eyebrows, his mouth a stern line, his eyes glinting with malice.

"Now might not be the time to try to reason with him," Roscoe suggested. "You were just in bed with his girlfriend."

"I thought she was Shelly!" Beau moved to the end of the bed, placing his feet on the floor.

My laughter subsided. Too tired to be mortified, too sleepy to do anything but yawn and lean into Cletus, I inhaled through my nose and smelled him, and he smelled exactly like I'd expected.

Just. Wonderful.

"Come on." Billy cleared his throat. "Let's give them some privacy."

I heard Beau sigh. "Fine. Fine." Sheets rustled, the bed gave a squeak. "I'll sleep in Roscoe's room, even though it's as bright as a tanning bed in there."

"How would you know how bright a tanning bed is?" Roscoe asked from somewhere behind Cletus, like he really wanted to know. "You'd just burn."

"I never said I'd used one." Beau's tone was surprisingly conversational as he unfolded from the bed and shuffled out of the room. "It's an analogy. Haven't you ever heard an analogy before?"

"No. Never." Roscoe's sarcastic reply sounded further away.

"Aren't you sorry you didn't just go to Shelly's or sleep in your own room?" This question came from Billy and was the last I heard from Cletus's brothers before the door clicked shut.

My humor left me then, and—to my surprise—I didn't feel terribly embarrassed. I felt only exhaustion and gratitude that I was finally surrounded by Cletus.

But I did feel moved to say, "Don't do anything to Beau, it's not his fault."

Cletus said something, a gruff collection of words I didn't understand. He fitted his arms behind my legs and under my back, lifting me. "Have you slept at all?" I couldn't decide if the question sounded irritated or concerned.

"No."

He kissed my forehead. "What are you doing here? Why aren't you asleep at home?"

"Because you're here, and I miss you." I heard the unintended vulnerability in my tone as the honest words left my mouth before I could catch them, which—despite my sleepiness—made my middle tense uncomfortably. I wanted to ask, *Don't you want me here?* But I didn't.

We'd been mostly separated for weeks. I'd broken a lot of promises. It was a question I wasn't sure I wanted him to answer.

Cletus laid me down on the bed, and I opened my eyes. He also looked exhausted. "What about you? Have you slept?"

His eyes, stormy and upset, didn't meet mine. "No. I gave Beau my room 'cause it's darker, and I took a shower. We just got home a half hour ago."

"From plucking chickens?"

He sat on the edge of the bed and nodded, studying his hands. "Yep. Beau helped me move them to the church. They all fit, which is good."

I took a breath instead of speaking, examining his handsome profile, knowing we were both too tired to have a meaningful discussion about anything, but also wanting to be sure he didn't mind me being here.

"Cletus."

"Yes?" He swallowed, his eyes still on his hands.

Might as well cut to the chase. "Do you want me to leave?"

He gave me his attention then, his gaze cutting to mine, wide with what looked like surprise and confusion. "No. Of course not. Why would you ask me that?"

I licked my lips, reaching my hand out to him. "Just making sure."

He didn't take it. Instead, he frowned, looking me over, like my question made him angry, and stood from the bed. My heart sunk as he moved to the door and flipped off the light. For a split second I thought he was going to leave me

alone in his room. But then I heard him return, felt him shake out the comforter and lay it over me. I listened as he placed a second pillow next to the one under my head and climbed into the bed.

He gathered me to him, his strong arms wrapped around my body, one hand at my hip, the other in my hair.

"I'm glad you're here," he whispered, like it was a secret. The words plus his voice made my lungs hot.

I smiled against his chest, relaxing into him. "Thank you."

"For what? Exposing you to my brothers' bad manners?"

"No." I smiled wider, closing my eyes because I couldn't keep them open another second. "For helping Mr. Badcock. For organizing your family and plucking those chickens. For taking them to the church so they could be salvaged. For saving the man from ruin."

"I don't know about that." His fingers pushed into the hair at my temple. "His loss of income is going to be substantial, but I think his insurance will ultimately cover it and we'll be able to sell all the birds. Billy called Mr. Johnson at the Piggly Wiggly this morning. They're going to take them and sell them as a special, fancy *organic* offering, play up the local farmer angle. Says he can charge upwards of twenty dollars for each bird. But you're right. Twenty dollars ain't going to help when he usually charges ten dollars per dozen eggs, every day."

A few moments of silence passed. I felt myself drift, aware but not aware. I don't know how much time had passed, but at some point he used my hair as leverage to tug my head back while he dipped his forward. Even in my near dream state, I sensed that he was after a kiss. Lifting my chin, our lips met in the middle. A slow, soft press, warm and dizzying.

His leg moved between my knees and the fingers in my hair fisted, pulling roughly. I opened my mouth and he swept in, the hot slide of his tongue somehow both subdued and demanding. One of my hands was trapped between us, but the other automatically slipped under his T-shirt, searching for skin. His muscles moved beneath my palm as his hand in my hair untangled itself, slid over my shoulder, under the covers, down to my knee.

I moaned, arching my back, restless. But then he pulled his mouth away, removing his leg from between mine.

"Wait—"

"Shh. Get some sleep," he whisper-barked.

"But—"

"Sleep."

"I—"

“Sleep.”

Grunting, I drifted again, resurfacing when his hand caressed up my leg under my skirt.

He made a sound like he was in pain.

"What?"

His fingers bypassed my bottom and moved to my ribs, lifting my shirt. "I'm not going to take advantage of you when you're this tired." I got the impression he was talking to himself more than to me.

"Why not?"

He paused, held perfectly still, didn't even seem to be breathing.

I lifted my arm to drape over his neck and yawned. "Do whatever you want. Take off all my clothes. Use me."

A tortured sounding sigh met my ears, then another, and my mouth curved into a hazy, answering smile. Even so, I could no longer stay awake. I was so tired. Very, very tired. Also, I was warm, and comfortable, and felt safe, and happy, and *finally* content.

And so I slept, dreaming of all the things I wished we were doing instead.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman.”

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Jenn

I was naked.

I became aware of this fact gradually, mostly because hands were moving over my body unencumbered by clothes. Thinking I was still dreaming until teeth sent a sharp spike of pleasure pain from the center of my breast to low in my belly. I jolted awake, my eyes flying open.

"Cletus!"

He made a sound of satisfaction in the back of his throat as he palmed my other breast, grabbing, massaging. "More of that."

"What?" I asked on a hitching breath because he was kissing a path down my body, his bushy beard and hot breath tickling sensitized skin.

"More of my name, said just like that."

I moaned, pressing the heels of my palms into my eyes, rubbing away the sleep.

"That sound is acceptable too." I felt his lips smile mid-kiss, just below my belly button. "More of—"

Reba McEntire singing "I'm a Survivor" cut off whatever he was about to

say. My face screwed up at the sound of my momma's ringtone and we both stilled.

Now a sound of pure frustration rumbled out of him. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Ignore it." I shifted, squirming beneath him, lowering my fingers to push into his hair. "Ignore it and just keep doing . . . whatever you were doing."

He placed another lingering, wet kiss on my lower stomach, his hands circling around to the back of my thighs.

The phone rang again.

He stopped, sighed, and I sensed him lift his head. I huffed, opening my eyes. The room was still dark, but I could make out his shape in the grayish dim, and I just knew he was naked too. A surge of charged, vibrating greed raced through me, a breathtaking yearning that drowned out the sound of my phone. It helped that this was his room and his presence permeated everywhere and everything—the lingering warmth next to me, the depression of the bed where he knelt, his hands on my legs.

I no longer heard anything but the sound of my heart, beating a selfish song, but he must've heard something because he said, "You know, I think I'll just turn off your phone."

"Good idea." I swallowed thickly, croaking out, "Turn it off."

Cletus stretched above me, leaned over the side of the bed, and began searching the ground for my phone. My hands were immediately on him. God, he felt so good, his muscles in sharp relief beneath hot skin. The rough hairs of his chest, the trail leading down his defined stomach, everything about him was absolute and delicious perfection. I had the oddest thought, that I just wanted to eat him up. I bit his shoulder, my nails digging into the substantial curve of his firm bottom.

"Whoa. Wait. Jenn. Let me—let me . . . fuck it." Abandoning his search for the phone, he turned swiftly and pushed me to my back, grabbing my wrists and holding me down as his hips settled between my legs.

"I need you." I meant it. In the moment, I was desperate for him, for his body, like I might shatter from wanting. Everything hurt and everything felt good.

My phone vibrated and dinged, vibrated and dinged, vibrated and dinged as Cletus expertly licked and sucked and kissed my neck and shoulders, sending thrilling spikes of heat and anticipation to twist and tangle low in my abdomen.

And then, Reba.

I'm a Survivor.

Again.

Someone growled. Maybe both of us growled. I grit my teeth, deciding that my mother was going to pay for this interruption, and she might not survive my wrath. Perhaps Cletus's famous vengefulness was rubbing off on me because he wasn't rubbing anywhere on me and I wanted to scream.

Wiggling my wrists to free myself, I leaned over the side of the bed as he sat back.

"It's in my bag, right here." I grabbed the strap of my purse and swung it up to him. I didn't wish to see her text messages. I didn't want to be pulled from the moment, once again, by another emergency. Likely, it was selfish of me to foist the burden of decision-making to him—whether to answer her calls or ignore them—but if I couldn't exploit Cletus's dubious moral code for my own benefit sometimes, then was I really living my best life?

Cletus reached inside my purse and ruffled around. Yanking out my cell, he then dropped the bag and tugged his fingers through his hair. The screen illuminated his stern frown, the determination in his eyes abruptly turning to confusion.

He blinked. "What the . . .?"

Darn it all! *Where were his dubious morals when I needed them?*

"Ignore it. Ignore her. Turn off the phone." I sat up, shifting my legs under me and lifting to my knees.

"Uh, Jenn. You might want to see this."

"Turn it off and come back to me." Coaxing him, I placed urgent kisses along his neck and the underside of his ear. My hands, ravenous for the feel of him, caressed down the hard planes of his perfect body.

"Do you get your milk from Farmer Miller?"

What?

OH NO!

Today was dairy day. The list I'd left for my momma included picking up butter, milk, and cream from Miller Farm.

My forehead fell to Cletus's shoulder and I whimpered, "Oh God, his cows aren't dead, are they?"

"No. But he's not selling milk, cream, or butter anymore."

An involuntary sound of helplessness slipped past my lips. It had taken me weeks to find a replacement for Nancy Danvish's happy cows. "What?"

"According to your momma, there's to be a dairy cow auction in an hour. He's selling them and most everything else on the farm."

"Are you serious?" I pulled the phone in Cletus's hands and twisted it to face me, reading through her messages.

Momma: Farmer Miller says he ain't selling milk anymore and someone just bought him completely out of reserves this morning. Furthermore, he's retiring!

Momma: He's selling these dairy cows today, at an auction. I'll call you. This is crazy.

Momma: JENNIFER! YOUR FATHER IS RIGHT NOW AT THIS MOMENT HERE ON THIS PROPERTY. MILLER IS GOING INTO BUSINESS WITH YOUR DADDY!! GET DOWN HERE NOW! I AM BUYING ALL THESE DAMN COWS!

"She's buying all the cows?" I glanced up to find Cletus staring at me, looking as confused as I felt.

"She can't. The Miller Farm has Guernsey cows, twenty of them. They're hard to come by in the States, incredibly rare and expensive."

"What is going on? Why would she buy all the cows?"

As the last word left my mouth, my phone rang—*I'm a Survivor*—and my forehead fell to my palm. Surrendering, I answered and pressed the speaker button.

"Momma."

"IT'S YOUR DADDY!" she screeched, making both Cletus and I recoil.

"Are you at the farm now?"

"YOUR DADDY. HE'S GOING INTO BUSINESS WITH FARMER MILLER! HE WANTS TO RUIN ME!"

"Calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down, it's just like him. This is just like him! Of course. Why didn't I see it?"

Cletus and I swapped a look, and I was happy to see he was still confused, because that made two of us.

"I don't understand what's happening, Momma. Can you slow down and tell me? Start from the beginning."

"Your evil, good for nothing, impotent, limp dick daddy is buying out local farmers. It all started with Nancy Danvish in the fall, and he is trying to ruin me! Do you understand that?"

"What does that have to do with Farmer Miller's cows?"

"There's an auction for the cows. Today. In one hour." I could tell she was pacing as she spoke. "And I'm going to buy all those cows."

"We don't need cows."

"You need milk, don't you? For your cakes?"

I looked to Cletus for help, but his eyes were unfocused, staring beyond me, seemingly deep in thought.

"Yes. I need milk for my cakes, and butter, and cream for frosting and such. But—"

"And so I'm buying you the cows. Makes sense to me."

Cletus gently slipped his fingers beneath my palm and cradled the phone. "Ms. Donner, this is Cletus Winston. May I ask, is Principal Sylvester there now?"

Her voice dropped to a heated whisper. "Yes. The rat bastard is looking at me right now with a smirk on his ugly, evil face. And if he keeps on looking at me, I'm going to tear his eyeballs from their sockets and barbeque them on shish kebob sticks and shove them up his flat, wrinkly, old white ass!" She sounded like she was speaking through clenched teeth. She also sounded certifiably insane.

Again, Cletus and I glanced at each other and I got the sense we were both worried about the same thing.

"Uh. Don't do that," he said, sounding calm, his tone conversational. "Maybe wait for us in your car? Out of his sight, if it's a bother. We'll be right there."

We'll be right there? What? No!

A protest rose in my throat because we were naked, together, finally. Let her buy the cows. Let her shish kebob parts of my father. Let them work it out, or not. I didn't care.

The side of Cletus's mouth tugged upward a smidge, like he could read my thoughts. But I could tell by the look in his eyes that he'd made up his mind as he asked, "One more question. To the best of your knowledge, does Kip Sylvester plan to buy these cows?"

"Well, he ain't gunna." My mother's dark declaration rang between my ears, foreboding and shrill. "'Cause I'm going to buy all those cows first!"

* * *

"We don't have any place to put twenty dairy cows." I tried not to twist my fingers, but I couldn't help it.

After dressing in a rush—and mostly in the dark, unfortunately—we were now on the way to Miller Farm. Not much had been said between us about anything other than the current predicament.

"But you could probably use one." Cletus stroked his beard, his elbow on the windowsill of the . . . truck?

Honestly, I didn't know what this thing was.

Usually, he took one of his Buicks whenever we drove together—he owned two identical 1971 Buick Rivieras—but preferred his tiny Geo when it was just him. However, on the way, we'd dropped off Cletus's Buick Riviera at the Winston Brothers Auto Shop in favor of this new-to-me army green colored classic Ford of some sort. It kinda looked like a truck, but it also looked like an SUV.

"What kind of car is this?" I ran my hand along the bench seat, certain the new looking tan leather interior wasn't original to the vehicle.

"It's a 1969 Ford Bronco wagon, V8, 302."

"It's a station wagon?"

"No. It's a precursor to the modern-day SUV."

"What was wrong with the Buick?"

"The Bronco is a four-by-four, takes the turns better than the Buicks," he muttered absentmindedly, answering each of my questions as though on autopilot.

The only way to Miller Farm required taking back roads, up and down the mountains, a long and twisty ride I knew by heart, seeing as how I'd been stopping by Miller Farm every Saturday afternoon for over a month.

"You don't have anyone to milk it though," he said, still stroking his beard.

"Please. Do not let my mother buy even one of those cows."

His attention flicked to me, and then back to the road. "I doubt Diane Donner would care to hear my opinion about the weather, let alone how she should spend her own money. Who do we know with an unused barn?"

"Nancy Danvish." I laughed my reply. "She just got rid of almost all her livestock in the fall."

"Retired."

"That's what I thought. But my momma said something this morning about her going into business with my father."

"Doing what?"

"Something about a farming experience bed and breakfast. I didn't ask her any questions, I was so tired."

"And now your father, after disappearing for weeks, returns this week to attend a livestock auction at Miller Farm."

"I don't understand it. Farmer Miller never said anything to me about selling his cows, and I was just there last week when I picked up our order." I rubbed my forehead.

“Did you talk to him last Saturday? That would’ve been New Year’s Eve.”

“No. One of the other guys helped me load up the order. They said the Millers had company over, on account of it being . . .” I trailed off, not finishing my sentence, and lowered my gaze to my lap.

I was still sore for having to miss New Year’s Eve with Cletus.

I’d had a choice: keep my promise to Cletus and spend the evening with him, or stay with my sobbing mother who I’d found drunk on the floor of the kitchen in my parents’—I mean, my momma’s house. Shortly after phoning Cletus and breaking the bad news, she’d confessed that she’d had a one-night stand with an Iron Wraith, at the Dragon Biker Bar, at Christmas, when I’d left her alone to have dinner with the Winstons!

What could I do? I couldn’t leave her, and I knew she’d never forgive me if I’d invited Cletus over. She wouldn’t want anyone to see her in such a state. I never did ask if she’d seen Isaac while she was at the bar, but I suspected not. Actually, after ascertaining that she hadn’t been hurt, I never asked her anything about it, and she hadn’t brought it up since.

Point was, she’d been fragile, apt to make crazy choices, and needed supervision.

“Now I have to find a new dairy,” I said, mostly to change the subject away from the disappointment of New Year’s Eve.

“If your mother carries through on her threat to buy even one of those cows, you’ll be swimming in milk,” Cletus said suddenly, giving me the impression he’d come to a decision about something. “I wonder if we could use the Quonset hut, for a time. Or maybe I could talk Jethro into building a barn.”

“No. Don’t do that. We’re going to talk my mother out of this crazy scheme, not enable it. She doesn’t really want those poor animals, she just wants to win against my father.”

Cletus made a noncommittal sound, his thumb rubbing the tan leather of the steering wheel in a slow circle, which made me jealous of the steering wheel. I covered my face. We desperately needed time. Together. Alone. Not driving to another livestock emergency.

We needed hours to touch and talk, to figure things out and make plans for the future. *That is, if he still wants a future with you.*

Oh dear Lord, I was suffering from a chronic and acute case of *the doubts*. Huffing at myself, I did my best to push the doubts from my mind, but they wouldn’t be pushed. In fact, they pushed back and suddenly I was awash with worries I’d been painstakingly ignoring.

It’s not that I didn’t trust Cletus with my heart, I absolutely did . . . as of Thanksgiving. But we’d been apart for so long, me letting my mother and work

come between us, I wouldn't blame him if he no longer intended to uphold his hasty proposal. He hadn't mentioned our engagement since, and he hadn't corrected me when I introduced him as my boyfriend.

What if he doesn't want to get married? Or he was only proposing because I might've been pregnant? What if he's having second thoughts about being with you at all? WHAT IF HE'S MET SOMEONE ELSE?

I peeked through my fingers and examined his profile. He seemed deep in thought. Meanwhile, my heart was racing with the doubts.

"Cletus." I tried to keep my voice light. I failed.

"Yes?" He sounded distracted.

Clearing my throat, I asked calmly, "What are you thinking about?"

"I'd sure like to get my hands on one of those Guernsey heifers."

"You want what?" I reared back.

"I mean the Miller cows." He glanced at me, the side of his mouth twitching up. "They're Guernsey, not Holstein. Very few Guernsey remain in the USA, just about 4000 I reckon."

"Oh." I let my hands drop from my face, feeling silly. *That's what you get, Jennifer, for entertaining doubts.*

"What did you think I meant?" he asked.

I wasn't going to answer *that* question.

Instead I asked, "What's the difference? Between Holstein and Guernsey?"

"Holstein cows produce this protein, they call it A1, in their milk, and it's been linked to all kinds of digestive issues. There's a theory that most folks in the US who think they're lactose intolerant actually just have difficulty with the A1 protein."

"And Guernsey heifers don't make A1 protein in their milk?"

"About ninety percent of Guernsey don't. They produce the easier to digest A2 protein, which some people believe is better for you."

"Do you think so?"

"I honestly don't care whether it's good for me or not, I just think Guernsey milk tastes superior, as does the cream and butter."

"If A1 causes lactose intolerance and digestive problems, and the Guernsey milk tastes better, then why do we use Holstein cows at all?"

"Higher milk production."

I waited for more, for him to continue with additional reasons. When he didn't, I asked, "That's it?"

"As far as I know. But I'm not a dairy farmer." He flexed his legs as though stretching them and added what sounded like, "Yet," under his breath.

"That's crazy."

"Quantity or quality, that's the choice."

"Well, it shouldn't even be a question. Quality should always win."

He shrugged.

"Don't shrug like that. When you shrug like that, it makes me sad."

"Like what?"

"Like it—something, whatever it is—is futile."

"Here we are." A small, sad looking smile on his face, he flicked on the blinker, slowed, but didn't pull into the gravel driveway as it was packed with cars, trucks, and trailers.

I gaped at the cars spilling out of the driveway and parked on the side of the road. "This is crazy."

Cletus lifted his chin to a real estate sign. "Looks like he already sold the farm, now he's just selling everything else."

"That sign wasn't there last week. I didn't even know it was for sale." I sat up straighter in my seat. "This is weird. Something is off. Farms don't list and sell in a matter of days."

"Agree."

We fell into silence, and Cletus crept along until he found an empty spot. Cutting the engine, he grabbed his phone from the middle console and tucked it in his pocket before exiting.

Meanwhile, I glanced mournfully around the landscape. I loved this stretch of property. Not only did it have a gorgeous view and its own little lake, but it was high up in the hills rather than down in the valley with the rest of the farms. A rare, high prairie where the cows and goats and sheep ate their grass and lived peaceful lives.

I wonder if he's selling the goats?

Farmer Miller kept pygmy goats, just three of them. He raised them for milk, and his wife offered goat cheese making classes over the summer for tourists, which was how I knew about the dairy. After meeting the cute, friendly little ladies in the fall, I'd frequently entertained thoughts of buying my own pygmy goat.

Cletus opened the passenger door and pulled me from my covetous reflections. He offered a hand, which I accepted, and helped me out of the car. Once the door was shut, he kept hold of my hand, leading us along the tall northern Ligustrum hedge toward the footpath entrance to the farm.

"I wish I'd known this place was for sale," I said and thought.

"Why?"

"Uh, just because."

I sensed his attention on me, scrutinizing, before it moved to the gate. He

unlatched it, scanning the front of the property as we walked through the overgrown arch formed by the hedgerow. I wondered what Cletus saw as he looked around, what assessments and conclusions he was making.

In front of us was a field of unkept grass and wildflowers, at least an acre square, sloping up to the house. Farmer Miller didn't pasture his cows out here, they were tucked safely behind the house and an electric fence. It was obvious he didn't mow the field either, the whole acre remained open and wild. I imagined it would be full of green and flowers in the spring, fireflies on summer nights, and honeybees on blossoms in the fall, protected from the road and prying eyes by the thick hedgerow. But right now, the field was a sea of brown and gray, cold and sparse.

"The house is in disrepair." Cletus was squinting at the sad little cinder block ranch house in the distance, which used to be white but now looked as gray as the field.

"Yes. It is." And it didn't fit the rest of the place. I'd thought as much the first time I'd seen it.

But the barn was well taken care of, as were all the other outbuildings, and ideally situated for a homestead. A big vegetable garden, and goats and chickens and turkeys, maybe even a sheep or two. And here, where we were walking now, one could plant a hedge maze with a rose garden at the center . . . not that I'd given it much thought.

"You look like you're having a lot of feelings. Care to share any?"

"Just—" I sucked in a breath, looking beyond the roof of the sad, short house to the blue sky and pasture, the mountains and valleys. If the house was replaced, if something new was built, a two-story craftsman with a deck on the roof and a big porch on the second floor, then the view wouldn't be lost on cows and goats.

"Jenn?" He squeezed my hand, my name soft on his lips, grabbing and arresting my attention.

I took another breath, wanting to say so much but knowing now wasn't the time. Not with my mother minutes away from buying heifers just to spite my father. Plus, Miller Farm was sold. Even if I wanted it, that ship had sailed.

"Just that, we should talk soon." I felt like shrugging one of Cletus's futility shrugs.

"Agree." He nodded, a frown forming behind his eyes.

He turned, keeping hold of my hand, and we walked for a while. The crunch of frozen grass and dead flower stalks gave way to the crunch of gravel beneath our shoes.

My mind was all over the place, and I blurted, "About us," when we were

just about a hundred feet from the house. Which, again, wasn't the right time to be starting any conversation on the topic, but maybe there would never be a right time?

His steps faltered and he seemed to take a bracing breath before saying, "Agree."

"Cletus, I miss you."

He stopped, turned, and locked eyes with mine. Just like in the Bronco, his usually vivid blue gaze appeared stormy, ill at ease. *Restrained*.

"I miss you too," he said.

This terse echoing of my admission felt like a single drop of water when I was dying of thirst. Suddenly, nothing seemed as important as having this talk right now. Whole farms could be bought and sold in a week! Time was leaving us in the dust.

"I know the reason we miss each other is my fault. I know that. I take full responsibility, and I'm sorry."

He turned, shaking his head, pulling us toward the house and the voices of the crowd, presumably gathered for the auction.

"I'm so sorry. But I want to let you know, I spoke to my momma this morning and things are really going to change."

He didn't look at me. He kept his eyes on the gravel path in front of us, but I could see by sneaking a peek at his profile that his mouth was curved downward. More than that, I could feel his unhappiness and frustration.

"I'm so sorry."

"Please stop apologizing."

"Then what can I do?"

"Keep your word."

CHAPTER EIGHT

“To love a woman for her virtues is meaningless. She's earned it, it's a payment, not a gift. But to love her for her vices is a real gift, unearned and undeserved.”

— Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*

Jenn

O*uch.*

I winced, my free hand lifting and stalling at my middle instead of pressing to my heart, where the pain originated.

He made a grumbly, unhappy sound, shoving his free hand in his pocket, and then pulling it out to push through his unruly hair. It looked like he hadn't had a haircut in months, and his curly locks were poking every which way, wild.

Abruptly, he faced me, released my hand, slid it to my elbow, and brought us to a stop. "First and foremost, I don't want you to be sorry. I understand that sometimes you'll need to break your word to me, out of necessity, depending on the situation, when things happen beyond your control. I understand that. But when every promise is broken because *everything* is out of your control, I will be concerned." His tone careful, his gaze shuttered, as though he were actively wringing every ounce of chaos and feeling from them as he spoke.

“Everything isn't out of my control.”

He let go of my elbow, breaking the physical contact between us. “And yet, you've broken every promise.”

Ouch.

This time, I did rub my chest as his words hit their mark.

"This isn't about me, or us, not really." He lowered his voice, but it still lacked any heat or emotion. "Keep your word to yourself, Jenn. You promised yourself you'd set boundaries—for yourself—with the bakery and your mother. And, yes, I benefit from those boundaries. Selfishly, I'd like for you to hold firm. But also unselfishly too. I worry about you. You're killing yourself, working seventy, eighty or more hours a week."

"I know." I stepped closer, nodding. "And I'm—"

"Don't say you're sorry. Please." He closed his eyes, an edge of real anger sharpening his words.

I stifled the urge to apologize again, clamping my mouth shut.

He continued without opening his eyes, his voice devoid of sentiment. "I'd like to say I've learned my lesson, to let folks fight their own battles—you in particular—but I'm not sure about that anymore. I've done nothing, but I'd be lying if I said I haven't been tempted to interfere. Watching you cede those boundaries every week while I sit on my hands hasn't been easy. It feels unnatural."

Indignation and irritation warred with reason and before I could sort through which of my feelings was more valid, I was already speaking, "I understand your frustration, but you need to let me handle things my way. Don't you think I miss you? Don't you think I'm frustrated too?"

He swallowed around some thickness, saying nothing, but when he opened his eyes, he didn't give them to me. They remained firmly planted on the gravel between us.

"Like I said, I spoke to my mother this morning. She's hiring another baker so I can have weekends off starting in—in March." I'd made her promise February, and I would hold her to February, but promising March to Cletus right now felt safer, just in case. "And I'll have Mondays and Tuesdays completely off starting immediately. Uh, or—I mean next week. I have to prep and submit for the first round of the state fair judging this week, but after this week, things should be so much better."

He continued staring at the ground, motionless and immovable like a boulder, except for the subtle ticking of his jaw at his temple. Mere inches were between us, yet what presently separated us felt wider than Farmer Miller's wild acre.

I tried adding, "I'm no longer running these supply errands—well, just for the bananas, 'cause you know how particular I am about bananas—but that's why my mother is here right now. She came to Miller Farm to pick up the milk

instead of me. Please. Trust me. I'm trying to make things better."

I stepped forward, he stepped back, and my heart sunk to my feet.

Cletus lifted his attention from the rocks, his eyes on the path behind me, yet I had the sense his focus was inward. "I trust you. I believe in you. I know you're strong, wise, capable. I know you are. I trust you."

"And I trust you."

"Maybe you shouldn't." One of his eyebrows lifted a scant millimeter or two and the downward curve of his mouth flattened to a grim, straight line. "Because I also know all about being weak, yielding to destructive habits and instincts, when it comes to the well-being of someone I love."

Well. *Darn.*

My indignation fled, leaving me with the harsh reality of reason.

He was right. I'd been weak, allowing my mother to poke holes in my borders. I loved her, I wanted her to feel supported, and so I'd yielded, allowed her to invade the territory of my personal life, time and time again, rather than hold her accountable to her promises.

Meanwhile, Cletus hadn't interfered. He'd kept his promises.

"I see your point," I said, defensiveness draining from my bones. "I see your point and I won't say I'm sorry since you don't want my apologies. Instead, I'll . . . do a better job of maintaining the boundaries I redrew this morning. I'll do a better job of saying no to the bakery and to my mother."

His head moved with a subtle nod, his features now devoid of all expression, but I got the sense that my words had mollified much of his anger. "Don't do it for me. Do it for yourself, if that's what you want."

"I will. I'll do it for myself. But, Cletus, that also means I'll be doing it for you because we're—we're tangled together, you and me." I crossed my arms to keep from reaching for him again. I didn't want him to take another step away. "I don't want to let you down."

"Jenn." His voice was soft, gentle, and it both warmed and broke my heart. "I don't expect you to be perfect. I know you love your mother and need to be there for her."

"I do. But I can't keep putting her needs ahead of mine. And for the record, I don't expect you to be perfect either."

He continued nodding, now a little smile peeking out behind his bushy beard, a warming twinkle in his eyes. "On that note, it would help, maybe, if I were allowed one meddling per year. Or maybe two."

"One meddling per year," I parroted, confused.

"I want to keep my promises to you, I do, but we both know I'm going to screw up—from time to time—and exact revenge on your foes without even

realizing I'm doing it." He sounded so reasonable, as though revenge was as benign as making a batch of cupcakes.

I wanted to laugh, instead I lowered my eyelids by half and glared. "You want my permission to seek vengeance against folks who are unkind to me?"

"Not permission, per se." Now he reached out, his gaze following the progress of his hand as it smoothed down the sleeve of my jacket, encircling my wrist, unfolding my arms, and lifting my fingers between us. "More like—" he placed a kiss on the back of my hand "—an indulgence, like the Catholics used to do, in the medieval times."

Despite the irritation I should've been feeling, a betraying smile pulled at my mouth. *Jennifer Sylvester, do not be charmed by Cletus Winston's wickedness. Do. Not.*

Charmed against my will, I countered, "Except those nobles paid the Catholic Church for their indulgences. What are you going to pay me for indulging your meddling?"

His eyes, happier than I'd seen them in quite some time, moved to my lips. "I'm open to your suggestions, though I have several ideas of my own."

"Nuh-uh, you would do those things anyway." A thrill raced down my spine and I didn't try to hide my pleased smile, obviously forgetting where we were and who was waiting for us and that we were talking about me giving him permission to seek revenge on theoretical folks in an undefined future.

"We could continue your lessons." He stepped closer, threading our fingers together and lowering his lips to my ear. "I'm an excellent teacher, as you know."

I shivered, also moving closer, irritated by the layers of clothes between us. "You're such a good teacher, you fell for your student."

"Yes, I did." His beard tickled my neck as he sucked my earlobe into his mouth. "And I continue to fall, daily."

An inelegant, wanting sound slipped out of my mouth, sorta like an unsteady *uh-ya*.

I felt his lips move, grin against my skin. "I could also build you things."

"What kind of things?"

"Beds."

"Beds?"

"Of the garden variety. Or of the other variety."

I laughed, gripping the front of his jacket for balance because I wanted a kiss, and his kisses always made me dizzy. "Oh, well in that case—"

"Jennifer! Cletus? Jennifer and Cletus!" My mother's demanding recitation of our names yanked me out of my lovely bubble and—like before, in his room

—one of us growled at the interruption (or maybe both of us). “I was just calling your phone again. What took you so long? Get over here.”

Cletus leaned away, catching my gaze, a knowing smile in his clever eyes. We were now being ordered around by my momma, yet he seemed more peaceful and settled than he had on the drive over, or in his room, or at Mr. Badcock’s last night, or at the jam session before that.

I felt similarly, content for now with the outcome of our short conversation but knowing there was still so much left to discuss. Taking a bracing breath and letting go of Cletus’s jacket, I turned toward the sound of her bellowing.

She was dressed in a purple ensemble with a matching wool coat, different than what she’d been wearing this morning. Her hair a meticulous helmet of blonde waves and swirls, her makeup thicker, heavier, like she’d been preparing for a stage performance rather than a farm visit.

Presently, she marched toward us, her hands fisted at her sides, two deep wrinkles between her eyebrows. “Oh, thank goodness. Y’all are going to help me secure these cows. Hurry up, the bidding is just about to start.”

* * *

Everything happened so fast. In retrospect, I don’t know what I could’ve done differently to secure a different outcome.

“You’re going to help me win those cows, do you understand?” My mother had basically shoved us toward the makeshift auction area, her hand like a vise on my arm.

JT MacIntyre, the junk man Mr. Tanner, half of the Hill clan, Old Man Blount, and several others I recognized from around town and the bakery were present. Old Man Blount was just about the meanest man in the world while also still being an upstanding citizen. It was common knowledge that his only son had preferred to join the Iron Wraiths than spend any time under his father’s roof. I guess my father and Old Man Blount had that in common.

“But Momma, we don’t have any place to put them.”

“Never you mind about that.” She narrowed her eyes as they slid to the side, her mouth pinching.

I followed her line of sight to where my father stood. He wasn’t looking at my mother. He was looking at Cletus, and he appeared nearly as irate as my mother.

“Judging from the warmth of his expression, it’s a fair guess that I’m not on his Christmas card list,” Cletus said almost cheerfully, adopting his typical

expression and posture of the town goofball.

"*Harrumph.*" My mother stepped closer to Cletus, patting his shoulder. "Don't you worry about him, baby. He's a snake, and you're ten thousand times the man he is. Don't you let his nasty manners get to you, Cletus."

Cletus and I traded confused stares. Since when had my mother become Team Cletus?

She must've read our exchange because she huffed, her tone pragmatic. "I'm a big enough woman to admit when I'm wrong, and I was wrong about you, Cletus. You don't think I see all the ways you've been supporting my Jennifer?"

"*Your Jennifer?*" he asked, his eyebrows bouncing high on his forehead.

"I see you." My mother ignored his question, pointing at him like he was a sweet but sneaky boy. She paired this with a warm—for her—smile. "I see you're smitten, as you should be. And one thing is for certain, with eyelashes like yours, y'all are going to give me some of the cutest grandbabies." She rubbed her hands together and stepped fully between us.

Cletus ignored that, instead lifting his chin toward my father. "Who is that lady with him?"

I hadn't noticed anyone initially. I took another peek. Next to my father was a woman with blonde hair like my momma's, who was about my height—so, my momma's height—and who looked *a lot* like my mother.

Before I knew what I was doing, I was speaking, "Is that—"

"Yes, that's her." My mother tugged on the sleeve of my coat. "Please don't look. It's embarrassing."

"That's Elena Wilkinson," Cletus muttered, like he couldn't believe it.

I couldn't believe it either. The woman my father had been having an affair with for many years, his secretary at the high school where he'd been the principal, looked completely different.

Her hair was the most drastic of the changes. She'd always had blonde hair—hers was a natural whitish yellow—but it had been curly and long, with pretty ringlets. Now it seemed to be dyed a brassy bottle blonde (like my mother's hair), cut much shorter (like my mother's hair), waves and swirls (like my mother's hair), and styled (you guessed it, like my mother's hair).

Likewise, her makeup appeared to be thicker, and more of it. Also, her clothes were similar to my mother's, that *first lady chic* look of a skirt suit and high heels, heavy with accessories and accents, instead of the flowy skirts and tops she used to wear.

"Who is that woman next to her?" Cletus whispered, his lips barely moving.

"What woman?" My mother craned her neck like she couldn't stop the impulse.

“The one with the curly blonde hair.”

I hadn't seen the other woman at first, on account of me being so short and her standing behind Elena like a shadow. I needed to lean to one side to get a good look at her face. Cletus was right, she did resemble my father's mistress. Except she was older—at least ten years older by the look of it—a few inches taller, and, I realized too late, glaring directly at me like I'd taken her soufflé out of the oven too soon, making it collapse.

I straightened, snapping my eyes away, and fought a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold.

Cletus, meanwhile, seemed to continue his unabashed perusal. “She doesn't like you, Jenn,” he whispered offhandedly, like he was speaking his thoughts.

“Don't look at those people.” My mother smoothed her hand down the front of her jacket and then played with her earring.

“It's to be expected that we'd give them a good once-over. They're expecting it.” Again, Cletus's lips barely moved. He clearly didn't care about them knowing he was looking, but he didn't want them to know what he was saying. “That's got to be either Elena's older sister or her mother. They look too much alike.”

Now Momma played with her other earring. “I don't want to talk about *them*. Auction is starting. We better hush.”

“Welcome ladies and gentlemen. Let's get this party started. Farmer Miller wants to thank y'all for coming. Much appreciated taking time out of your Saturday on such short notice.” JT MacIntyre grinned his big white grin at all of us. The man was exceptionally good at grandstanding and talking folks into doing what he wanted them to do. He wasn't especially handsome, but he had presence, and he used it.

“If y'all have the pamphlet, we're going in the order prescribed, starting with the livestock and working our way up to the equipment, feed, and outbuilding supplies. There has been just one small change to the agenda. Farmer Miller, upon additional introspection, would like to auction all his cows at the same time, as one lot, instead of in batches as we'd previously spelled out. He'd like to keep them together, if possible.”

“What? All of them at once?” This came from one of the Hills, and if his tone was anything to go by, he was upset by the news.

“What if we don't want all the cows? What if we just want one?” Cletus asked, surprising me. I didn't think he'd been serious in the car.

“That's not up to me.” JT held his hands up, like he surrendered. “Y'all can see the winner, after the auction, if'n you wish to make a deal.”

I looked to Cletus, to discern what he thought of this change. His eyes,

slightly narrowed, were moving back and forth between Farmer Miller and my father. The two men were looking at each other, an obvious understanding passing between them.

My father's gaze then cut back to where I stood. At the same time, a cold wind swept through the gathering, making me shiver again. He gave me a hard stare, like I disgusted him, and then scowled at Cletus, a mild sneer curling his lip. Hurriedly, I looked away.

I hadn't seen my father in weeks, and I supposed part of me would always long for a relationship with him where he saw me as something other than a pretty but dumb ornament, but our last conversation had left me feeling indifferent to his point of view.

For one, he'd been cheating on my mother for years.

And for another, every time he looked at me his gaze felt threatening, like he wished me harm. I saw clearly now that he'd been manipulating me with harsh words and silence all my life, withholding affection as a means of control. I don't know if I'd go so far as to call it abuse, but . . . well, we'll just leave it at that.

Moving closer to my mother, I studied the crowd, realizing most folks were strangers. Many looked like farmers, in overalls and fleece, but a few weren't dressed any differently than Cletus and me, in jeans and jackets and boots. I assumed they were homesteaders from surrounding areas, maybe as far as Kentucky, Georgia, and North Carolina. One fella wore a cowboy hat and looked like a real rancher from Texas.

"Now, we don't have any more time for questions, the rest of the details are in the pamphlet. Let's get this auction going. I know I'd like to get home to my beautiful wife." He grinned, pausing like he expected us all to agree—out loud—that Bobby Jo MacIntyre was gorgeous.

She was, but JT MacIntyre was infamous for being obnoxious about how he'd married the most beautiful woman in town. Granted, they'd dated for close to twenty years before she married him, and only after finding out she was pregnant with their daughter, Magnolia, but that man simply could not open his mouth without bringing up his wife. It was kinda cute, but it was also awkward. And irritating.

A few more grumbles erupted from the audience, and two ladies backed away from the group, turning toward the driveway and leaving. Everyone else stayed put.

"We'll open things up at ten thousand."

"Ten thousand?" someone near the back complained. "Ain't nobody here got ten thousand to spend on cows."

"For twenty of the finest dairy cows in these southern states? I should say it's a deal," JT said cheerfully, grinning at the naysayer.

My mother lifted her paddle with the number fifty-two on it. "Ten thousand."

"Momma!" I whispered, grabbing her arm that held the paddle. "Do not bid on those cows. We have nowhere to put them."

"Jenn, what are you doing? You know we should all have a united front, us against your father." She extracted her wrist from my grip. "You're making us look weak."

I opened my mouth to object, but Cletus cut in, "Yes. I agree. We should have a united front. Go on, Ms. Donner. You get those cows if you want them."

I looked at Cletus, my mouth agape, incredulous. Did he really want her to buy twenty cows? Was he crazy?

Or is this his way of meddling? Getting revenge on my mother?

The thought was unsettling. I had just agreed—in a roundabout way—to allow him indulgences. Did that mean he was going to let my momma make an idiot of herself for pushing my boundaries? Was this his idea of revenge?

Looking at Cletus's stoic face, I couldn't be sure one way or the other.

"I hear ten, do I hear twelve?" JT looked out over the crowd.

"Twelve."

"Twelve-five."

"Thirteen."

"Thirteen-five."

"Fourteen."

"Fifteen."

"Sixteen."

"Sixteen-five."

"Seventeen."

These rapid-fire bids came from different folks in every direction, people I didn't recognize, and gave me no time to process what was happening. All I knew was that Cletus and I were clearly not on the same page, and it was up to me to stop this insanity from going any further.

Pretty soon, the bidding was up to twenty-five thousand dollars, but my father hadn't bid yet. After her initial bid of ten, my mother didn't bid either, just kept eyeballing my father, as though ready to pounce.

"Twenty-five going once. Twenty-five going twice."

"One hundred thousand," my father said, loud and clear, and administered a superior smirk to the rumble of murmurs and astonishment.

Oh no.

CHAPTER NINE

“It wasn't necessary to win for the story to be great, it was only necessary to sacrifice everything.”

— Donald Miller, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years: What I Learned While Editing My Life*

Jenn

My momma was right. My father planned to buy the dairy cows. All of them. What my daddy wished to do with the cows, I had no idea. He'd never done a day's worth of manual labor in his whole life, if you don't count using my mother's money to pay someone else to sail a boat.

My mother stepped forward, as though to bid, and Cletus caught her wrist. "No. No, that's crazy. You're not going to buy those cows for a hundred thousand. He's baiting you."

"Cletus Winston, let go of my hand," she seethed through clenched teeth.

"Diane, if I may call you Diane—"

"You may not." Her eyes were like bullets. On fire. Fiery bullets, drilling into Cletus's unruffled but determined wall of stony blue irises.

"You do not want to purchase those cows for a hundred thousand dollars. I can find you a Guernsey for two thousand." His forehead wrinkled with what looked like concern. "Anything above forty is unfair."

"You do not get to tell me what I want." She ripped her gaze from his, struggling to lift her arm.

JT's voice boomed over the crowd's extended and astonished chatter, "One hundred going once."

"Let me go."

"Momma, Cletus is right." I placed myself in front of her. "Where would we put them?"

"One hundred and ten!" she shouted, glaring at me, and in my side vision I saw Cletus close his eyes and shake his head.

"One hundred and ten from, uh, who is that? Oh! Goodness. Mrs.—uh, I mean, Ms. Donner. Where is your paddle so we can get the number?"

Cletus released her wrist, still shaking his head. "Ms. Donner, I'm trying to save you from your vengeful impulses."

"I don't need saving," she shot back, even her words were like a fiery bullet, and she lifted her paddle.

"One ten going once."

"One hundred and fifty," my father's smooth voice chimed, lifting his number above his head for all to see.

Another shocked murmur peppered the crowd at my father's latest bid. Horrified, I watched as my mother squared her shoulders and lifted her paddle once again.

"Diane." Cletus's voice turned as beseeching as I'd ever heard it. "Don't."

She ignored him, angling her chin. "Two hundred thousand."

"You are being played," Cletus whispered harshly, like his temper was fracturing. "Why do you think they changed the listing? They saw you coming. Kip Sylvester doesn't want those cows. He and Miller are working together. They just want your money."

The certainty behind my mother's eyes cracked, and yet she pasted on a self-assured grin. "I know what I'm doing." But this time, she didn't sound so sure.

Unable to help myself, I looked at Farmer Miller, and then at my father. They both seemed to be trying their hardest to disguise elation and self-satisfaction. And that made me sad. I'd always liked Farmer Miller.

"Two hundred going once. Two hundred going twice. Sold! Two hundred thousand to Diane Sy—uh Donner, paddle number fifty-two."

Folks offered sparse applause and my mother looked triumphant. But the problem was, so did my father, laughing behind his hand and shaking his head. Elena's features remained stoic, but the older woman behind her was also grinning, meanly. It was clear to anyone really looking who had actually won.

"Okay. Well. Dear me. That was exciting. Moving on, let's keep this rolling." JT wiped at his forehead with a handkerchief like he was sweating, meanwhile it was thirty-nine degrees outside, and I could barely feel my nose. "We have Lily, a two-year-old pygmy goat with papers. We'll start the bidding at, let's say, fifty?"

"Fifty thousand?" Someone hollered from the audience. "Or can us regular folks bid this time?"

JT pointed his gavel at the old man. "Now don't get your britches in a twist, Blount."

My mother turned on her heel and sauntered out of the throng, head held high, big smile on her face. She marched toward the reception table, looking cool and collected. Cletus and I followed at a distance.

"This is nuts," I lamented, near tears.

"At least you'll have some milk to drink with those nuts."

"Don't you make jokes. You encouraged her!"

He looked at me like I was also nuts. "Initially, yes, I encouraged her. When the price was reasonable, yes."

"Why?" I stepped in front of him, blocking his path.

"I told you in the car, I wanted one of those cows."

"You were serious?"

"Absolutely."

I stared at him, nonplussed. "Well, wish granted. You can have your pick for ten thousand dollars."

"Jenn." He caught my hand as I began to turn. "Wait."

"Yes?"

"I don't want your mother to look a fool," he said solemnly. "I would never do anything to contribute to her unhappiness."

Lifting to my tiptoes, I pressed a quick kiss against his gorgeous lips. "Yes. I know that now, but—"

"Because I know it would mean your unhappiness." His hand squeezed mine.

I pulled my fingers from his and folded my arms. "But if making her look a fool contributed to my happiness? What would you do then?"

Mimicking my stance, a small, exceptionally unrepentant smile claimed his mouth, but he said nothing.

"You're unbelievable."

"I'm consistent."

"What am I going to do with you?"

"Indulge me?"

Darn him, but that made me laugh. Yet even though he was clever and funny, my laugh was tired, worried, distracted, and quickly waned. My shoulders slumped. I was absolutely exhausted, and I still had a whole evening of baking in front of me. Sunday's special orders wouldn't make themselves, not without elves and magic.

“Cletus. What am I going to do about those cows?”

His calculating gaze moved beyond me to where my mother was settling her debt. "Let me see what I can do. She won't be able to make her money back, but I can see if the Hills are willing to buy one, maybe Blount, a few others."

"Thank you."

“But Jenn, you didn’t buy them. Don’t waste time and energy fretting about this. They are not your responsibility.”

“That doesn’t matter, and you know it.”

“It does matter. Let the woman accept the ramifications of her cloudy judgment and poor decisions. You are not responsible for housing, feeding, and the general care and welfare of twenty heifers.”

“You said you were going to buy one. Therefore, that leaves nineteen.” I lifted my eyebrows meaningfully.

“No. That still leaves twenty.” He looked pointedly at my mother.

I caught his meaning immediately and just barely curbed the urge to smack him in the arm, lowering my voice to a whisper, “You are not nice. Do not call her a heifer. And if it had been your brother Billy who’d done such a thing? Acting out in hurt and anger? What would you be saying then? Would you be helping? Or could you leave him to deal with the consequences of his actions all by himself? Watching him suffer?”

“Ask me in another four years. He has until January 2021 to make things right.”

“What does that mean?”

“Shh. She’s coming back. Act normal.”

I turned just as my mother came to a stop in front of us, her head still held high. “Well now, that’s all settled. I have until the end of the week to pick them up, and that suits me just fine. And Darla, such a lovely lady, said they'd send over the raw milk in the morning, every morning, until we pick them up.”

Twenty cows worth of raw milk every morning for a week? Where the heck are we going to put it?

My mother turned to Cletus and gave him a tight smile. "I appreciate what you were trying to do back there, but I'll thank you never to meddle in my affairs again, Cletus Winston."

Cletus gave my mother a solemn nod. "You have my solemn promise that you shall never hear of another incidence of meddling, by me, on your account."

"Thank you." She stuck out her hand for a shake, which he accepted.

I didn't point out to my mother that Cletus hadn't agreed to her demand, merely that she would never hear (that is, find out) about his meddling. With Cletus, words mattered. He said exactly what he meant. But folks had to be keen

to listen if they wished to understand his meaning. My mother had never excelled at listening.

“Jennifer dear, where are we with the orders for tomorrow?”

“Oh. Let me see—”

“You have special orders for tomorrow?” Cletus’s tone was carefully conversational, and the carefulness snagged my attention. I could tell he was disappointed about something because his eyes seemed to have gone from twinkly to dim in the span of two seconds.

“Yes. I do have special orders to bake for tomorrow. A cake and tea reception, and a few baby showers, three w—wedding showers,” I stumbled over the word *wedding*, seeing as how Cletus's entire person seemed to stiffen at the word. “Not too many, actually.”

“If Jenn rides back with me right now, she won’t need to stay up all night baking. She needs her rest.” My momma gave me a maternal smile, adding, “I’m glad you were here. You gave me strength.”

I smiled wanly at my mother, distracted by Cletus’s continued watchfulness and the increasingly detached quality to his posture. He bit his bottom lip, pulling it through his teeth, giving none of his thoughts away.

But he did say, “I guess you better go then.”

Ignoring my momma’s earlier offer, I shuffled a half step toward him. “Do you want to drive me?”

“I think I’ll stay here and see what might be worth an acquisition.” He shook his head, and his eyes were so shuttered and dark, my heart ached. “I’ll also speak with Blount, Hill, and the others about—uh, that thing we discussed.”

Oh. That makes sense. He was staying as a favor to me, to check with local farmers about buying my mother’s ill-got heifers.

“It’s settled then. Cletus,” Momma said curtly, “Nice to see you. Jennifer—” she pulled her keys out of her coat “—I’ll meet you at the car. I’m parked right at the front.”

I grabbed Cletus’s arm as soon as my mother was out of earshot. “What about tomorrow? Can you come over for dinner tomorrow?”

He inspected me closely, seeming wary. “Will you have time?”

“I’m not doing the bakery case tomorrow, just the special orders. I’ll have plenty of time.”

Cletus Winston had lit a fire in me last fall. I ached for him, his smile, his conversation, his touch, his presence in a way that I’d never suspected existed between two people. Did he really have no idea how much I wanted to be with him? How I longed for him every night and every day?

His inspection continued. “Why don’t you take the day for yourself, get

some rest.” His words were measured, like he was trying to read my mind and give me the right answer to some unspoken request.

“Cletus.” I moved into his personal space and tried to project the intensity of my desperation by using my expression and tone of voice. I didn’t want to say the words, *I feel frustrated and needy, and therefore you will come over, put your hands on my body and attend to my needs.*

Instead, I said firmly, “Come. Over.”

Apparently, he read me loud and clear then because his features immediately brightened. “Will you be up for that?”

“Yes. I’ll take a nap if I need to. I’ll be all rested up. I pro—”

“Don’t promise. Please.” Cletus covered my hand with his, dropping his gaze to where we touched, his eyebrows pulling together.

Ugh. That made me sad. But, all things considered, his request was fair. “Okay. I won’t. I’ll just say, I really, really hope you come over.”

“I will be there.” Like before, he lifted my fingers and placed a kiss on the back of my hand. “I’ll bring a bottle of that Italian wine Duane and Jess sent us.”

“Great.” I jumped up, wrapping my arms around his neck, and pressed several quick kisses to his mouth. “Tomorrow. Tomorrow. Tomorrow,” I said between kisses, and then quickly skipped away so I wouldn’t be tempted to stay and . . . not talk.

This was good. This was progress. What a day!

Yes, my mother had purchased twenty cows she didn’t need (or want). But on the bright side, at least we’d have all the milk we ever needed, plus butter, plus cream. Our dairy cup runneth over, and runneth-over-ing was better than a big cup of empty.

I jogged to my mother’s car, my step light for the first time in ages, my head full of grand plans. First, I would make the special orders, then I’d go to sleep before sunrise, then I’d see what I had in the kitchen for fixing dinner. Then Cletus would come over, and then—

“Hey baby, do you mind driving?” My mother was standing on the driver’s side with the door open, her hand lifted like a salute, shielding the sun from her eyes. “I have a little headache.”

“No problem.” I skipped to her side as she walked around the car. She’d left the proximity key in the cupholder. Once I was situated—seatbelt on, rearview mirror adjusted, side mirrors checked—I started the car.

“Such a pretty view here,” she said, buckling her seatbelt. “Not as nice as the view from the lodge, but still pretty.”

I snuck a glance at her because her voice cracked on the words *view, lodge, and pretty.*

“You okay, Momma?”

She nodded, her smile huge and clearly forced. “Just fine.”

Oh no.

I braced myself, and this was wise.

Not two seconds later, her features crumpled like a piece of paper, her head fell to her hands, and she sobbed, "What have I done?"

CHAPTER TEN

“The difference between an admirer and a follower still remains, no matter where you are. The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. He always plays it safe.”

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*

Cletus

The door to my bedroom opened Sunday afternoon while I was getting dressed for Jenn’s, my brother Beau poking his head in the doorway.

I scowled.

“Hey, Cletus. Listen, I need—uh . . .” Beau paused, looking me over as though gauging my temperament.

Allowing the inspection, I gave him my back. “Beau, you will kindly learn to knock.”

I heard no footsteps bringing him further into the room, he must’ve remained loitering by the door. “What are you doing?”

“Putting clothes on my person.” I didn’t spare another glance for my brother, nor did I ask him what he wanted. I don’t make a habit of asking folks questions when they’re obviously willing to volunteer the information without any prompting on my part, as was my way, an efficient habit I’d learned from watching my brother Billy.

But this time, I also didn’t ask because Beau and I were still in a fight. About

him. Sleeping in my bed. With Jenn. While she'd been improperly attired for anyone but me.

He responded to the unveiled displeasure in my tone with an exaggerated sigh. "You're still mad about yesterday?"

"I don't get mad."

"You just get even, right?"

"No." Getting even was a waste of time. Why would I get even when I could get the advantage?

"What are you going to do this time?" Now I heard footfalls carrying him into the room. "Replace all my shoes again with exact replicas, two sizes too small?"

I said nothing, allowing silence to hang between us like a noose. As the quiet stretched, I heard him swallow, loudly. A worry-swallow. Good. More silence.

"It's not fair for you to be angry with me about something I had no control over in the first place." He walked even further into the room as he said this, coming to stand about four feet from my side. "Especially since the reason I was up the entire night was 'cause I was helping Mr. Badcock pluck those chickens because *you* asked."

Hmm. Well. He had a point there.

"And you said I could sleep in your room. I specifically asked for permission, which you gave. And—"

"Fine. Fine. I won't *do* anything." But that didn't mean I wouldn't ask someone else to *do* something.

He released a long breath that sounded relieved. "Good. I have a favor to ask."

I lifted an eyebrow at this. "No."

"You don't know what it is."

"No."

"I just helped you with all those chickens."

"You helped Mr. Badcock with his chickens, not me. We were all helping the poor man because it's what the good Lord—and our momma, rest her soul—would want us to do." I stood, picked up the tie on my dresser, and held it up to my neck.

"You are—" he cut himself off, his jaw clenched tight, and he shook his head. But despite his invented frustration, he was also smiling.

"What do you think?" I asked, turning to the side. "Should I wear a tie?"

"Unless it's a funeral or a business meeting, no tie. What if I told you the favor was for Shelly?"

Oh! "Then yes." I returned the tie to my dresser next to the five open ring

boxes I'd removed from the top drawer, giving them each another quick assessment. I'd bought them all during December—engagement rings, for Jenn—but I still had no idea which one was the *right* one.

Meanwhile, in my peripheral vision I saw Beau's mouth fall open. "You'll do a favor for Shelly but not for me?"

"I've been doing favors for you my whole life, Beau. I'm tired of doing you favors."

His hands came to his waist, most of his earlier smiling diminished into a plain old scowl. "Fine. Here's the deal, I want to take her away for a weekend. But one of us is always working unless it's a Sunday or a holiday. Can we get a temporary mechanic? Someone who can take a shift or two? So Shelly and I can be off at the same time?"

Scratching my beard, I weighed our options. Fact was, I didn't know any mechanics in the Valley who weren't also working with or for the Iron Wraiths. Joel Barnes, for example, was a great mechanic. But he'd been roped into motorcycle club "business" since his shop began to suffer a few years past.

Plus, finding a part-time mechanic would be a good idea in the long run, freeing up my time for other pursuits. *Should Jenn ever have any time off from the bakery . . .* I wasn't going to hold my breath, but I'd continue to hold out hope.

"Let me see what I can do." Scrutinizing my reflection, I endeavored to press a length of disobedient curls to the left of my cowlick into some semblance of order.

"Thank you," he said, his tone more than a little sardonic, and he paired this unmannerly show of mock gratitude with a curt bow. "I am in your debt."

"No. Shelly is in my debt. As you said, I'm doing this as a favor to her."

"Are you serious?"

I glanced at my brother.

He frowned. "Right. You're always serious."

"And I have a favor in mind. Please have her people call my people." Bringing my attention back to the assemblage of superior, sparkly engagement rings, ridiculing me from their velvet boxes, I also frowned.

Which one is the right one?

"Your people? Who are *your people*?"

"*Me*, Beau," I explained slowly, continuing to examine each ring in turn. "I mean *me*. It's an expression."

The challenge of choosing the right ring for one's future life partner cannot be summarized in a word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph. I could fill volumes with the issues to consider, the factors involved, a tome of if-then statements,

diagrams, and 3D renderings.

“Still haven’t decided?” Beau asked, no longer sounding frustrated or rude.

The two-carat, platinum filigree old mine cut diamond seemed like the obvious choice, but nothing about Jenn was obvious.

Beau reentered my peripheral vision. “I like the white sapphire one.” He pointed to it. “I thought it was a diamond, and it’s huge.”

My gaze cut to the white sapphire, an emerald cut solitaire, three and a half carats. “It’s not too big?”

He gave a light snort. “There are two things that are never too big for women, gemstones and—”

“Please. Spare me. And help me pick one.”

“I did.” He motioned to the blue velvet box containing the white sapphire. “That one.”

“It’s too ostentatious.”

“Okay. That one.” Now he gestured to the two-carat oval aquamarine flanked by white diamonds. I’d chosen it because aquamarine was Jennifer’s birthstone, but it was nowhere as expensive as the others.

“Now you’re just pointing randomly. That’s no help.”

“You are overthinking this, Cletus.” His tone held no accusation or complaint; consequently, I couldn’t be as irritated with him as I wished to be. “Just pick one. They’re all beautiful. She’d love any of them.”

“I realize they’re all exceptional, Beau. I selected the rings, after all. But which one is the right one?”

“You’re being crazy.” He backed away, sounding a little sorry for me. “You have this amazing woman in love with you and you’re letting a stupid ring get in the way. Do you know how I know Jenn is amazing?”

I glared at him. So help me Jesus, if he brought up yesterday, and seeing her bare ass, I was going to maim him.

He huffed, giving me a flat look like maybe he’d read my mind. “No, dummy. Whatever you’re thinking, that’s not what I was going to say. I know Jenn is amazing because she doesn’t care about the ring.” Now he lifted his hand and gestured to all the rings. “She cares about the man.” He walked to me and jabbed his index finger once, quickly into the center of my sternum. “She cares about *you*.”

Hmm. That was the second good point he’d made. “Shelly must be rubbing off on you.”

Beau’s smile started small and spread slowly. “You know I’m right.”

“You’re not wrong,” I hedged, scratching my beard. “But that doesn’t change the fact that Jenn deserves the ring she wants, not my best guess.”

“Then just ask her.” My brother pulled his phone from his back pocket, glanced quickly at the screen, and then put it away. “I have to go. Just—think about it, okay? Ask her.”

I frowned. Asking didn’t seem appropriately romantic. I couldn’t just ask her which one she preferred and maintain my aura of life-partner perfection. It was a well-known fact, women wanted men to be mind readers. More than that, *I* wanted to be a Jenn mind reader, anticipate her wishes and desires, whims and wants.

“Look at it this way, Cletus,” Beau called as he left me and my five rings and strolled down the hall, “the sooner you get the ring on Jenn’s finger, the sooner Drew will stop his hemming and hawing and actually ask Ashley to marry him.”

Now that’s an excellent point. Shelly really was rubbing off on Beau.

I snatched up the emerald cut sapphire, closed the box, stuffed it in my pocket, and texted Jenn,

Cletus: Meet me at the Yuchi stream in an hour.

Jenn: What about dinner?

Cletus: We’ll make it together later at your place.

Jenn: Where’s the Yuchi stream?

Cletus: Remember that day you made me the world’s best blueberry pancake muffins, brought them to the auto shop, and we went on that walk with the stream?

Jenn: See you in an hour! <3

* * *

I was early.

Everyone knows I usually hate being early as it’s like waiting for the same thing twice, but this time I was early on purpose. I needed to think through my plan, walk through each possible scenario, practice, prepare for all likely eventualities. Parking the Bronco in the second-best spot, leaving the one closest to the trailhead open for Jenn, I meandered a bit down the path until I could hear the water rushing over rocks.

Winter nipped at my nose and lips, frosty wind rustled my hair. The air smelled like snow. At this altitude in early January, it might snow at any time. *I should get Jenn snow tires for her car. Does she have chains?*

Though it was rare for the Smokies to experience any significant snowfall, flurries did happen on occasion. A light dusting was more common, enough to make the ground crisp and freeze the barren sticks and stones, but not enough to

freeze or cover the plentiful rivers and streams.

One thing was for certain, it was cold. My fingers were warm in my jacket pockets, but I should've brought a hat. Hopefully, she wouldn't wear any gloves. There existed a good chance I would need her fingers bare.

I checked the time after walking through all probable scenarios and strolled back up the incline toward the lot. Right as I cleared the trail, Jenn pulled her shiny BMW into the spot I'd saved for her. This was the car her parents had given her, a trinket in her golden cage, and I wondered—not for the first time—if she even liked the car.

There's nothing inherently wrong with a BMW, it's just that only folks who look like they'd drive a BMW actually drive BMWs.

And don't look at me like that. You know what I mean.

Have you ever seen someone walk into a parking lot, get inside a BMW, and think to yourself, *That person does not look like they'd drive a BMW*. Of course you haven't. They get in the car and you think, *Well, yeah. That makes sense*. Or a BMW pulls next to you at a traffic light, you look over, and you think, *Yep. Looks just about right*.

Presently, I wondered what kind of vehicle Jenn would choose if she could have any vehicle she wanted, and I frowned. I had no idea, just like I had no idea which of the five curated rings best suited her taste and preference.

Not knowing things is frustrating.

"Hey, handsome!" Her smile immense, she jumped out of the car and jog-skipped over to me.

Now I smiled, because what other choice did I have? None.

"Jenn."

I bent to give her a kiss, but she caught me by surprise, throwing her arms around my neck like she'd done just before leaving Miller Farm with her momma yesterday, and kissed my face all over.

"I." Kiss. "Missed." Kiss. "You." Kiss. "So." Kiss. "Much!" Kiss. Kiss. Kiss.

I endured her light peppering of kisses for as long as I could. They weren't at all unpleasant, but they provoked a particular kind of madness. When I could take no more of her sweetness assault, I hauled her body against mine and dug my fingers into her long, brown hair to hold her still. I kissed her. Properly. No light peppering, no subtle seasoning. A committed, heaping helping of spice and everything naughty but also nice.

I loved the way she surrendered to me, like she'd been waiting for me to take over, take what I wanted, and take her along for the ride. I loved how she arched her back and pressed closer at first, as though with urgency, but then relaxed and

shifted and stretched, soft and pliant in my arms. I loved how she tasted, how she moved, how she smelled, the sounds she made when I tugged her hair, teased her tongue, and savored her lips.

But I especially loved seeing the aftereffects—kiss-swollen lips, languid daze, heavily lidded eyes, rumpled askewness of her hair and clothes—as I leaned away.

“Come with me.”

Not giving her a chance to respond, I pulled her silently along the trail, through the forest. I couldn’t lose sight of my mission, tempted as I was to divest her of all clothing, reveal all that soft, hot skin, and make love to her in the back seat of my Bronco.

Later, I promised myself. After the mission.

Our surroundings quite different than just a few months ago, gone were the explosions of red, yellow, and violet adorning the trees, floating in the stream like weightless jewels. In their place were bare branches, a gray sky threatening more snow, and the cold stillness, absent birdsong, that marks winter.

We made it to the spot I’d resolved upon, where we’d sat at the edge of the stream and talked months ago, where I’d suggested I give her kissing lessons and she’d reacted like she always seemed to react—which is to say, with unpredictability—and I stopped.

“I remember this place,” she said, laughing lightly. “Gosh, seems like so long ago now.”

Reaching into my pocket as best I could, considering my hand was shaking, I attempted a tight smile. I was nervous. I knew I was nervous, not because it was a state to which I was accustomed, but because what else could reasonably explain my symptoms?

Heart palpitations. Damp palms. Shaking hands. Dry mouth. Difficulty swallowing. The sound of blood rushing between my ears. Either I was dying, or I was nervous.

Finally withdrawing the velvet box, I inhaled a hearty measure of frigid air.

“You want to know something?”

Turning her smiling face to mine, her chin a perfect point, she gazed up at me with so much trust and love, I nearly lost my breath. “Are you going to tell me something?”

“I am.” I didn’t return her smile, too transfixed by her, the effortless beauty of this sweet, smart, kind, clever soul who had chosen me. On purpose. And since I was transfixed, I couldn’t manage to both focus on what I wished to say *and* smile.

“Tell me.” She leaned closer, her eyes moving between mine.

“I fell in love with you here.”

She blinked, her smiling dropping from her mouth but not her stare. “You did?”

“I did.” I swallowed, because nerves. “I remember the moment.”

“You do?” Her grin was back, wider than before, and seemed to light and warm the desolate landscape. “When? When was it?”

“I told you about my brother, my half brother, and you held me.”

“I remember.” Her smile was unsteady, a little wobbly, and she lifted her hand to press against my jaw and cheek. “You know, you can always talk to me, about anything. I love hearing about you.”

Yep. I loved her. I loved her so much. I loved her more than breathing.

Taking a steadying breath—*courage man!*—I lowered to one knee, 'cause that's how it's done.

Jenn, her hand still on my face giving a little start, stiffened as I lowered, and a short, sharp, startled intake of air cut through the otherwise still woods.

“Jennifer.” I looked up at her.

She looked down at me, her eyes wide and confused or overwhelmed, impossible to tell. “What are you doing? Are you proposing? I thought you already did that. I thought—”

“Jenn,” I said, firmer.

Her hand left my face and she covered her mouth, presumably to stop herself from asking more questions, and stared at me, riveted.

I opened the ring box, gave her a moment to look at the ring within, and catalogued her reaction. Her gaze darted to the ring, her eyebrows lifting a tick, but then her eyes came right back to me. No tears. No expressions of joy, excitement, or other proclamations of predilection for the ring were revealed beyond the baseline she'd already shown upon me lowering to one knee.

Hmm.

Nope.

Wrong ring.

I closed the box and I stood, returning the box to my pocket. “How far did we walk last time?” I glanced down the path along the stream. “Do you want to check out more of the trail? Or head back?”

When she said nothing, I glanced at her. She was still staring at me, her hand over her mouth, but now her forehead was ribbed with frown lines.

“We can head back,” I offered, tossing my thumb over my shoulder. “It's cold out here. And I got that wine from Italy in the—”

“Cletus Winston.”

“That is my name.”

“What are you doing?”

“Right now? Endeavoring to discover whether you want to head back or—”

Her hand dropped and she made to grab for my pocket where I’d placed the ring box.

See? Unpredictable.

“Give me that ring.”

Twisting my hips, I hopped back—insomuch as a man my size can hop—and protected the area of my person she sought to thief. “Excuse you. That is my property.”

She straightened, fists coming to her hips, mouth agape, staring at me like I was a crazy person. “You got down on one knee!”

“Yes. My chiropractor and my online yoga instructor both agree, it’s good to change positions once an hour and stretch when you can.”

Huffing, then laughing, then huffing again, she threw her hands in the air. “What is going on?”

“As I attempted to explain, I would like to know: do you want to head back now, or do you wish to see more of the trail?”

She stared at me again, this time for quite a collection of seconds. I’d estimate close to twenty. I stared back as I honestly had no opinion. We could stay or go. I had the information I required to determine next steps. *Mission complete.*

The ring was wrong. If she’d loved it, she would’ve had more of an emotional, uncontrolled reaction to the reveal. I would present the next ring to her at some point in the future, at another location of special meaning, until her response yielded appropriate shock and awe.

Gathering a deep breath, so deep her chest and shoulders visibly expanded, she turned on her heel and marched back the way we came. She grumbled as she walked. I did not attempt to decipher what she said. Typically, when Jennifer grumbled, the words were not meant for me.

At one point, I did try to reach for her hand. She smacked my hand away and crossed her arms. I thought it prudent not to comment on how her backside swayed more fervently, marching with crossed arms, as a temper had struck her.

When Jenn was in a mood, it was like watching a movie in the theater; if you talk during, the best possible outcome is that you get shushed. The worst is that you get banned. *For life.*

I waited until she stopped muttering and her marching slowed just a little, and then asked her back, “Are you angry?”

“What do you think?” Her pace increased, her back rigid.

“May I enquire as to why you’re angry?” My phone buzzed, announcing a

text message. I ignored it, easily keeping up with her short and angry woman stride.

“You have no idea why I’m angry?” We were at her car now, and she was fumbling in her pocket for something, likely her keys.

“I have an idea, but I’d like for you to confirm it first.”

Giving up the search in her pocket, she fisted her hands and glared at me. “Why did you show me that ring, then take it away?”

Abruptly, my phone rang—a proper phone ringtone, not one of those abhorrent custom ringtones—and I pulled it out of my pants, rejected the call without looking, and shoved the cell back in my pocket. “It’s not the right ring, Jenn.”

“What nonsense are you talking?”

“The ring isn’t the right one. If it had been the right one, I would’ve put it on your finger, had you answered the question correctly.”

“Now I have to answer riddles just to get my own engagement ring?!”

The sound of my very proper ringtone cut through the air again, and I grit my teeth, yanking it out of my pocket and—accidentally—reading the text message that had come through the moment prior.

Jackson James (Armadillo?): Are you with Jennifer Sylvester? Her momma is at the ER in Maryville, smoke inhalation and concussion. We’ve been trying to call but it goes straight to voicemail.

I read the message twice while Jenn ranted. “You can’t just bring me out here, give me a kiss like that” —she flung an arm toward where we’d been standing when I kissed her— “march me down our path, tell me that you know the precise moment you fell in love with me, get down on one knee, *show me my engagement ring*, then TAKE IT AWAY!”

“Did you turn your phone off?”

“Cletus!”

“Your phone is off?” I showed her my phone, and her glare shifted from me to the screen.

Her eyes scanned the message and she gasped, taking my phone. “Oh my God!”

“Your phone is off?” I didn’t like that. She shouldn’t be driving around with her phone off.

“We have to go. Oh my goodness.” Her voice breathless, panicked, she spun in a circle, like she didn’t know what to do first.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her over to the Bronco, opened the passenger door, helped her in, and shut the door. Soon I was inside, we were both buckled up, and I turned the engine.

“How long have you had your phone off?”

“I turned it off after we texted.” She rubbed her forehead, covered her mouth, rubbed her forehead again, shifted in her seat. “I didn’t want to be interrupted again with another cow auction. Oh my God, I hope she’s okay.”

That made sense. *But still.* “Call Jackson back.”

“Yes. Right.” She lifted my phone. “Uh, okay. What’s your password?”

“One, zero, one, zero.”

After tapping it in, she paused, frowned, and then looked at me. “Your password is ten, ten?”

“Call Jackson, find out what’s up.”

Giving her head a little shake, she navigated to his number and called. She pressed the phone to ear and bit the thumbnail on her other hand.

“Put him on speaker,” I said, turning onto the main road.

“Oh! Yes. Right.” Lowering the phone, she pressed the speaker button.

The line rang twice more before Jackson answered. “Cletus?”

“Cletus and Jenn,” Jenn clarified quickly. “What happened?”

“Oh. Hey, Jenn. We tried to call, but—”

“Don’t worry about that. What happened?” She waved his explanation away even though he couldn’t see her.

“Well, your mother is at the ER. She’s doing okay, woke up, is responsive but not talking yet. Some smoke inhalation and a bad bump on the head. Old Man Blount found her out near his beehives. Someone set the bee boxes on fire. He went out with a hose and found her unconscious. Looks like she was dragged.”

“What? Dragged? Did you say dragged or drugged?” Jenn stared at the phone, her tone anxious.

“Dragged. We reckon someone konked her on the head by her car and dragged her to the bee boxes. Do you know why she’d be out there?”

“Uh. Yeah. Yes. She was picking up the honey.”

“Picking up honey? Your momma was picking up honey?”

“Yes. I gave her a list of our suppliers yesterday—now that Nancy Danvish is retired, or whatever she’s doing—we have several local farmers where I source my ingredients. Mr. Badcock, Miller Farm, Old Man Blount, the Hills—”

Jenn sat up straight, her attention moving to some spot outside the windshield, her gaze unfocused. “Oh no,” she whispered.

“Jenn?” I placed my hand on her wrist. “You okay?”

“You still there?” Jackson’s voice cracked over the line. Reception wasn’t always the best on the mountains, prone to cutting in and out.

“We’re on our way, Jackson. See you soon.” I ended the call, and then slid

my hand to her thigh. “What’s wrong? What’s going on in your head?”

“This is my fault.”

“What?”

She twisted in her seat and faced me, her fingers at her lips. “Cletus, don’t you see? Farmer Danvish’s retirement, Mr. Badcock losing his chickens, Farmer Miller selling his livestock, Old Man Blount’s burned bee boxes—they’ve all sold to *me*.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.”

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Cletus

“**L**isten to me! I’m telling you, they’re in it together.” Old Man Blount’s shouts reached us as soon as the sliding doors to the ER opened. “That cow auction? At the Miller Farm? Bullshit! That was them putting on a show. Those Sylvesters are rotten to the core.”

I held Jenn’s hand tighter, slowing our pace, and pulled her a little behind me as we walked down the hallway closer to the ruckus.

“He’s just mad about his bee boxes,” I muttered.

She said nothing as his rant intensified. “Look at that son of theirs, Isaac. Motorcycle club trash! And that girl, Jennifer—”

“Don’t disrespect the kind lady. You need to calm down or you need to leave. Now.” Jackson James’s voice boomed from someplace nearby. He sounded angry.

I decided then and there to delete Jackson’s (Armadillo?) designation from my phone. *No leprosy for him.*

“Now I know you’re upset,” Jackson continued, now sounding tired. “But that’s no call to come in here and start trouble.”

“You don’t know shit!” Blount yelled. “Let me back there! I’ll get the truth out of the Dragon Lady, I’ll kill them both!”

A crash, shouts, worried gasps, soles of shoes squeaking on linoleum—the telltale echoes of a scuffle.

I brought Jenn to a stop and backed us up against a wall, keeping her fully behind me. “That old man is mean as a badger with half a brain.” Perhaps I would give him Jackson’s (Armadillo?) designation.

“He’s distraught,” she said, sounding distraught herself. Her free hand gripped the side of my jacket.

More shouts, gasps, linoleum shoe-squeaks, followed by Officer Boone’s voice calmly reciting Miranda rights.

Jenn’s forehead fell to my spine between my shoulder blades, her chest pressing against my lower back with a deep inhale. “Bless his heart.”

“Indeed.” I moved fully in front of her, blocking her from view as Deputies Boone, Evans, and James exited the waiting room, hauling a spitting and cursing Old Man Blount down the hall. Both Evans and Jackson James had a split lip and the beginnings of bruises forming beneath their cheekbone and jaw, respectively.

I caught Boone’s eye and he lifted his chin in greeting, his gaze sliding back to the old man as though to say, *Let me deal with this, I’ll be right back*. The other two officers tipped their heads in greeting. I thought maybe Old Man Blount was fixing to spit on me, he looked so riled up. He did not, however, in the end.

I waited until they were outside, stepped away from the wall, and turned to Jenn. “How are you?”

“I just feel bad for him. He lost those beautiful bee boxes. Did you know he built those with his son? He’s upset. I hope they don’t press charges.”

“I hope they do.”

Jenn flinched back like my words surprised her. “Cletus. He’s upset.”

“He assaulted two individuals, in front of witnesses, while throwing a temper tantrum. At his age, he should know better.”

“Those bees were like his friends.”

“If you can’t hold your temper in society, then you don’t get to be part of society. Those are the rules.”

“There’s no exception to the rules?”

“That’s not up to me.”

She crossed her arms. She’d been crossing her arms at an increased rate lately. “You don’t see the irony of your statement?”

“I do not.”

“You have a history of not always following the letter of the law.” She lifted her eyebrows meaningfully.

She didn’t need to lift her eyebrows, I knew to what she referred without the nonverbal clue, but I failed to see the relevance. “That is correct.”

“And yet you condemn Old Man Blount for his illegal actions?”

“I’m not the one condemning him, the legal system is.”

“Then why do you get away with breaking the law?” She stuck her chin out. It was cute. I wanted to kiss it.

“Because I haven’t been caught.”

Her eyes narrowed into slits. “I caught you.”

“Yes. You did.” I couldn’t help but smile at the memory. “And now I’m serving a life sentence. Lucky me.”

She smiled like doing so was not something she had control over, but she wasn’t ready to concede. “Cletus, put yourself in his shoes. If someone had burned down the Winston Brothers Auto Shop, I don’t think anyone could blame you for being upset.”

“Being upset is not an excuse for violence.” I didn’t know how to make myself any clearer. If we allowed folks to pick fights whenever they experienced unruly emotions, then everyone in town would walk around with a black eye.

But more than that, on a personal level, I knew I needed the order. If I were allowed to pick fights whenever I experienced unruly emotions, then everyone in town would walk around with two black eyes. I’d been that way once. Never again.

Jenn shook her head, looking disappointed, but we didn’t get a chance to dwell on the topic any further. Boone and Jackson walked through the sliding doors, Jackson testing his lip with his tongue.

“Evans is taking the old man in.” Boone set his hands on his hips, looking between us.

“Are you okay?” Jenn asked Jackson. “Do you need a nurse?”

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.” He gave her a brave smile and then winced.

In a rare paroxysm of vacillatory inconsistency, I redacted my earlier decision. That is, I changed my mind: Jackson’s (Armadillo?) designation would stay put for now.

“We need to talk. Your mother is still with the doctor,” Boone cut in, getting right to the point. “They woke her up and she’s okay, no lasting injuries. They think they can discharge her soon. She’ll need to be watched tonight.”

Jenn cast me a mournful glance. “I guess I will stay with her.”

I rubbed her back in what I hoped was a reassuring manner. I also hoped she

knew she didn't need to worry about me. First of all, this was an emergency. No use twisting oneself into knots about an emergency situation. Second, she hadn't promised we'd spend time together tonight because I'd stopped her from promising.

She still looked mournful.

"I'll bring y'all dinner and be back in the morning with breakfast." I'd make a quiche. Who doesn't love a good quiche?

Nodding, still mournfully, she sighed. "This is all so crazy."

"Jennifer, I'm sorry I have to ask—" Boone pulled out his notepad "—but do you have any idea why Old Man Blount would think your parents are responsible for torching his bee boxes?"

Jenn and I traded a look. In the car, she'd told me she was convinced that all these farm shenanigans had something to do with her, or at the very least, they had to do with the bakery. I wasn't as convinced, but I did plan to investigate her suspicions as soon as possible.

"I have no idea." The helplessness in her voice had me pulling her closer to my side. "Though I think maybe Blount is right. Not about my momma. My momma has nothing to do with any of this, but my father . . ."

Boone gave her a hard stare, like he was trying to figure out if he believed her. "Then why was your mother at Old Man Blount's?"

"To pick up the honey. I have a standing order, every Sunday night. He only lets folks stop by on Sundays."

"And she was at Badcock's to pick up eggs?" Boone asked, though I was certain he already knew the answer to the question. He'd questioned both Diane Donner and Jennifer on Friday.

"No. Not to pick up eggs. She was there to pay for a six-month order."

"That's right." He nodded, continuing to assess her. "And why was your mother at Miller Farm yesterday?"

"To pick up butter, cream, and milk." Jenn twisted her fingers, visibly agitated. "Boone, do you think this has something to do with the bakery? All this upheaval with the farmers? Do you think someone is targeting my suppliers?"

"Badcock, Miller, and Blount all supply the bakery." His lips twisted to the side and his gaze grew thoughtful.

"That's right. And Nancy Danvish used to, before she retired in the fall."

As though abruptly deciding, Boone glanced around the hallway before stepping closer to Jenn, his voice hushed. "Did you know your father was down at Blount's farm in early December, and then again this last week, trying to talk him into selling?"

"My father was at Old Man Blount's?" Her head reared back. "He must

really not understand Old Man Blount. That man would never sell his farm.”

“And then your momma shows up there today for reasons Blount doesn’t know or understand and is found right next to the burned-out boxes, still on fire.” Boone flipped through the pages of his notepad as he recited the facts.

“Except Ms. Donner was hit in the head, left unconscious, and would’ve died in the fire if she hadn’t been found,” Jackson pointed out, sending Jenn an apologetic smile.

I hated to agree with Jackson, for any reason, but he was right. “Ms. Donner didn’t burn those boxes,” I announced with authority because I was certain. “I doubt she even knows how to light a match.”

I could feel the consternation in Jenn’s gaze pointed up at me, but I said what I said. Her mother was whip-smart, a shrewd businesswoman—when her husband and cows weren’t involved—nerves of steel, but she had a team of people to lift their fingers so she didn’t have to lift any of hers. I wasn’t insulting the woman, she knew what her time was worth, what tasks were beneath her notice, and there was never anything wrong with practical self-actualization and awareness.

“Yeah, we’re not suspecting Ms. Donner for this.” Boone’s attention remained fixed to his notepad. “Although, we’re certain it was arson.”

“Boone.” Jackson elbowed him lightly. “You’re not supposed to be sharing ongoing investigatory details and conclusions with civilians.”

“I know that, Jackson.” Boone’s voice was distracted. “But this is Cletus.”

My attention sharpened on Boone. We weren’t friendly, but I knew he was the best investigator at the sheriff’s office. I didn’t like thinking he knew—or suspected—I might be different than the hapless weirdo I projected, it might interfere with my long-term, less than legal machinations.

Jackson looked me over, frowning. “Not a word to anyone.”

I lifted a hand. “Who am I going to tell? My cars?”

Jenn interrupted, “I don’t understand who could do such a thing to those bees.”

I shook my head somberly, deciding it was time to look a bit more idiotic. “Especially when there’s this huge crisis in the country with inseminators.”

“I think you mean pollinators.” Jackson made a face of distaste.

“Inseminators, fertilizers, pollinators, they all do the same thing.” I inspected Boone as I said this, not liking the way his mouth hooked up and his eyelids lowered, like he was unimpressed with my attempt at buffoonery.

Note to self, be dumber around Boone.

Boone’s steady stare then shifted to Jenn. “Do you think your father could’ve done this? Because Blount wouldn’t sell to him?”

Jenn seemed open to the suggestion—at least, not surprised by it—and her gaze clouded as her focus turned inward. “Maybe. I mean, we know he and Nancy Danvish are going into business together. Now it turns out he tried to also buy Blount’s land. But what about Mr. Badcock?”

“You said, when you went to see Mr. Badcock, he was real hostile right?” I asked.

“That’s right.”

“And that was strange?” Boone tilted his head, still openly assessing Jenn.

“It was strange.” She nodded.

“We should check in with him, see if your father asked about buying his farm,” Jackson suggested before I could lead everyone down this path, and I was glad. I didn’t want to ask too many good questions.

“And while we’re at it, we should also ask him who bought all his eggs before I got there.” Jenn was clearly irritated by the memory.

“Actually, Badcock told me Kip Sylvester did make an offer for his farm in early December and again last week, which he turned down. And the eggs, that was—” Boone flipped through his notepad “—Roger Gangersworth.”

Jenn heaved a sudden sigh, like this news pained her. “Oh, Roger.”

“What? What about Roger?” Boone looked to me.

I shrugged. Dumbly.

“You know he’s a baker.” Jenn twisted her fingers, agitated, fidgeting again.

“Okay, and . . .?” Boone prompted.

“He really hates that I win the state fair baking contest every year.” Now she looked guilty.

“Could he be working with your father?” Jackson asked.

“As far as I’m aware, they don’t know each other outside of my winning streak. I’m pretty sure Roger hates my father by association. I know he hates my momma.”

Boone and Jackson traded a look.

Jenn added quickly, “But I just don’t see Roger Gangersworth burning bee boxes and killing chickens.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“His pie is excellent,” Jennifer said, like this would explain why she didn’t think Roger was capable of wickedness.

“Don’t let your preference for his pie get in the way of your decision-making. We’d all like to think great cooks aren’t capable of sinister deeds, but that’s simply not true. I, myself, often suffer from pie bias.” I squeezed her around the waist and she glanced at me like I was strange and wonderful, but she also looked agitated and tired.

“What I mean is,” she went on, “he’s not the sort to hit a woman over the head and leave her there to die. I just really can’t see him doing that.”

Studying Boone, I figured it was safe to ask, “Do you know what Ms. Donner was hit with?”

“It appears that she was hit on the back of the head with a broom, or a rake handle. Something like that. Blunt force, hence the concussion.” Jackson scratched his jaw. “They knocked her out by her car and then dragged her to the bees.”

“How do you know she was dragged and not carried?” Jenn asked.

“We found a trail where the person pulled your mother through the field, and there’s grass and dirt stains on the back of her clothes.” Boone’s response was both perfunctory and distracted.

“They left her there to die?” Jenn’s voice cracked with emotion. I resumed rubbing her back.

“That’s what it looks like.” Boone nodded. “It also looks like the person who dragged her wasn’t very strong because they dropped her a couple times.”

“That woman can’t weigh more than one hundred pounds,” Jackson added unnecessarily. We all knew Diane Donner was slight in stature but big in personality. Plus, she’d always been a tad underweight. Jenn had told me that while they were married, Jenn’s father had frequently hounded Diane about her dress size.

“Here are the facts: your father asked farmers Badcock, Miller, Danvish, and Blount to sell their farms.” Jackson ticked off the farmer’s names on his fingers. “And now, the two that didn’t sell—Badcock and Blount—end up with murdered livestock.”

“Are bees considered livestock?” I addressed my conversational query to Jackson. “And did you know honey is bee vomit?”

“I did not know that.” Jackson made a face of disgust, and I smiled inwardly.

One of my favorite pastimes—for the undeserving—is ruining enjoyable activities, destinations, and/or goods with facts. If you dig deeply and scrutinize enough, everything enjoyable can be made either problematic or disgusting. Cognitive dissonance is a wonderful, wonderful phenomena.

“Miller?” Jenn asked urgently, ignoring my question. “My father bought the Miller Farm?”

My heart did a strange flopping thing at the distress in her voice. It had been obvious to me as soon as we stepped foot on the Miller property that Jenn had fallen in love with the place. Learning her father had been the one to buy it appeared to hit her hard.

Boone nodded, confirming her fear.

“That’s why he was at the cow auction,” she muttered under her breath. “He was there because he’d bought the land.”

“I’m waiting on the property office to get back to me, but it looks that way,” Boone clarified. “According to both Blount and Badcock—the two who didn’t sell or buy-in—your father wanted to buy out their mortgage, lease the land back to them for a dollar fee. They’d join some sort of farming hotel co-op, where they would have guests stay on their property and do—uh—what do you call it?”

Jackson nodded. “Oh yeah, that thing where the person does the lived experience or whatever—what is it called?”

Both Boone and Jackson were snapping their fingers until Boone blurted, “Agritourism!” then they pointed at each other. “That’s what it was, agritourism. They live for a stretch on a farm, some call it primitive living, relative to life in a big city these days without food delivery and such.” Boone’s attention returned to Jenn. “So the farmers continue to live on their land rent-free, no mortgage, basically retired. The agritourists do all the farm chores and the farmers split the profit from the hotel co-op, all of which Kip—your daddy—would arrange and manage for a fee.”

“That’s a dumb idea.” This made no sense to me, and I figured there was no harm in saying as much. “Who would pay for that?”

“Oh, you know, those hipster types from the big cities, with their selfies, wanting to Instagram influence all over the place, taking a hundred pictures just to get one perfect enough to post.” Jackson flicked his wrist this way and that. “Those folks will do anything to get more social media clicks, it’s like an addiction.”

“Badcock said your father had a business plan and investors, and the details looked solid.” Boone stuffed his notepad in his back pocket. “But he didn’t want to sell because he likes—or, I guess, *liked*—what he did, raising chickens and such. Anyway, I think it’s pretty clear, your father is involved.”

“I guess I should be relieved it doesn’t have anything to do with me or the bakery.” Jenn’s lips flattened into a sad line. “He was definitely involved at Miller Farm, him and Miller were working together to drive the price of those cows up. I just couldn’t figure out why they were working together at the time, what my father had to gain from it. I guess now I know.”

“Yes. My dad told me what happened.” Jackson gave Jenn a sympathetic look.

“How’d the sheriff find out?” I asked. It’s always good to know from which direction information flows.

“My father heard it from Fire Chief McClure, who heard about it from his wife, who heard it from Posey Lamont. It’s all over town. Where are you going

to put those cows?”

“Posey Lamont? The lady who makes the muffins?” Posey Lamont wasn’t at Miller Farm during the auction, but she was another baker. I wondered if she didn’t much appreciate Jenn always winning first place at the state fair, similar to Roger Gangersworth.

“Correct. Posey Lamont.” Jackson nodded distractedly. “Do you have a place for the cows?”

But I wasn’t finished. “Where’d Posey Lamont hear about it?”

“I don’t know, Cletus,” Jackson answered irritably. “I haven’t spoken to Posey since the jam session on Friday.”

That’s right. She was there, wearing that eyesore of a sweater. And Roger was there too, wearing unsurprising overalls.

Jenn clutched her head. “What am I gunna do about those cows?”

“Your mother is in no shape to pick those cows up. She can’t make arrangements either. She shouldn’t even go to work.” Jackson laid it all out, like Jenn didn’t already know all this. I could see it was on the tip of Jackson’s tongue to step in and try to rescue her.

So I made sure I spoke over him, “Don’t worry, Jackson. I’m here to help Jenn with the cows. I’ll take care of everything.”

“Cletus, I can’t ask you to do that.” Lifting her eyes to me, my heart gave another sad flop at the stress and exhaustion within them.

“That is one hundred percent my job and my role as your fiancé,” I pronounced the last word nice and slow, “to help where and when needed. I live to service you.” I brought her hand to my lips and kissed the back of her fingers.

Jenn watched me do this, giving me the side-eye. She seemed to be warring with her urge to scold while also feeling gratitude. Yet I knew she saw right through me, that I’d overpronounced the word *fiancé* for Jackson’s benefit, and that was just fine. I hoped she’d always see through me.

Nevertheless, I decided it was time to deflect and distract. “Don’t forget. You still have the state fair cakes.”

“Oh. That’s right! I have to bake the cakes this week for initial judging.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of everything.” I didn’t add that it would also give me a chance to have a chat with the gentleman farmer. He definitely thought I was an idiot. Thus, I suspected I’d be able to get some good details out of him. Folks, in my experience, liked to monologue about their own successes, and Miller was no exception.

“Jenn, I hate to ask this, but if your father comes to see you, or talks to you about the bees or anything related to the farm stay business, I need you to tell me.” Boone dipped his head, his voice lowering to a hush.

“Are you going to bring him in?” Jenn shifted her weight from her left foot to her right, and back again, like the thought of anyone having to interact with her father was worrisome.

Boone seemed to hesitate, and I got the sense he was choosing his words carefully. “Questioning your father is a given.”

Hmm. Interesting how he put that.

Before I could stop myself—and continue my charade of idiocy—I asked, “Have you already questioned Kip Sylvester?”

Again, the side of Boone’s mouth tugged upward, but he didn’t look my way, instead addressing Jenn. “Nothing is certain. I’d really like to find out who’s doing this, and why.”

Hmm. Interesting he didn’t answer my question.

“Me too, and I will tell you if he speaks to me about any of it,” she promised. “And thank you.”

“For what?”

“I know my momma was seriously injured, and this is very serious. But you cared about this investigation even before she was hurt. Thank you for caring about Mr. Badcock and his chickens, and even Mr. Blount and his bees.”

Boone scratched the dark stubble on his jaw, his brown eyes turning friendly, for once. “Jennifer, it’s the small businesses that are the backbone of this country. I know that. My job is to keep folks feeling safe, every single person, and safety is more than just a person’s body, it’s also a state of mind. If people around here don’t feel safe—their homes, their property, and their person—then, well, we’re not doing our job as police officers, are we?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“There are many Beths in the world, shy and quiet, sitting in corners till needed, and living for others so cheerfully that no one sees the sacrifices till the little cricket on the hearth stops chirping, and the sweet, sunshiny presence vanishes, leaving silence and shadow behind.”

— Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*

Cletus

S now fell, blanketing the outside while we sat inside, waiting on Jenn’s mom to be discharged. Silently, we watched the flakes through the large window in the waiting room until dusk obscured their descent. Hospital staff called Jenn back, presumably to fuss with paperwork and care-taker instructions, and I let her go with a hug and a promise to stay. I used the time to contact Billy and set into motion Operation Nesting Dragon.

“Why do we always have to give these task lists of yours a name? Why can’t we just call them what they are?” Billy’s tone seemed tired rather than irritated. “Okay, so, you want Beau and Shelly to pick up Jenn’s car, then Ms. Donner’s? How and when do they pick up the keys?”

“We have a copy of the keys at the auto shop in the safe. They’re labeled clearly, Beau knows the combination.”

Billy’s tangible hesitation ended as he asked haltingly, “You keep copies of keys for everyone in Green Valley?”

“Do you want me to answer that question? I thought you wanted to run for state congress.”

He grumbled something I couldn't quite decipher, then said, “No, don't answer. Fine. I'll tell Beau.”

“Have them install snow tires on both, then return them to the Donner house by tomorrow midmorning. He should lock the cars and put the keys back in the safe.”

“Okay.” The scrape of dishes being stacked sounded from the other side of the call. He must've turned a faucet on, I heard running water.

“And don't do my dishes.”

“I wasn't planning to.” A dish clattered, and Billy's voice grew muffled, likely because he pressed the phone to his ear using his shoulder, as was his habit. “But I did have to move your pile of dishes out of the way. I'm just cleaning up after myself.”

“Good. Is Roscoe still there? Or did he head back?”

“He's getting ready to leave, I think. I can catch him if you need me to.”

“Tell him to take the lasagna in the freezer—the one that says *Emergency Lasagna*, not the one that says *Lasagna Emergency*—to the Donner house on his way back to school. I'll text him instructions on how to get inside. He needs to set the oven to bake at three-seventy-five for forty-five minutes.”

“What's the difference between the Emergency Lasagna and the Lasagna Emergency?”

“One fixes an emergency, the other causes an emergency.”

“Shouldn't it be switched around? Lasagna Emergency should solve an emergency, right?”

“No, Emergency Lasagna is the one you use when you have an emergency. Just, let it be. I have a system.”

Billy sighed again—louder and longer this time—and I heard the water shut off. “All right, let's start again. Which one is which? I better write this down and go get it myself.”

I waited while he grabbed a pen and paper. Instructions written down, he promised to send Beau and Shelly right away. We hung up so I could text Roscoe with the necessary details for gaining entry into the Donner house. I'd just finished as Jenn and her momma left the exam area of the ER.

The woman looked small and not herself, fuzzy-headed. I'd never seen her without a barrier of makeup, a helmet of hairspray, and a designer outfit. Presently, she donned pale blue scrubs, smudges of soot beneath her nose and chin—though it looked like the hospital staff had endeavored to wipe her clean—and her hair in a tangle.

She didn't seem to be in the mood or mind to talk as I wheeled the woman out to my car and helped her climb in. Jenn loaded up in the back seat, then we drove her home, little in the way of conversation passing among us other than one or two remarks on the snow.

But when I cut the engine upon arrival, Diane stirred as though surprised, her voice cracking out, "Are we home already?"

"Yes, ma'am." I refrained from mentioning that the Bronco had snow tires, excellent shocks and struts, four-wheel drive, and a short wheelbase. As such, the tight turns and country roads had been smoother than in her BMW. We'd made it to the Donner house in forty minutes without jostling the passengers or any wincing on Diane's part.

Jennifer exited the back seat, opening her mother's door while I took the liberty of unbuckling her seatbelt. In an uncharacteristic display of vulnerability, the older woman allowed herself to be steered and led to the front door, me on one side carrying most of her slight weight, Jenn on the other.

I reached for and opened the front door before Jenn could withdraw any keys—I'd told Roscoe to leave it unlocked—and we were greeted by the aroma of my Emergency Lasagna, my stomach giving an automatic, answering rumble.

Diane's feet stalled. "What—what's that smell?"

"It's Emergency Lasagna."

"Oh!" Jenn looked at me over her mother's head, her gorgeous eyes full of warmth and gratitude. "Thank you."

"What—how'd that happen?" Diane's body stiffened, her features belying alarm and confusion. "When—who—"

Keeping my voice gentle, I encouraged her forward with a tug around her waist. "Roscoe, that's my youngest brother—you know him, he's the good-looking one—put the lasagna in the oven and set it to bake for forty-five minutes. It should be ready in just a bit. Are you hungry?"

"I haven't had lasagna in over twenty years." Diane's eyebrows pinched together. "It used to be one of my favorites."

"You should have some." Jenn also pressed her forward, away from the cold of the open door. "Why don't I help you get cleaned up?"

Diane nodded distractedly, allowing me to help her to the threshold of her bedroom. Jenn took over, casting me another warm look of gratitude, then—with a promise to emerge soon—shut them inside.

I meandered into the kitchen, checking the bake time on the oven. The lasagna still had another twenty minutes. I opted to set the table, deciding against building a cozy fire in the fireplace. The last thing Diane Donner likely wanted was a fire.

I'd just discovered the silverware drawer when Jenn's unexpected voice made me jump. "She wants to eat in her room—sorry. Did I startle you?" She stood in the doorway, and I hadn't any idea she'd approached.

I plucked a fork and knife from the drawer. "I didn't hear you. You're so quiet."

"Sorry. Force of habit in this house." Jenn leaned a shoulder against the doorframe. "Growing up here, it was often preferable to be invisible, if you know what I mean."

My heart constricted, an automatic response to her current words in much the same way my earlier stomach growl had been an automatic response to the smell of Emergency Lasagna. "I'm sorry you ever felt being invisible was preferable to being seen."

Jenn, a sad smile on her gorgeous lips, pushed away from the doorframe. "Happens to everyone, I suspect. From time to time."

"I supposed that's true." I disliked that she'd ever wanted to be invisible. Furthermore, I disliked that I couldn't fix this problem for her, save her from it, improve her past somehow.

Lack of ability to time travel is frustrating.

"You okay?" Her elbow bumped mine as she came to stand next to me.

"Fine. How are you feeling?"

"Bewildered. And tired." She reached into the cabinet for a plate, her hip brushing my leg.

I stepped back to give her space. "It's been a strange few days."

"That's an understatement."

I examined her profile as she seemed to examine the white plate she'd just set on the counter. "What's on your mind? I mean, other than the well-being of your mother."

Jenn inhaled deeply, and then released the breath through her nose, turning toward me with a frown in her eyes and on her mouth. "I still think this whole farm business has something to do with the bakery. I just—I can't seem to shake the notion."

"In a roundabout way, of course it does."

"How do you mean?"

"I'm guessing your father selected this fair part of East Tennessee for his farm stay business as a way to upset your mother."

"Yes, but that's not what I mean. I just have this feeling that we're missing something, that the bakery is somehow involved."

My feet were tired, so I leaned my hip against the counter. "How so?"

"It just feels like too much of a coincidence that Roger Gangersworth buys

all the eggs at Badcock's farm the afternoon before the chickens end up dead. And even if my father is buying Miller Farm, why make a point to be there for the auction? For that matter, why auction the cows at all? If they're running a farm stay, agritourism business? Nancy Danvish still has all her chickens, goats, bees, and cows. She just stopped selling to me."

"Does she sell to anyone else?"

"I don't know. But she has to do something with all that milk and eggs and honey, right? Where is it going? And what did Roger do with those Badcock eggs?"

I stroked my beard, staring unseeingly at a spot over Jenn's head. "I reckon I could ask Nancy Danvish."

Jenn made a face. "No. She'd know you were asking on my behalf."

"Then I could ask Flo McClure. She'd tell me."

Jenn perked up at that. "Could you?"

It was a poorly kept secret that Florence McClure—who worked dispatch at the police station—and Nancy Danvish were lovers, and had been since the early 1980s. Folks in Green Valley were more progressive than many other parts of the deep south about some things, but not about sexuality, or anything related to it, or the fact that sex—as an act—existed.

I'd shocked a gaggle of my fellow Sunday schoolers when I'd unceremoniously announced that storks did not deliver babies. I'd then used the chalkboard to draw several helpful diagrams, all of them related to human anatomy. Suffice it to say, I was not invited back to Sunday school. Mind, that was before Reverend Seymour took over.

Also, I'd been six years old.

Anyway, if anyone knew Nancy Danvish's secrets, it would be Flo.

"Flo and I are friendly—or at least friendly for Flo. I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you. I'd like to know who Nancy is selling to, if anyone. And if she is selling to others, why she won't sell anything to me anymore."

"I feel like the answer is obvious."

Jenn tilted her head to the side, as though wanting to look at me from a different angle. "How do you mean?"

"I think she won't sell to you because she's in business with your father, and he's asked her to stop selling to the lodge. Another way to aggravate your momma, even if it's indirectly."

"That makes sense." She nodded slowly, then suddenly shook her head. "But I don't know. My gut is telling me there's more to the story. If he wanted to threaten my mother's hotel business with one of his own, why not use his investors' money to just build a similar hotel to the Donner Lodge? Why go to

all the trouble of buying up farms? Killing the livestock of those who don't sell? That seems so strange and brutal, like it's more than just getting back at my momma. Interrupting the bakery's supply chain makes me think, and you're going to think I'm crazy, but it makes me—it makes me wonder if—if —”

“If he wants to get back at you?”

She nodded, glancing up at the ceiling. “Am I being a wackadoodle? Trying to make this all about me?”

“No,” I responded immediately. “You're right when you lay it all out like that. He—or someone in his employment—allegedly killed forty chickens and hen-napped twenty-one others. They burned Blount's bee boxes but left the rest of his farm untouched. You bought only honey from him?”

“Yes. Just the honey, nothing else.”

A picture began to form. “And the state fair primary entries are due this week?”

She gasped, rearing back. “That's right!”

“And you can't make your famous banana cake if you don't have your ingredients.”

“The timing, it's got to mean something. Right?”

“It's too much of a coincidence to think otherwise. Roger Gangersworth, a baking competitor, buying the Badcock eggs. Posey Lamont, another competitor, the source for spreading it around town that your momma was bamboozled into buying bourgeoisie bovines.”

The more I said, the more certain she looked. “Yes. Exactly. Even though I don't think Roger killed those chickens, I feel he is involved somehow.”

“Who else is on your list? Other than Badcock, Miller, and Blount.”

“Uh, well, we have the preserves and berries from the Hills.”

“Really? The Hills?” The timer on the oven went off. I crossed to turn it and the heating element off, opening the door to the oven and peering inside. Yep, it was done.

Jenn handed me a pair of oven mitts. “Yes, the Hills. They have the best berries up in that state park land.”

“I did not know that. How did I not know that?” I set the divine tray of Emergency Lasagna on the stovetop, enjoying the smell of heat and tomato sauce and basil.

“You don't know everything, Cletus.”

My gaze cut sharply to hers. I would never say, *How dare you!* to Jenn.

So instead, I said, “Pardon me?”

“Just most things.” Her smile widened. Stepping forward, she gave me a kiss through her laughter and cupped my cheek.

Thus, she was forgiven.

Leaning back but keeping her fingers on my face to thread through my beard, she added, “The Hills’ berries are shade-grown, and I know some people don’t agree with me about berries that are shade-grown. But I find they’re smaller and sweeter.”

“I didn’t even know they sold berries.” I tried, and failed, to hide the pensiveness this caused me.

I loved two things in this world to distraction: Jennifer Sylvester and blueberries. Now to discover that the Hills sold berries—small, sweet, shade-grown berries—and I’d had no idea. Likewise, I’d been engaged to Jennifer for weeks and we’d not been together, in the biblical sense, since the end of November.

Perhaps the time had come to reevaluate my life choices.

“They don’t sell their berries, typically. Not to most folks. I had to sweet talk Millie Hill into it. In fact, I think I might be the only person they sell their berries to. I doubt anyone else but me—and now my momma—knows where I get my berries.” Regrettably, Jenn dropped her hand from my face.

“That’s good news for the Hills. If someone is sabotaging your suppliers, they might not know about the berries. But you wouldn’t be buying berries now. They’re not in season.”

“No, I buy them now. I buy their jams and preserves, but also their berries. They flash freeze them right away in the spring and summer, they have them all year long. They have all those freezers up there.”

What she didn’t need to add was why the Hills had all those freezers. The Hills were a particular kind of folk and lived on deeded lands that would—upon the last of their kin—revert to the government. They also lived off the grid, mostly, with a few notable exceptions.

“You might want to think about buying them out of their berries, just in case Roger Gangersworth figures out where you get them and decides to drive up there to undercut you, like he did with Badcock.”

“I doubt they’d sell to Roger. Plus, my car isn’t especially conducive to carting around coolers for frozen bulk foods.” Jenn stepped out of my arms and opened a drawer near the sink, pulling out a spatula.

“I’ll fill the Bronco with coolers and transport as many as you might need for the next several months.”

“Speaking of which, where’d you get that Bronco? Have you always owned it?” Picking up the plate on her way, she cut into the lasagna and placed a piping hot square in the center of the dish.

“I bought it after it became clear I can’t keep borrowing Billy’s truck all the

time.”

“When was that?”

“Friday night.” Seeing her confusion, I added, “I’ve had my eye on it for a while. The previous owner dropped it off at the shop Saturday morning.”

“You had somebody just sitting around, waiting to sell you a vintage Bronco?” Jenn used the side of the lasagna dish to scrape the remains of cheese and sauce from the flat end of the spatula.

“Yes. I have many folks sitting around waiting to sell me lots of cars and do me lots of favors. Who else besides the Hills is on the list?”

“Um, I get my flour from a distributor out of Knoxville, straight from Europe.”

“You use European flour?”

“I know it might seem excessive, but I just think, you know we use so many insecticides on our wheat here in the States, and the actual plant was genetically modified back in the 1970s to be bigger and produce more gluten, which is why I think most cakes made with US flour taste like bread and lack all subtlety of flavor.” She wouldn’t look at me, and her tone had grown defensive. “And I think it’s nicer to have my food not changed by anything but nature.” All these admissions seemed to make her anxious, like she thought I might be judging her for her opinions about wheat flour.

I was not, and would not judge her. If anything, this new detail made me love her even more because it spoke to my soul.

My peculiarities ranged from bizarre to obsessive, and I loved that hers did too. She wished to use untampered flour for her confections? She held exacting standards for her ingredients and refused to settle or conform under pressure?

Halt! Electrical activity spreading through the walls of my atria, forcing the blood through my ventricles. That is, be still my beating heart.

Jenn cleared her throat, her cheeks turning a lovely shade of pink beneath my continued perusal. “You think I’m strange.”

“I know you’re strange.” My voice lowered an octave all on its own, without consulting me. Alas, she was entirely too sexy. I would never be in complete control of my faculties around Jennifer Sylvester.

“You make it sound like being strange is a good thing.”

“It’s my second favorite thing about you.”

She fought a smile and peeked at me. “What’s your favorite thing?”

How your body feels when—

Just like that, something shifted within me, a flip switched, or a switch flipped, or whatever gentlemanly part of me that had been holding down the manners fort abruptly absconded with my good intentions and self-control.

I wanted her, badly. We'd had no time. I missed her, the feel of her, being inside her, making her bliss out with my mouth and fingers, and watching her come alive and come apart. My lungs ached, abdomen tensed, the base of my spine tight, greedy with want, with *need*.

If her mother hadn't been recovering from a murder attempt down the hall, I likely would've taken her, in the Donner kitchen, the smell of savory lasagna in the air. Honest to goodness, the murder attempt was the only thing stopping me. Had it been less serious of a maiming—

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Jenn dropped the spatula handle and huffed, her cheeks burning hotter.

"Like what?"

"Like you . . ." She licked her lips, her breath coming faster. "Like you're angry."

"I'm not angry. I'm—" Tearing my eyes from hers, I speared my hair with frustrated fingers. "I should leave." *And take a snow shower.*

"What? Why? Don't leave."

"I'll—uh—be back in the morning with breakfast." My lungs on fire, I gave her a wide berth as I left the kitchen, deciding it would be best not to administer a parting kiss. Instead of guiding her down the Yuchi stream path earlier in the day, I should've had my way with her in the Bronco when the opportunity presented itself.

Seize the day.

Lessoned learned.

Now I knew.

With quick steps and long strides, I was at the front door, opening it, and sucking in a welcome breath of the icy winter. That my body reacted this way around her, with no warning, was not her fault. It was my fault. Consequently, it was beholden on me to leave.

"Aren't you hungry?" Her voice was close behind as I descended the porch steps. She trailed me.

"I'm starving," I muttered, my limbs rigid as my boots crunched on snow.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing." Opening the door to my Bronco, I slid inside. I made to reach for the handle to shut myself inside but found I could not. Jenn had inserted herself between me and the door. I set my hands on the steering wheel, stared forward, and held tight.

"Cletus," she said to my profile, like my name was an accusation. "What is going on? Why are you in such a rush to leave? You said you weren't angry."

"I'm not angry with you, not at all." I formed the words carefully and gave

my windshield a tight smile while turning the engine of the Bronco.

I needed a distraction. I'd make a list! All the tasks necessary in order to pick up Miller cows within the week. First, I'd need to locate a barn with enough and large enough stalls for the milking equipment. Dairy cows had to be milked at least once a day, every day, otherwise they were likely to get udder infections and cease producing. *Utterly.*

"Then why are you going?"

"It's late."

"It's eight."

"I have tasks." Why wouldn't she just let me close the door?

"Like what?"

"Securing a barn for twenty dairy cows."

She paused, and I still felt her eyes on my profile, considering. "You're planning to find a barn tonight?"

"Yes." In fact, I was looking forward to it. I would stay up all night if I had to. The good Lord knew I wasn't doing anything else.

Jenn leaned closer, and I tightened my grip on the wheel.

"Couldn't you . . . couldn't you do that from here? Make calls and such?" The hint of unsteadiness in her voice had me looking at her again, and I found her forehead wrinkled with worry, her eyes wide and unhappy.

My hands grew lax, her unhappiness a damp, hairy blanket to my frustrated flare of concupiscence. "What's wrong?"

"It's just, I hate this house. Did you know that? I know I must have some good memories from my childhood, but I can't remember any. Every time I come back here, I feel so suffocated by horrible memories and that last time my father screamed at me in the kitchen, saying those nasty things. And someone tried to *murder* my mother today. And I know it's small bananas compared to attempted murder, but you show me that ring and take it away and—"

Her chin wobbled, and my heart hurt, and her next words were definitely unsteady. "And I had thought you were staying tonight, at the very least, in case, and I know this sounds silly, just in case that someone comes back and—"

I turned off the engine and exited the Bronco, wrapping her in my arms, and feeling every appalling inch of the ass I was. "Of course I'll stay. I'm sorry. I'll stay. I'll keep you safe."

I would stay.

Of course I would stay, what was wrong with me? She was right. Her mother had been seriously hurt, on purpose. What had I been thinking? I could—would—control myself. I'd just . . . make lists from here, find a suitable barn, and not look at Jenn too long or too often. She needed me. I would stay.

“Thank you.” She snuggled deeper in my embrace, sighing like she was relieved, and pressing her body more fully to mine.

Words were a labor when she was so close, and so soft, and so warm, and felt so good, and smelled like heaven, and I couldn’t touch her like I wanted. My skin felt too tight and my jaw hurt.

Nevertheless, I survived a gruff, “Anything you need.”

Jenn placed a kiss on my chest over my heart and proceeded to melt it by whispering softly, “Just you, Cletus. You make everything better.”

I swallowed around what felt like rocks—composed of lingering lust and shame—because I was officially the worst.

But I would be better.

For Jenn.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Someday you will find out that there is far more happiness in another's happiness than in your own.”

— Honoré de Balzac, *Père Goriot*

Cletus

I did not sleep, but I did stay.

Staying within the confines of the living room, I worked through the night to locate appropriate accommodation for Ms. Donner's designer dairy cows. I also woke Jenn's momma at intervals, as per the doctor's instructions, as I wanted Jenn to get a full night's rest.

My eldest brother, Jethro, returned my call in the middle of the night from some fancy resort in the Maldives. He and his wife were on vacation because that's what pregnant movie stars and their new hillbilly husbands did, apparently.

Jethro knew of a barn for sale built in 1873, and as such, the barn could be moved as one piece. Early American barn construction—meaning prior to 1900—used beams hewn from single virgin-growth trees, making for sturdier barns with fewer parts, or so Jethro seemed enthusiastic to inform me.

“I've had my eye on it for years. It's a superior type of construction.” His tone held a wistful note, like how the twins sounded when they spoke about American cars built prior to 1972. “You'll be able to move it all in one piece if

you use a wide load flatbed, and as long as there are no power lines in the way. Where will you put it?"

"Ideally, the Donner Lodge."

"Oh, that'll be a problem. There are power lines through downtown. You could take it up the Parkway, but then you'd have to double back down the north mountain road, and I don't think the truck could make it to the lodge that way, the switchbacks are for bikes, not semitrucks. Why not just leave the barn at her house?"

"Here? At Diane Donner's house?"

"Sure."

I rubbed my tired eyes and fought a yawn. "There's no site fit for it, no stretch of land flat enough that isn't covered in trees. Plus, they have staff at the lodge who can see to the cows. Can you imagine Ms. Donner tending to twenty—er, nineteen heifers?"

"You have a point there." His voice held laughter, like he was imagining it.

Gauging his mood, I tried, "What about the homestead?"

"What? Our house?"

"There's plenty of flat land. And it would be just until we can figure out how to get the barn to the lodge, or they build their own. Likely, that's what would happen."

"I don't know . . ." Ocean waves crashed in the background and I did my utmost not to succumb to envy. Duane was off in Italy or wherever with Jess. Jethro was in fancy Maldives with Sienna. Beau wanted time off to be with Shelly even though they spent every night together.

And where was I? Arranging the care, feeding, and milking of heifers while my oft unavailable fiancée slept down the hall *in the same house*. I was almost as ridiculous as Billy and all his infernal pining.

"You think Ms. Donner will build her own barn? At the lodge?" Jet asked, and I knew I had him.

"Yes, I do."

"Who would take care of the cows until they're moved?"

Obviously, he liked that barn. "I reckon you'll get a free barn out of the deal. Sienna could use it as a yoga studio, wouldn't that be nice? Or you could get a pony for your progeny."

"I'm not getting our baby a pony."

"Why not? Your infant will have a private jet, but a pony is a bridge too far?"

"Cletus."

"Jethro."

“Stop trying to distract me. Who will take care of the cows?”

Jet’s intimate knowledge of my distraction techniques was irritating. “I will take care of running the dairy operation until Donner Lodge gets their own barn.”

“By yourself?”

“I’ll have help.”

“Who?”

I ignored that question since I didn’t yet know whose favor I’d be calling in. “And it’ll be good for Roscoe. Him being in vet school, it’ll give him something to do on the weekends other than laze around, check his reflection in the mirror, and eat your food.”

“You have a point there.”

It didn’t take much more convincing after that. I hung up just as soon as he said yes, not because I thought he might change his mind, but rather because I didn’t want to deal with any stipulations he might make on the placement of the barn or how long the cows could stay. What did he care? He was in paradise with his beautiful wife until March. After that, they’d take her private plane home for the duration of the pregnancy.

Hopefully, all the cows but one would be long gone by then.

That settled, I checked on Ms. Donner again, waking her up just enough to ensure she could recite her name, the year, and that her eyes could focus. I filled the time until 5:30 AM by composing several additional lists: a true bullet point delineation of tasks necessary to secure the cows, the best locales to attempt another engagement ring focus group (of one person), and a record of all the state fair baking contestants who’d lost to Jenn in the finals, ordered from saltiest to sweetest—the people, not their baking entries. Obviously, Roger Gangersworth and Posey Lamont claimed the two briniest spots.

Unfortunately, the records from Jenn’s first year winning weren’t online. I made a note to stop by the library and pay a visit to our head librarian, Julianne McIntyre, who maintained excellent records of local and state events.

At 5:30 AM, I called Billy and asked him to drop off several items on his way to work: the four remaining engagement rings, a change of clothes for me, and the Emergency Quiche. He asked if the freezer also contained an emergency causing quiche, and I told him the truth: No, it did not.

What I didn’t divulge was that I’d already used the emergency causing quiche in September of last year for the Labor Day picnic at the church, as I’d received advance notice that several members of the Iron Wraiths Motorcycle Club were planning to crash it. They’d arrived. I’d served them quiche. They’d lingered for ten minutes. They’d left due to an emergency. I hadn’t baked a new

one yet.

By 6:30 AM, the Emergency Quiche warmed in the oven, the four remaining candidates for Jenn's engagement ring resided in the ample pockets of my cargo pants, and I required movement and exercise. Walking the perimeter of the Donner house, I searched the new, thin layer of snow for footprints or any signs of nefarious mischief. After an hour, and finding none, I reentered the house, peeled off my jacket, shucked my shoes, and made my way to the kitchen to check on the quiche.

No sooner had I entered than I heard a smacking sound, which drew my attention to the kitchen table. My future mother-in-law's hand had fallen to the tabletop where she was sitting, her palm landing in the key of preemptive C major—where C stood for complaining. "Please tell me you did not spend the night in my daughter's room."

"You don't remember me coming in last night and checking on you?" I crossed to the drip coffee machine and set about brewing . . . something.

"I do remember. But I wasn't in a state of mind to realize you'd stayed the entire night. In Jennifer's bedroom, *no doubt*."

Taking my time making the coffee since my brain was tired, I spoke slowly and carefully, "Ms. Donner. I would not do that. I was in the living room all night. This is your house, your rules. Where can a person be a master of their dominion and destiny if not in their own domain?" Finished assembling all pieces and parts required to brew coffee, I pressed the *on* button and turned to her.

The woman seemed surprised and a measure irritated by my statements. "Well, at last. We have something in common."

Either the woman was in a grouchy mood this morning due to her recent brush with death and subsequent brain injury, or she was showing her true opinion of my person, i.e. she didn't like me much. If I hadn't been exhausted, I would've skirted both possibilities, distracting her with talk of her lodge, or banal town gossip.

Instead, since I was exhausted, and frustrated, and determined to marry her daughter and make aforementioned daughter happy, in an uncharacteristic bout of spontaneity, I said, "You seem determined to disapprove of me."

Diane stared forward for a long moment, her lips twisting to the side. "I suppose I am."

"Why is that?" Maybe if I knew, I could change her impression. Mind, I didn't care if she liked me, but—as I said—Jenn's happiness mattered.

"You're not—" her stare skated over my clothes, her hand waving in the air gestured to all parts of me "—what I'd hoped for my daughter."

“Is it the beard?”

“No. I like the beard. Suits you. But it could use a trim. Your hair and sideburns could use one too. And you look so nice in a suit, too bad you don’t wear more suits.”

“I think you mean, too bad I don’t have a job that requires suits.”

Diane’s mouth tugged to the side, a fracture in her frosty exterior. “Yes. I guess that’s what I mean.”

“Don’t want your daughter to end up with someone who works with their hands?”

“You know, I don’t know.” She sat back, her gaze contemplative. “Kip always said that a man who works with his hands doesn’t know how to use his brain, but—” she blinked, hard, considering me again, like she was seeing me anew “—he was wrong about so many things. I wonder now if he said such a thing because men who are good with their hands threatened him, made him feel like less, so he tore them down. In retrospect, that seems to be his modus operandi. Did you know he couldn’t change a tire? Didn’t know how.”

I said nothing as she clearly didn’t require any prompting to continue.

“One time we were stranded just outside of Asheville after going to the Christmas markets at the Biltmore—we had an annual pass while the kids were growing up, highly recommend that, gorgeous and inspiring during Christmas—and got a flat. Isaac and I, we changed the tire.” She tilted her chin up, her shoulders squaring, looking more like her normal self. “And Kip, he was so upset with me, said I was unladylike.”

“Who taught you?”

“How to change a tire?”

I nodded.

“My grandfather Donner taught me—all us grandkids—when I was twelve. Said I had to learn how to do for myself because everyone in my life would eventually let me down.” Her words were flavored with bitterness and her lip curled. “He was right.”

I pulled a mug out of the cabinet and poured myself a cup of coffee. “Jennifer has never let you down.”

She nodded, her gaze somehow both calculating and yet softer. “You’re right. Jennifer hasn’t. I don’t think she knows how to let people down. I don’t think it’s in her.”

I hadn’t spotted molasses or apple cider vinegar; as such, I sipped my plain black coffee. “Makes her an easy target.”

The softness fled, and Diane Donner’s eyes narrowed in a way that felt dangerous. *Motherly indignation*. “A target for *whom*?”

“For folks who wish to take advantage.” I said the unnecessary words. She knew what I meant, but maybe she thought I’d never say it out loud, maybe she thought I wouldn’t dare.

Maybe she didn’t know me very well.

Diane Donner crossed her arms, the motherly indignation flaring, mutating into threatening indignation. “You planning on taking advantage of my daughter?”

“Naturally. And I suspect—and hope—she’ll take equal advantage of me.”

Eyes wide, her mouth moved, and a sound of shock tumbled out. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

“Take last night for example.”

She gasped. “I thought you said—”

“At Jenn’s request, I stayed, to make sure y’all were safe and didn’t require anything. I had dinner brought over. I checked on her momma throughout the night.” As I spoke, I pulled out the hot pads, withdrew the quiche from the oven, and set it on the range. “I arranged breakfast. I’m having snow tires installed on both her car and yours—you really should get on a schedule for that, every December to March—and I enjoyed every minute of it. Well, every minute until you woke up in a persnickety mood. But I’ve been told, and I’ve come to understand the truth, that being in love means my beloved takes precedence over even my own comfort, persnickety future mother-in-law notwithstanding. Are you hungry?”

When I turned back to her, I found Diane Donner taking another survey of my person. I wasn’t in the habit of spelling out my good deeds, but this woman apparently required some evidence of my regard for her daughter. We likely had more in common than either of us would like to admit. Revealing that truth wouldn’t ingratiate the perpetually prickly woman to my cause. Thus, it was a truth better left unsaid.

“What’s that?” Ignoring my evidentiary list of good deeds, she pointed at the pie plate on the stovetop, her question resoundingly beleaguered, as though the pie dish might be used as a collection basket to solicit money. “Please tell me that’s not pie.”

“It is, of a sort. This is a quiche.” Selecting a plate from the cabinet, I cut her a slice.

“Quiche?”

Setting the eighth of quiche on her plate along with a fork, I placed them in front of her and claimed the chair across from hers. “I do not excel at the sweet, but I’ve been told I possess great talent at the savory.”

“You mean salty.” Diane dusted imaginary lint from her dressing gown, an

extremely frilly pink robe with light pink lace and embroidered darker pink flowers.

All right. I'd tried honesty and frankness to no avail.

Moving on/new approach, time to change the subject to something worth discussing. "What do you remember about last night?"

"What do you mean?"

"When you were hit on the head, at Old Man Blount's. What do you remember?"

Diane stared at the table, shaking her head slowly. "I don't remember a thing. I got out of my car and everything went black. Next thing I knew, I was in the hospital."

"You didn't see anyone as you drove up? Any other cars?"

"It's all a blur. I drove up, got out, and then I was in the hospital. I wish I knew something to help catch the person who did this, but I don't. If I remember something, Fredrick Boone told me to write it down, so I'll do that. I can't do anything about it right now. And honestly, the main issue weighing on me at present is what to do about those cows." She rubbed her temple like it hurt, wincing slightly.

Hmm. "Would you like me to pick up your cow's milk and cream this morning?"

"Those cows belong to me," she sniped. Picking up the fork, she cut into the quiche, spearing a bite. "And Miller's people said they'd be dropping it off at the lodge every morning this week. I have no need of you inserting yourself into the matter."

I grit my teeth, determined to make nice. "I thought you might want some of the milk here." I checked the time on the oven, wondering if Jenn would mind if I left before she awoke.

Diane Donner blew on the bite, peering at me like my words were a riddle. "Bring it here? Raw milk?" This seemed to confuse her greatly, and she continued to look at me like I'd grown antlers made of cheese until the bite of quiche fully entered her mouth. Abruptly, her entire demeanor changed, transforming from pedantic to startled.

I perched on my chair's edge, forcefully alert. "What? Are you—do you feel okay? Is it your head?"

"Cletus Winston!"

"That is my name."

"Where did you get this quiche? And is that sausage?" She cut a larger bite and shoveled it into her mouth, moaning.

Splitting my attention between her rapturous expressions and the plate, I

remained on high alert. “I made the quiche. And, yes, that’s my sausage.”

“Is it the same sausage from the lasagna last night?” Diane Donner spoke while she chewed, a very unladylike display of ravenous enjoyment, and moaned again.

It’s the sausage. Folks are always ravenous for my sausage.

“Uh, well, sorta.” I scratched my cheek. “I use Italian sausage for lasagna, and a breakfast sausage blend for quiche.”

“Where do you get it? The sausage?”

“I make it.”

Her fork clattered as it hit the plate. “You make sausage?”

No longer on high alert, I stood, crossing to the coffee pot to pour another cup. “I do. And my sausage is famous.”

“It should be more famous. Would you be willing to sell some to the lodge?”

“I wouldn’t be opposed to it.” Sipping the hot coffee, I leaned back against the counter and surveyed her miraculous change in mood. Perhaps Diane Donner wasn’t a persnickety person, perhaps she was merely hangry and required more sustenance. “It’s wild boar sausage, if that makes a difference.”

“That’s even better.” The woman licked her fork and inspected the plate for crumbs.

“You want another piece?”

“Oh, no. I shouldn’t.” She shook her head, but her gaze strayed to the pie plate.

I brought my refreshed coffee cup and the quiche to the table.

“I really shouldn’t.” She pushed her plate toward me, her attention rapt on the quiche.

Without asking again, I cut a new slice, bigger this time, and deposited it on her plate. Once more, she attacked it, each bite larger than the last until her cheeks were pink, her hand rested on her belly, and she wore a smile of contentment.

“Your lasagna was delicious, but that quiche is the best thing I’ve eaten in ages. Maybe ever.”

“Folks always say that about my sausage,” I muttered behind my coffee cup, taking note that Diane Donner could be wrangled into a state of compliance with high quality food.

Good to know.

A strange but not strained silence settled, wherein I sipped from my mug and her eyebrows, eyes, and mouth moved through a range of expressions, like she carried on a discussion with herself inside her head and reacted to whatever each side of the conversation said last. Eyebrows up, then down, then one raised.

Mouth a stern line, then a reluctant smile, then a thoughtful frown.

Only because I found myself honestly curious, I asked, “What’s on your mind?”

Her gaze refocused outward, and I got the sense she’d forgotten I was there. I braced myself for a dismissive comment.

Instead, she surprised me by grinning and leaning forward. “Truth is, I’ve been thinking, Cletus, and—”

“Doctor said no thinking for a week.”

She ignored me, her eyes pointed up at the ceiling, full of dreams. “What if—well, you know we’re about to remodel the lodge?”

“Jennifer has mentioned this.”

“So my thoughts are, what if we turned it into a culinary experience?” Grin wide, eyes bright and full of expectation, she waited for my response.

“A culinary experience,” I parroted.

Protip: when you don’t wish to reveal your thoughts or opinions, repeat whatever the last words said were. At the present moment, I had no thoughts or opinions to reveal, as such, this approach worked just as well.

“Yes! Have you heard of the farm-to-table initiative? What if we brought in a fancy, big city chef? Somebody accomplished, well-known. I think, with Jennifer’s social media accounts, those kinds of numbers would be a draw. And we could gradually turn the accounts into lodge accounts, give the new chef a platform. Slowly, of course. We don’t want to do a sudden bait and switch on folks.”

“No, you want to bait and switch them over time.”

She didn’t seem to hear me, content to rattle on, “We would make the lodge a culinary destination. The price of food—breakfast, lunch, and dinner—would be incorporated into the price of the room, like a resort, or a cruise, but boutique, higher class. I’ve been wanting to redo those rooms for so long with local antiques from all over the Carolinas and Georgia, historical elegance. And, and here’s the best part, we use the Miller cows. Publicize the fact that I paid \$200,000 for them, make folks believe these cows are special, a reason to visit and experience their milk and cream firsthand.”

I nodded along, understanding her intent immediately. “Why else would a genius like Diane Donner pay \$200,000 for cows unless they were worth more than \$200,000?”

“Exactly! There’s nothing substantively better about a designer purse than one bought at a big-box store, but folks pay a premium for the status. People will believe the story because they want to believe the story.”

“Works for politicians.”

She and I both chuckled, and it took my brain a few moments to realize the present situation: I sat with Jenn's momma, feeding her, and sharing a laugh. Not for the first time in my life, I appreciated the shrewdness of Diane Donner's mind, but I'd never found a reason to like the woman before right this minute.

Jennifer, I knew from firsthand experience, was just as clever as her mother, if not more so. Current scientific research maintained that most of a child's intelligence is passed down from the mother.

Diane tapped her fingers on the table, on her lips a small smile. "The more I think about it, the more I like this idea. You could even do a sausage making class."

"A sausage making class." Uh, hell no. My sausage recipes were as secret as they were sacred.

"And maybe a foraging class. You hear about that Hill fella? Rumor is he has a mushroom sniffing pig."

"One of the Hills has a truffle hog?" What? "How come I didn't know about this?"

"I hate to break it to you, but you don't know everything." The amused brightness in Diane's eyes told me she didn't hate breaking this to me. "But, if it makes you feel better, I'll tell you what my grandfather Donner used to tell me, 'Understanding that I don't know everything is the first step toward knowing everything.'"

I made a noncommittal sound, bringing my coffee cup to my lips just to discover it was now empty.

"Those cows are the key. I'm so glad I paid a fortune for them, and so publicly. Word will get out, and I'll use it to my advantage. Did you know they're Guernsey?"

"I did know that."

"It's supposed to help folks who have that lactose intolerance. That's why Jenn's desserts don't give people tummy trouble. I just found that out. She is a genius, that daughter of mine. I think on all the years that her daddy made me think that she was slow. I must've been in a high fog or something. What was wrong with me? That I let my husband talk about my daughter like that? How do I make things up to her? How do I make it right?" Diane sniffed, her face crumpling.

Once again, her temperament had shifted on a dime. The doctor said we were to expect mood swings, with a concussion, and here was the proof.

"Please don't get yourself upset. You just inhaled a bunch of smoke and were hit over the head. Maybe focus on your guilt a little later. When you're recovered enough to deal with it."

“That’s good advice.” She sniffled, nodding, using a napkin to dab at her eyes. “But I don’t know that we get to decide when we deal with guilt. I think guilt decides when it deals with us.”

She had a point there.

“I just feel so much self-loathing over what I did to my children.”

She started to cry in earnest, which made me fret. I’d never been good at dealing with folks in despair—men or women—so I did the only thing I could think of, I patted her hand resting on the table and said, “There, there.”

“No.” She withdrew her hand and sniffled again. “Don’t tell me not to feel ashamed.”

“Oh, I would never say that. I definitely think you should feel ashamed.”

Her tears stopped, her spine stiffening. “You do?”

“Yes. You have not been a great mother to Jenn. But that doesn’t mean you can’t be a great mother from now on.”

We swapped stares for a long while, her gaze growing hazy, then sharpening. Her eyebrows and mouth were doing that thing again, like she was having a conversation with herself. Meanwhile, I lamented my lack of coffee.

“I think . . .” She finally broke the silence, her shoulders sagging a little. “Thank you for your honesty, Cletus.”

What?

I gave her a somber nod because I didn’t know what else to do. Her words surprised me. Then again, I was tired. Maybe I would’ve seen this gratitude coming if I’d slept a few hours the night before.

“I like that you’re honest. I like that. And you’re right. I wasn’t the worst parent, but from this point forward, I am going to be the best. I am going to make things up to my babies. I am going to give Jenn the best rest of my life. She is going to be all that I focus on. She is going to get all my attention and love.”

Oh no.

“That’s not really what I meant.”

“It’s hard for me, you know, to admit that I don’t know what’s best for my children. Although, I don’t believe the Iron Wraiths are what’s best for Isaac. Does that make me a bad mother?”

“No. Not wanting your son to be a drug dealer and thief does not make you a bad mother. But your offspring are no longer children. They’re adults. And—”

“I just feel so mixed up. I feel like my mother compass is broken. My human being compass might be broken too.”

This was getting mighty personal, and once again, I wasn’t quite certain how to react. As such, I unleashed another somber nod. “I think it’s good you’re

coming to these realizations. But I don't know if I'm the right person for you to talk to about this. Have you considered therapy?"

"Oh, therapy!" She chuckled like the idea was absurd, more absurd than thought-vomiting all over her daughter's fiancé. "I don't need therapy. Besides, I tried that once and I didn't like any of the therapists I met with. But, you know, there's this woman—health guru life coach—I might reach out to her."

"Life coach." *Good Lord.* Here we go.

"She reached out to us through our Instagram account, about Jenn. We started trading marketing strategies and now we follow each other on Instagram. She talks all about female empowerment, taking control of your life, and not compromising yourself."

"Be suspicious of folks who tell you what you want to hear. She might be saying all the right things, but having the depth and breadth of education, especially on how to apply theory is—"

"Oh, Cletus. You don't know what you're talking about. She's helped hundreds of people."

Hundreds. "Through Instagram."

"Yes."

All right, I'd try a different approach. "Is she a medical professional? I find medical professionals are usually better for mental health issues than Instagram life coaches."

"I don't know, it never came up."

"It never came up."

I was beginning to realize much of my time—both now and in the future—with Jenn's momma would be spent repeating the woman's words so as not to reveal my thoughts and thus generate discord. And that was just fine. Not everybody needed or deserved my opinion. It was just as easy to be beige around stubbornly ignorant folks as it was to be colorful around those with a thirst for knowledge and truth. "She's based in Boston, near Harvard, if that makes you feel better, and she is just the nicest lady."

"Oh yes, proximity to a college makes a huge difference." There was no need to infuse my tone with sarcasm, the words should've spoken for themselves.

My statement flew over her head and she pressed on. "She said I need to stop judging myself. I should instead focus on course corrections and living my best life."

It was time for another cup of coffee.

I pushed away from the table and crossed to the pot, checking the time on the oven. "You've already engaged her?"

“She gave me the first session for free. As a courtesy, you know.”

“I see.” I poured just a half cup and lifted it to my lips.

“She also talks about the importance of self-orgasms.”

I choked on my coffee.

Diane squirmed in her seat, pushing her empty plate toward the center of the table and rearranging the fork while I coughed.

“But I guess I’ll spare you those details because I see I’ve made you uncomfortable.”

“Thank you,” I rasped, walking back to the table and my chair.

“It’s just, we’ve had such a nice conversation this morning, and I guess I’m not used to talking so freely with folks.”

“I appreciate you sparing me that conversation.”

Diane Donner suddenly smiled at something behind me, perking up. “Good morning, Jenn.”

I turned over my shoulder, once again amazed by how quiet Jenn’s approach was, and indulged myself for a multitude of seconds in every detail of her person. The sleepy smile on her lovely face, the dusty pink of her full lips, her long chestnut hair pulled into a haphazard bun, equally haphazard strands trailing down her neck, the curves and round softness of her body in the light gray yoga pants and white long-sleeve T-shirt she wore.

What she didn’t wear? A bra.

Closing my eyes, I turned back to the table and reached blindly for my mug, my fingers closing over the handle.

“What are y’all talking about?” came her sleep-scratchy voice. Even that was sweet, the cadence and tone, and conjured various and sundry images of waking up next to her—obviously naked—making her laugh, listening to her speak, touching her, gazing at her.

“Did you know Cletus cooks?” Jenn’s mother’s question reminded me that the woman was still present.

“I did, Momma. And you did too. Remember Thanksgiving dinner?”

“I guess I didn’t put two and two together. Or I did put them together and my math was wrong.” In an odd turn of events, Diane Donner’s chuckle didn’t sound at all forced. “And he’s a damn fine cook, who cooks good food, not like those dinners your daddy used to make—dry baked chicken and steamed broccoli. Blech.”

“Cletus’s sausage is famous.”

I felt Jenn’s warm hand come to my shoulder. She then placed a kiss on my cheek followed by a whispered, “Good morning.”

“Morning.” Forcing my grip on the mug handle to relax, I opened my eyes,

but focused only on the rim of the cup.

I truly had no idea, when I'd reluctantly surrendered to loving this woman, how difficult it would be to navigate every day when we could not spend our lives together like I wanted. No wonder my brother Billy was so bitter about Claire McClure, no wonder he couldn't be in a room with her without turning to ice or lashing out, for what he wanted, felt he needed, but was constantly denied.

"I think I'll go get dressed." Diane's chair scraped against the tile floor as I sensed her stand from the table.

"Do you need help, Momma?"

"No. I should be fine. And you should have some of that divine quiche your man made. Be back in a bit." The older woman's footsteps receded. A moment later, a door closed down the hall.

But in the very next moment after that, Jenn's hands were back at my shoulders and she said, "Move."

My attention flickered to her, and I perceived she wished for me to push back from the table, which I did. She then placed her bottom on my lap, her arms around my neck, and her lips on mine for a kiss. I kissed her back, insomuch as was sensible.

Eventually, she wiggled, huffing, and leaned back, spearing me with an accusatory glare. "You're not kissing me properly."

"Given our present location"—and given the level of my frustration—"I doubt proper kissing would be prudent."

Her shoulders slumped, her mouth tugging to the side in a sad twist. "I guess you're right. But what are you doing tonight?"

"Likely bringing y'all dinner again."

She looked pained. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"That we're kinda stuck here for the next few days, looking after my mother."

"Don't be sorry. Besides, I think she's starting to like me."

"You think so?"

"Yep. One taste of my sausage is all it took."

She pursed her lips like my statement did not impress her, eyelids lowering to half mast, and she wiggled on my lap again. "Hey, what's that?"

"What?"

"The hard thing in your pants."

"Well, Jenn, when a man desires a woman, he—"

She hit my shoulder, her eyes dancing for me. "No, not that. The thing I'm sitting on is small, hard, and has corners, not big, hard, and shaped like one of

your sausages.”

“Ah. That.”

“Yes. That.” She twisted her arms tighter around my neck and brushed her mouth against mine. “Should I frisk you?”

Pausing, I considered how best to maneuver, change the subject while keeping our positions just the same. But then, on second thought, I wondered if maybe now would be a good time to ask her. She’d said last night she hated this house, had no good memories here. Maybe I could give her one, a new one, that would make visiting her childhood home less difficult.

And I’d let fate choose the right ring. I had no idea which of the rings currently dug into her thigh. *Let fate choose and be done with it.*

I pressed my lips together to stop a smile at the sudden idea and the gleam of suspicion in her eye. “Feel free to frisk me if you need to.”

Grinning wide, she dropped her arms from my neck, leaned to one side, and searched behind her, feeling up my thigh until she found the cube in my pocket. Grin still in place, eyebrows pulled together thoughtfully, she reached inside and withdrew the velvet box, bringing it between us. A split second later, she launched herself off my lap and ran to the other side of the kitchen before I could react.

“Wait. Wait a minute.” I chased after her. I still needed to kneel and ask her properly.

“Nope. Ha ha! It’s mine!” Jenn kept her back to me. As such, I couldn’t see what she was doing, but I did hear her gasp.

Just as I made it to her, she spun, shoving the open box toward me. “This is some sort of decoy, isn’t it? A trick.”

“No.”

“Cletus. Where is my ring?”

“So . . .” I rocked back on my heels. “What you’re saying is, this ring isn’t to your taste?”

Visibly baffled, she gave her head a little shake, glancing at the new ring distractedly. “What? No. It’s beautiful. But it’s not the ring from yesterday.”

“So . . . what you’re saying is, of the two rings, you prefer the other one.” I lifted my chin, inspecting her closely.

Jenn’s nose wrinkled, her confusion intensifying. “Cletus Byron Winston.” She held out her empty hand, palm up, her eyes hardening. “Give me back my engagement ring right now and stop toying with me.”

I sighed. This was all wrong. “I promise, I’m not toying with you.”

“Then what would you call this?” She held the other ring higher, shaking it for emphasis.

“A market survey?”

Saying nothing, Jennifer glared, her lips now pressed into a thin, frustrated line.

“Fine.” I shoved my hands in my various pockets, withdrawing the other ring boxes and placing them in her outstretched hand. “Here.”

She fumbled to not drop them, eventually clutching them to her chest. “What on earth—?”

“The one from yesterday is there, if that’s the one you want.” Glad to be rid of the lot of them, I pushed my fingers into my hair and sighed again, still tired, but somehow less weary.

Splitting her attention between me and the boxes, she opened one of the remaining four, her eyes widening with what looked like surprise. She then opened the others, taking a moment with each to inspect the ring inside.

Confoundedly, she didn’t react to any one of them with more zeal or preference than any of the others. Now I was truly at a loss. How was I supposed to read her mind if she never gave away what she was thinking?

Once she had all five boxes opened and lined up, she shook her head, her mouth opening and closing for a moment before she blurted, “I don’t understand.”

“I bought them all.”

“All? Why?”

“For you.”

Jenn looked from me to the rings, to the room, back to the rings, overwhelmed. “What—why would you buy me five engagement rings?”

I stuffed my hands in my pockets again, taking solace in the fact that they were now empty. Apparently, *all my rings are on the counter*, had become the new, *all my cards are on the table*.

“You deserve to have the ring you want, not just any old ring I pick for you. You’re the one who has to wear it for the rest of your life, not me. It should be the *right* ring. For you.”

“So you bought five rings.” She reached for my arm, tugging my hand from my pocket and threading our fingers together, no longer looking or sounding perplexed. In fact, she was fighting a grin. “Oh, honey.”

For some reason, I had difficulty meeting her eyes. I tucked my chin to my chest and cleared my throat. “You should pick one.”

She breathed a little laugh, stepping closer, her other hand coming to my jaw. “You are one in a million.”

“And you are one of a kind.”

Jenn laughed again, angling her head such that she could kiss me, her warm,

soft lips coaxing my chin up, her hands sliding to my shirt front to grip the fabric, hold me closer.

“I love you,” she whispered, her tone raw with vulnerability and determination. “I love you so much, and I miss you. I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you, Cletus Winston.”

“I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you, Jennifer Sylvester.” Leaning my head back, I lifted my chin to the row of rings. “Just as soon as you pick an engagement ring.”

Grinning wide again and holding my gaze, she reached over and placed her hand on a box, seemingly at random. Plucking it off the counter, she found my hand and set the box in my palm, wrapping my fingers around it.

“This one.”

“This one?” Now I wrinkled my nose. “Do you know which one you picked?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Jenn lifted to her tiptoes and gave me a quick kiss. “All that matters is who I’m marrying, not what I’m wearing when we do it.”

I gave her the side-eye. “In that case, how do you feel about wedding ceremonies at nudist colonies?”

She threw her head back and laughed, and I laughed too, because her laughter was—is—contagious.

Well, the time has come.

Lowering to my knee in her momma’s kitchen, at 8:30 AM on a Monday, the second week of January, I opened the velvet box to her mystery ring and held it up to her. An offering.

A ecstatic, post-laughter smile affixed to her mouth and shining from her eyes, she gazed down at me—not the ring, *at me*—and I witnessed the reaction I’d been waiting for, the zeal, the preference. Beau had been right. The ring didn’t matter. It was the man she wanted.

Which made it easy to say, “Jennifer Anne Sylvester, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife? And allowing me to become your husband?”

Her smile wobbled as happy tears flooded her eyes, and she nodded immediately. “Yes,” she whisper-croaked. “Yes. Absolutely. Yes.”

Then she was down on her knees, her arms thrown around my neck so tight I could hardly breathe. But I didn’t mind, because she was laughing and crying and holding on to me how I wanted to hold on to her.

Then Diane Donner’s voice bellowed from down the hall, growing closer with each syllable. “Jennifer! You are never going to believe what your daddy did. All the money in the lodge renovation account is gone. Gone! I called the bank and they said he—what on earth. . .”

Jenn's hold relaxed and we both turned our heads, watching as her momma halted in the doorway, wide eyes bouncing between us. The woman reached for the doorframe as though to steady herself, her attention flickering over our heads, presumably to the rings on the counter, then to the vicinity of the open box still in my hand.

She sucked in a sharp breath. "Oh my goodness gracious."

"Momma—"

"Did y'all just get officially engaged?"

"Ms. Donner—"

"Wait, wait. Stop. Just—dear Lord in heaven—just answer me this." Jenn's momma held up her hand, her skin devoid of all color, her eyes rimmed with what looked like worry or shock. "I know there's a lot going on right now, a lot of chaos and disorder, things up in the air. But I need to know—" her face crumpled, like the answer to her next question might make or break her "—are you pregnant? And can I plan the engagement party?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“It's easier to bleed than sweat.”

— Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*

Jenn

Jenn: Where are you right now?

I texted while jogging, which I do not recommend. However, the cakes were with the regional offices for first round judging and I was finally free to see Cletus after three days of stolen moments. Between taking care of my momma, my responsibilities at the bakery, and his responsibilities at the Winston Brothers Auto Shop, we'd barely had a moment alone together.

He texted back just as soon as my car's engine came to life.

<3 **Cletus** <3: At Daisy's, picking up a late lunch and having a meeting. Do you want anything?

Jenn: Do you have time to eat with me?

I set the phone in the holder, plugging it in. As I pulled out of the parking lot, I reminded myself not to speed. The snow tires he'd installed last Monday made a huge difference, one I could feel while I drove up and around the mountain

switchbacks, like my little car stuck better to the road.

<3 Cletus <3: Yes. What can I bring you?

Waiting until I hit a red light, I quickly texted back,

Jenn: Stay there! I'm finished with work, have the rest of the afternoon free, and will drive over. Order me the chef's salad.

<3 Cletus <3: Okay. But you should know, I'm meeting with Karen Smith right now. We're in the booth at the front of the diner.

Karen Smith?!

Jenn: Karen Smith?!

Karen Smith was, for lack of a more charitable term, a big old gossip.

The light turned green before his response came through, but I did see he was in the process of texting me back, those three little dots flashing in the bottom left of my screen. Doing my best to concentrate on the wet road, I couldn't help but check the screen of my phone every so often. Whatever he was typing or planned to text back must've been novel-length, or he kept changing his mind about what to say.

During one of my compulsive phone checks, my attention snagged on my third finger and the obscenely large, sparkly gemstone there. Would I ever get used to it? The weight, in particular, had thrown me off-balance. Even so, I loved it. I'd catch myself looking at the ring during the day, smiling, daydreaming about a (hopefully) not so distant future where I watched it glitter against the backdrop of Cletus's naked chest.

Another instinctive smile pulled at my lips, and a fissure of warm anticipation made me squirm in my seat. I couldn't wait to see him. My momma was doing so much better. Maybe this weekend—maybe as early as Saturday night—we'd be able to spend a night together at my place. Maybe he'd spend the night. Maybe he'd stay *two* nights!

My phone chimed, announcing a new message, and I read it quickly.

<3 Cletus <3: She has information we need. I'll explain when you get here.

I didn't like the idea of needing anything from Mrs. Smith. She'd always seemed to revel in my discomfort, and her passive-aggressive insults were difficult to mentally switch into erroneously expressed compliments. I had a policy of strict avoidance where that woman was concerned. Same with her husband, he was also a gossip, just less mobile due to his botched hip surgery a

few years ago.

Bless his heart.

I spent the last thirty minutes of my drive mentally preparing for an encounter with Karen Smith, determined not to let the woman spoil our impromptu lunch. By the time I pulled into the diner parking lot, I'd decided I didn't care who was at Daisy's Nut House. It didn't matter. I wouldn't allow anyone to ruin even a single second of my precious afternoon with Cletus.

Head held high, I gave the ring on my finger a quick smile and exited my car. It hadn't snowed since last Sunday, but the windchill today made it feel like twenty degrees instead of the forecasted thirty-six. I tucked my chin into the scarf Ashley Winston had gifted me for Christmas and marched to Daisy's entrance.

Through the glass, I spotted Sheriff James and Deputy Boone coming out the front door. I stepped back, giving them space to pass and smiling my greeting.

"Hello, Jennifer. Good to see you." The sheriff stopped just outside the door, tipping his hat before zipping up the front of his jacket.

"Hello, Sheriff. Boone. Just finishing lunch?"

"Yes, and some business. How's your mamma?" Sheriff James's expression turned compassionate.

"Oh, she's doing better. The doctor told her to stay home for a week, but she's going back to work tomorrow. I think being stuck at home is hard for her." The discovery of empty bank accounts had sent her into a tizzy. Thankfully, it had been just the two accounts, both earmarked for lodge renovations. Unfortunately, the amount taken had been sizable, over three million dollars!

Her lawyers were on the case, but his lawyers hadn't yet responded to the new injunction or suit or whatever it was they did, and without her knowing where he'd put the money—or having any way to find out as of now—she seemed to be in a holding pattern, and *that* had not helped her mood.

"I can understand that, and I understand congratulations are in order." The sheriff grinned down at me, indicating with his head toward the diner. "We saw Cletus inside, said you haven't set a date yet."

"Oh!" Surprised, I glanced between Boone and the sheriff, likely looking like a lovesick fool. But I didn't care. "Did he tell y'all?" For some reason, that pleased me, like I'd won something in a raffle—a thrill of excitement, a rush of delight.

"He did," Boone confirmed with a gentle smile, and then laughed. "Walked right over to us at the counter and it was the first thing he said. No hi, or how you doing? Just, 'Jennifer Sylvester has consented to be my wife and we're getting married. No date has been set. I'll keep you informed of new

developments.”

The sheriff laughed at Boone’s impression of Cletus—so did I, ’cause he actually did a good one with obvious friendly intent—and came forward, his arms open. “Wouldn’t be Cletus if he didn’t get right to the point. I texted the wife first thing and we’re so happy for you both.” Under his breath, he added with a chuckle, “Though I suspect Jackson won’t be as happy. Serves him right.” He then embraced me for a quick, paternal hug. “You deserve the best, and so does Cletus. Glad you two found that in each other.”

For some reason, the glimmer of pride in the older man’s eye as he stepped away made my chin wobble and my eyes sting. “Thank you, Sheriff.”

“We should have y’all over for dinner.” He gave my shoulder one last squeeze and stepped off the sidewalk for the parking lot, muttering as he went, “I know Janet would love it.”

Boone lingered, calling to the older man, “I’ll be just a minute, Jeff.”

“Take your time.” The sheriff lifted his hand, as though waving off Boone’s statement. “You know I need forever to get settled in my car. Old age is the worst. Don’t ever get old.”

Boone and I shared a chuckle, watching our beloved sheriff slowly make his way across the lot. Boone’s gaze grew sober, and he sighed. “Listen, I wanted to let you know, I’m still working on your momma’s case, but I have to turn my attention elsewhere for a while.”

“Oh no.” I searched his face for some telling sign as to his motivations. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, or it will be. But I wanted to let you know, you might not hear from me for a while.”

“Anything I should know about?”

“The—well, you know. The Wraiths and their brethren are always up to something.” His tone turned hard, frustrated. “Once that’s all sorted, I promise we’ll find out who attacked your momma.”

“What about Mr. Badcock and his chickens?”

Boone stared at me for a long moment, rolling his lips between his teeth, finally sighing again. “I still think it’s all connected, but—you have to understand—human life takes precedence over farm animals. If uncovering who attacked your mother also leads us to Mr. Badcock’s perpetrator, then we’ll follow that lead. But an assault—possible attempted murder—against a person carries more weight than destruction of property.”

My stomach sunk. “To Mr. Badcock, those chickens were more than just property.”

“I know. And to Mr. Blount, those bees were more than just producing

honey.”

I could see he did know, and understood, but he was only one person and their best investigator. The sheriff’s office was responsible for policing the entire county and it was a big county, with no less than three criminal motorcycle gangs to blame for most of the violent crime in East Tennessee. He had his hands full; they all did.

“As soon as I can, I’ll be back in touch.”

I nodded, managing a small smile and wave as he left to catch up with the sheriff. Turning for the entrance to the diner, I worried that the trail might grow cold by the time Boone had more time to dedicate to the investigation. He had resources, access to records. Without him actively investigating and finding the person—or persons—responsible, would my momma ever feel safe enough to sleep alone in her own house? Would Mr. Badcock and Mr. Blount move on from their losses?

These were the questions plaguing and distracting me as I walked through the door and almost collided with Karen Smith.

“Watch yourself.” The woman’s sharp tones yanked me out of my reflections.

As was my habit when faced with folks who disliked me, I pasted a smile on my face and put effort into brightening my tone. “Mrs. Smith. Did you have a nice Chris—”

“I know *you* did.” Without warning, she clasped my left hand in hers, bringing my ring finger up between us. “Congratulations. That is a huge stone, and it looks great on your hand, but you need a manicure. Where did someone like Cletus Winston get that kind of money?” She dropped my hand, pulling her purse strap higher on her shoulder. “From his new sister-in-law no doubt. Those Hollywood types are swimming in money. Go on then, he’s waiting for you.” She lifted her chin toward the front booth where the back of Cletus’s head was just visible, and then walked around me for the door.

I stood still, a tad perplexed—because that was honestly not at all bad for a run-in with Karen Smith—until the door chimed, announcing the woman’s official departure.

Giving myself a shake, I moved to where Cletus was sitting, breathing in the sight of him as he turned toward me, making to stand from the booth.

“I was just about to text you again.” He bent, his voice just above a whisper, giving me a sweet—but far too quick—kiss. “Let you know the coast was clear, Karen just left.”

“Hi. Yes. I ran into the sheriff and Boone outside, we said hello.”

Cletus moved me such that my back was to the rest of the restaurant and

helped me with my coat. “Here. Take a seat. Your food is already here, and I saved my lunch so we could eat together.”

“That was sweet of you.” I let Cletus maneuver me to one side of the booth and he skootched into the other such that we were now facing each other.

“I also got you tea, and coffee—both caffeinated and decaf, depending on your mood.”

“Rebecca must’ve loved that.” I shook my head, picking up my napkin to place in my lap. Rebecca had worked at Daisy’s for as long as I could remember and didn’t much like refilling drinks. Sometimes she left pots of coffee at tables if a person was in the habit of asking for too many refills. “Why were you meeting with Karen?”

“I was hoping she’d know something about—uh—” Cletus’s eyebrows tugged together thoughtfully and he dropped his volume to a real whisper “—about Roger and why he was buying up all of Badcock’s eggs.”

“What did you find out?”

“Nothing from her, not about that. But she did say something I thought was interesting.”

“What did she say?” I picked up my fork and scooped the serving of dressing onto my salad, but my attention was rapt on Cletus, and not only because I was interested in what he had to say.

Ladies and gents, my man was gorgeous. His eyes were addictive, bright intelligence—that is, looking at them was addictive—framed by those ridiculously thick lashes. That night I’d discovered my momma drunk over Christmas break? She’d told me he had “bedroom eyes,” and it had been the only sensical thing she’d said.

His lips were distractingly full and kissable, and his smile was just plain distracting. I knew, under that adorable mess of a beard, his jaw was angular and strong, and sometimes—when his attention was otherwise engaged—I would just stare at his handsome face and imagine him naked.

It’s true. I would do this. Sometimes he didn’t even have to be in the same room with me and I’d imagine him naked. I’d then get hot and tell myself to stop objectifying him, but no matter how much I reprimanded myself, I still did it. I still indulged in the memory of the hard planes of his stomach and chest, the defined muscles of his back and biceps, the large strength of his hands, the powerful thickness of his—

“Jenn?”

—thighs. Thighs . . . thighs. *Thighs.*

“Hmm?”

“You okay?”

“Mm-hmm. Were you saying something?”

Cletus’s eyes narrowed, looking me over, but his lips also curved with a small smile. “You didn’t hear me?”

“I’m sorry, I guess I’m, uh, hungry.” Well, my mouth was watering, and that was a fact. “What did Karen say?”

Giving me another long look of amused suspicion, Cletus leaned forward and said quietly, “She didn’t know anything that we didn’t already know about Badcock, but she said—sorta offhanded—that she didn’t know why you don’t still get your eggs from Nancy Danvish.”

“Huh.” I speared a wedge of tomato with my fork, dipping it in an excess pool of dressing. “I thought everyone knew Nancy is retired. But I guess now we know Nancy is still selling to folks other than me.”

“That’s what was strange. Karen said Nancy still sold to a few people and she was asking after you, wondering if you were upset with her about something.”

I made a face, hopefully communicating my confusion because I couldn’t speak without spitting bits of the large wedge of tomato in my mouth.

“I took the liberty of informing Karen that you were under the impression that Nancy stopped selling eggs and such, and Karen delighted in telling me that Nancy had indeed stopped selling to everyone but a select few who she considered good friends. However, and furthermore, Nancy considered you—Jennifer Sylvester—one of the few she’d still sell to, should you ever deign to stop by for a visit. I guess the old farmer misses you.”

Leaning back in the booth, I set my fork down and picked up my tea. “That is so strange. When I saw Nancy last, she said—and I quote—‘I’m getting out of this farmer business and closing up shop. You’ll have to find somewhere else to get your eggs and dairy,’ end quote.”

Cletus shrugged, eating a French fry, chewing, swallowing, then saying, “We should pay Nancy a visit. If she’s willing to sell to you, then at the very least you have an egg hookup for the next few months, until Badcock gets back on his feet.”

“True. And maybe she can tell us more about this farm stay deal she signed with my father.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” Cletus took a big bite of his hamburger, nodding, and chewing quickly. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you yet, I have everything arranged to move the old barn to the Winston homestead this Saturday.”

Munching on my salad, I swallowed before saying, “That was quick.”

“They liked the price. Their son-in-law has a semi hookup and is free this

weekend. Good timing too. I spoke to Miller yesterday, drove up to his farm during my break.”

“Did you get any information out of him about the farm stay business?”

“As a matter of fact, I did.” Cletus didn’t seem excited to share what he’d learned. Dipping a fry into a pile of ketchup, he popped it in his mouth, and then wiped his fingers on a napkin. “I can confirm, Miller thinks I’m a moron, and that’s good.”

“That’s good?”

“Yes. When folks think you’re dumber than them, they monologue. They tell you things. He told me things, such as, the deal isn’t yet done on the land.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your father offered for the property and it’s under contract, but it’s not yet sold.”

“Oh.” I set my fork down, an odd flutter in my belly.

“I asked him if he’d be open to entertaining another offer.” Cletus watched me, as though gauging my reaction to this news.

“You did?” I squeaked louder than I’d anticipated.

He flashed a smile, but then quickly suppressed it. “I did. He said it depended on the offer and whether the contract goes through, but he confirmed your father was buying the land for a dollar and assuming the mortgage. He didn’t know anything about Blount and Badcock’s troubles, but we did talk about the farm stay.”

“What did he say?”

“Kip will run the business side and give Miller seventy-five percent of the profit. Miller said he liked the deal since it keeps steady monthly income coming in, and if the business doesn’t turn a certain profit after three years, the land reverts back to him—totally in the clear.”

“In the clear?”

“Meaning he gets his land back, but the mortgage is paid off.”

“Wow.”

“Miller made a point of informing me he didn’t need the money to retire. He also said, even if Kip Sylvester hadn’t come to him with the idea, he was ready to retire in any case. His wife wants to move to Texas, where their youngest is settled and having babies.”

“So he was wanting to sell the farm?”

“Yes. Oh, and did you know Miller was planning on charging your momma rent? For keeping the cows past Saturday?”

“Yes. She said something about it yesterday, after you left. She was so upset. She’s not in a good place these days.”

“Diane has been through an ordeal. We should have patience.”

I smirked at Cletus’s defense of my mother. Cletus had been bringing us dinner every night and making sausage quiche every morning, staying in the guest room since Monday. Every morning since my momma’s injury, I’d walked in on them in the kitchen. He made her sausage quiche and they spoke in hushed tones while holding mugs, coffee for him and tea for her. The sight warmed my heart and had given me hope. Maybe it was the beginning of good things for all of us.

“I think you’re warming up to her.”

His attention shifted to someplace over my shoulder and he seemed to be remembering or contemplating a complex matter. “We’ve had some elucidating discussions these last few days. In fact, this morning she insisted I start calling her Diane.”

“Is that so?” I smiled and then shoved a forkful of salad into my mouth to keep from grinning wildly. It would be so wonderful if Cletus and my momma did more than just tolerate each other. My mother wasn’t perfect, but she was trying to be better. I wanted a relationship with her—a healthy one—and having Cletus on board would certainly make my life easier.

“I am beginning to understand your mother better. And, yes, I like certain aspects of the woman.”

“If it matters to you, I think she’s starting to like you too.”

“It matters to me, if it matters to you.”

“Ha.” We were still talking at a near whisper, likely because our booth wasn’t the most private in the diner, so I asked, “Why’d you sit up here? I thought you would be in the back of the diner since you were talking to Karen.”

“That booth was already taken, which—in and of itself—made the meeting with Karen worth it.”

“What do you mean?” I began to turn and crane my neck to see who sat in the booth near the back.

Cletus covered my hand with his, stopping me. “No. Don’t look. I already know who’s there.”

I leaned toward him. “Who?”

His gaze grew intent. “Roger Gangersworth, Posey Lamont, Deb Brightwell, Josephina Ortiz, Hamell Jefferson, and Elena Wilkinson’s sister, Tricia Wilkinson.”

With each name rattled off, I felt my eyes grow wider. “Wait! Wait a minute,” I whispered urgently, ducking as I slid out of my side of the booth and into his. “Except for Elena’s sister, those are all my state fair competitors!”

“Not exactly.” Cletus pulled out his phone, navigated for a bit, and showed

me his screen. “All second or third place winners to your blue ribbons for the last five years.”

“Then why did you say not exactly?” I scanned the list he’d compiled on his phone. Sure enough, all the folks presently in the back booth were on his list, plus a few other names not currently in the diner.

“Does Tricia look at all familiar to you? We saw her at the Miller Farm auction. She stood behind Elena, looking like she was chewing orange juice and toothpaste flavored gum. I mean, aside from being Elena’s sister, does she look familiar?”

“No. Why?” I handed him back his phone.

“I visited the library last night after I left you and your momma.”

Having him so close—literally, right above me on the second floor—had been a special kind of torture. But last night after dinner, he’d left for a bit. I didn’t get a chance to ask him where he went before I passed out, asleep.

“I’d asked Julianne McIntyre to pull the state fair baking contest winners for the last twenty years. None of the winners’ information is available online prior to five years ago.” He leaned to the side, pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to me. “Turns out, Tricia Wilkinson won for three years in a row, and eight total of the last twenty, until she lost to you six years ago—well, almost seven, with the contest coming up this March.”

“Seven years ago . . .” I scanned the paper he handed me, new lists of names sorted by date, placement received, and Tricia’s name had been highlighted in yellow next to each year she’d entered and won. Leaning back, I tried to remember my first foray into competitive baking. I’d been a teenager and the whole business had been a terrifying blur.

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember her.”

“Interesting, though, don’t you think? A notable coincidence, that Elena started working at the high school almost seven years ago, began the affair with your father almost as soon as she started? You being the one to dethrone Tricia from her on again, off again winning record?”

My face screwed up at that. “Maybe. I mean, what are you suggesting? That Tricia and Elena planned a long game strategy master plan to get back at me for winning a state fair baking contest by getting a job at the high school, sleeping with my father, breaking up my parents’ marriage, then what? Using my momma’s renovation money to start a farm stay business?”

“No.” Cletus gave me a quick flash of white teeth, his gaze moving over my face like he enjoyed the view. “No. I’m just saying it’s a notable coincidence, a connection we didn’t know about. We should take it under advisement to inform our conclusions moving forward, not string together baseless conspiracy

theories.”

“Okay.” I turned back to the table and reached for my salad, deciding to stay put next to Cletus while I ate rather than move back to the other side. “Makes sense. It is a strange coincidence.”

“And now Tricia is back there, huddled together with all those losing bakers.”

“I would hardly call second and third place *losing*.”

“Says the woman who always takes—and deserves—first place.” Cletus finished his hamburger in four more bites, washing it down with a cup of black coffee.

Meanwhile, I enjoyed—and was tormented by—our closeness, how his elbow brushed mine every so often, the warmth created by our legs pressed against each other. Once more, my mind arrested itself with objectifying imagery of the big, sexy man, lying in bed, covered at the waist in just a sheet, hand behind his head, smile and eyes on me as I reached under the sheet and—

“Why do you think they’re all here?”

“Pardon?” I swallowed all the saliva in my mouth and forced myself to concentrate on the conversation. But, goodness, it was difficult with him so close. *I just want to kiss his face off.*

He gave me that knowing smile again, the tenor of his voice deeper as he repeated himself, “Why do you think they’re all here?”

“I’m not sure. Entries were due today. Maybe it has something to do with that?”

“Hmm.” He didn’t look convinced, and his attention flickered between me and my plate. “I thought you were hungry. Aren’t you going to eat any more of your salad?”

Setting my fork down, I rested my elbow on the tabletop and leaned toward him, feeling restless. “What are you doing after this?”

“Given what Karen said, I had planned on driving over to Nancy Danvish’s with you and asking her about the business with your father.”

“What if we stopped by my place first?”

“Your place?” Cletus’s gaze burned with a comprehending light, dropping to my lips. “You mean, your momma’s house, or . . .?”

I grinned, not caring that a rush of heat had climbed up my neck and cheeks, my chest and lower abdomen tight and achy in the best way.

But then, like a bucket of cold vomit soup, a voice interrupted, “Well, don’t you two look cozy,” and I froze.

All those pleasant, swirling, lovely feelings vanished, replaced with a shock of frosty fear, followed by revulsion, embarrassment, and fury.

My father, the last person in the world I ever wished to speak to ever again, stood directly behind me. And apparently, he was in the mind to talk.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“No one believes more firmly than Comrade Napoleon that all animals are equal. He would be only too happy to let you make your decisions for yourselves. But sometimes you might make the wrong decisions, comrades, and then where should we be?”

— George Orwell, *Animal Farm*

Jenn

Not missing a beat, Cletus slid his arm around my waist, bringing me closer. “That’s ’cause we are cozy, Kip.” He over pronounced the *p* at the end of my father’s name, giving it a strong popping sound. “Consequently, if you don’t mind . . .”

Without having to look, I could imagine the face my father made in response to *that*. I worked to school my features and force my heart to settle. Cletus, meanwhile, conducted a quick inspection of my features, as though evaluating my thoughts and feelings, how likely I was to shatter into several small pieces.

I worked to project reassurance and calm. I was anxious, but I was in no danger of falling to pieces. Taking a deep, steadying breath, I made to turn, pasting on another smile like the one I’d given Karen Smith earlier. No use causing drama or a scene by refusing to speak to him. Besides, if he thought I was open to communication, perhaps he’d let something of his plans slip, maybe something I could use to help Mr. Badcock and Old Man Blount.

But before I could turn, my father hissed, “I raised you better than this, Jennifer Anne. Sitting in a *diner*, being indecent in the sight of God and half the town. And with that man.”

Cletus scratched the side of his face, and then placed the hand on my thigh. “Now, I know math wasn’t my strongest subject in school, but I don’t think half the town would fit inside Daisy’s, seeing as how we have over fifteen thousand people who live—”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” my father snapped. “I am speaking to my daughter, and I’ll thank you not to interrupt.”

“Don’t thank me for something I have no plans to do.” I understood Cletus was still trying to sense how much I wanted him to intervene, be a barrier between me and my father’s hatefulness, and how much I wanted to deal with on my own.

Truth was, I didn’t want to deal with my father at all. If I could make him disappear from my life for good, I would. But I had to believe God puts difficult people in your life for a reason. If I didn’t believe this, I’d hide under my covers all day rather than confront difficulties as they arose. Obviously, I still had something to learn or gain from interacting with this man, and I suspected the lesson would be defining boundaries and holding myself—and others—to them.

“I’ll be right back,” I whispered. Covering Cletus’s fingers on my leg with mine, I squeezed, giving him an appreciative smile before finally turning and sliding out of the booth. My hands were clammy, and a fretful tightness curdled, but I was determined to confront this difficulty.

I am afraid, but I am strong. Bravery is the child of fear and strength. Lord, give me strength so I can give birth to bravery.

My father shuffled backward as I exited. Hazarding a glance at his face, I saw he wasn’t looking at me. He glared at Cletus, shooting harpoons of hatred at my fiancé. And you know what? That helped. I latched on to a flare of protective defensiveness and indignation. How dare he look at Cletus that way. How. Dare. He.

“I’ll meet you outside,” I said to my father firmly, reaching for and pulling on my jacket.

His lips pursed, he angled his chin, gave a stiff nod, and turned for the door, leaving in a simmering huff.

As I zipped my jacket, Cletus stood, gave me a soft kiss on my cheek, and slid into the other booth. “I’ll sit here. As long as you stand between Posey Lamont’s PT Cruiser and Mrs. McClure’s Honda, I’ll be able to keep an eye on you.”

“Thanks. But I don’t think he’d try anything in front of a diner full of people.

He never hit me, Cletus.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d feel better if I could see y’all, make sure he’s not in a trying-new-things sorta mood.” His eyes were cagey, and his look was sideways, like he was bracing himself for witnessing a worst-case scenario through the window necessitating that he intervene.

Cletus hid it well, but I could sense he was afraid for me. He didn’t want me to go out there on my own, he didn’t believe I would be safe. I suspected this belief was born out of life experiences with his own bad father.

Even so, he wasn’t going to stand in my way, or handle my father for me, or insist upon being present while we talked. Thinking things over as I walked to the door and outside, I didn’t know if I’d give Cletus the same degree of self-determination should Darrell Winston ever show up. I suspected I’d shoot the man, if the means and opportunity ever presented itself.

“You are not to see that man again. You are not to associate with him.” My father spoke through clenched teeth and peered down his nose at me, sounding furious, and for a split second I was back in my parents’ kitchen that night, when my father had unleashed the full force of his nastiness, heart in my throat and tears burning in my eyes.

I would not be intimidated. I refused.

Gathering myself up, I lifted my own chin and attempted to peer down my nose at him. “We are engaged.”

“I—” he sputtered, his fury dissolving into plain shock. “I beg your pardon?”

“Cletus and I are engaged. Given your feelings on the matter, I do not think this is a topic we should discuss.”

“You’re engaged to a Winston?”

Wrinkling my nose at the way he said it, like any of the six Winston boys were interchangeable with each other, I folded my arms and lifted my chin higher. “As I’ve said. Now, is there any other reason you wish to speak with me? Or are we finished here?”

“I would’ve preferred Billy.” He eyed me, looking disappointed and frustrated. “You sell yourself short with Cletus Winston, Jennifer. You are much prettier than your momma was at your age, and so much prettier than anyone else in this town.” He showed me his palms, as though making an appeal to my better sense. “Any man would be happy to have you on his arm. Please. Don’t waste your beauty on that—that buffoon.”

I heaved a watery sigh, not knowing where to start. How many times had my daddy told me how dumb and beautiful I was in the same sentence? How many times had he praised my looks while reminding me that men preferred a pretty surface and obedience over critical thought and substance?

It hurt. It still hurt that my own father thought of—not just me, but apparently—*all* women in this way. Not for the first time, I wished there were some way, some magical collection of words that would allow him to see me and value me as I was, not as he wanted me to be.

And I guess, that was ultimately why I was out here. That wish for something that would never be.

He must've mistaken my struggle as something other than it was because he stepped forward, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Say the word, and I will rescue you, Jennifer. Let your daddy rescue you from this mess. I have a place for you in my new business venture, a big place, but you need to meet me halfway. Your momma works you too hard at the lodge, and Cletus Winston isn't ever going to be the kind of man who can take care of a family. He's not a breadwinner." My father tilted his head to the side, his gaze sympathetic.

Meanwhile, I now struggled for a different reason. Is that what he thought? That all I wanted was a breadwinner? I was trying not to laugh.

My father had *never* been the breadwinner in our household, not that it should've made any difference. A marriage is a partnership, or at least the kind of marriage I planned on having. Maybe Cletus would make more money than me, maybe I would, I didn't honestly care, and I knew Cletus didn't either.

And yet, here was my daddy, preaching to me about the importance of finding a man to provide for me.

"You don't think I can support myself." Surrendering to the urge, I laughed, looking at the sky. "You don't think I'm smart enough."

"Why would you want to? You're beautiful, baby girl. If you were smart, you'd see you don't need to have a hard life. Life with Cletus Winston won't be easy. He won't give you the life you deserve, with fine things and a big house. And make no mistake, you deserve a man who can give you those things."

I didn't know which repulsed me more, my father still thinking I was an idiot, or him believing "fine things and a big house" was all I wanted from life.

If you wanted to, you could get him to tell you what's going on with the farms, get him to admit his part, and report back to Boone. Your father thinks you're such a moron, he'd never suspect subterfuge.

I wasn't surprised by his condescending assumptions, but for some reason—maybe the obscenely large balance in my bank account due to all the lemon custard cakes I'd been making and shipping to Sienna Diaz—the assumptions did strike me as absurdly funny.

"Gosh, I don't know where to start." I shook off his hand, stepping back, addressing him directly but without anger. Why be angry when the situation was so futile? He obviously didn't know me at all. "I hope . . . I hope you find peace

with your new life. And I hope treating others with kindness becomes important to you, as you find your way.”

My daddy lifted an eyebrow at that, pressing his lips together in an unhappy line. “That’s all you got to say to your father? The man who raised you? Kept you safe your entire life?”

I took several more steps away, shaking my head. “I don’t know what else to say.”

“How about, ‘I’m sorry, Daddy’? Sorry for being disrespectful? For being disobedient? What about that? I am your father, and I deserve both your respect and your obedience.” He strolled forward, backing me into the door. “Or how about a thank you. ‘Thank you, Daddy, for giving up your hopes and dreams, settling in life and taking care of me. Thank you for putting my needs above your own.’ That would also be nice to hear.”

I wanted to volley back, *If any of it were true, I would say it*, but those words would only make him angry. He wasn’t going to change. He was never going to see me as someone who had value beyond my exterior and how that might be leveraged for his own benefit.

Allowing sadness to shine through my words and eyes, I said goodbye and pushed open the door, walking back inside the warm diner and to the booth where Cletus waited, having no desire to look back at what I’d left behind.

* * *

“Do you want me to turn up the heat? Are you cold?”

“I’m fine.” I tore my unfocused gaze from the scenery outside the passenger window to Cletus’s profile. He chewed on his lip, his forehead wrinkled in consternation, or deep thought, or both. “Besides, we’re almost there. I really am fine.”

“So you say,” he mumbled, adjusting his hold on the steering wheel. “And yet, you did agree to an indulgence.”

“Cletus.”

“Furthermore, I suspect you’d be *great* if you’d allow me to—”

“No. No maiming my father. Not today.”

Cletus grunted, a sound of frustrated dissatisfaction, and said nothing else.

Instead of going back to my place like we’d discussed, Cletus had taken one look at me when I walked back into the diner and insisted we pay Farmer Danvish a visit to “continue our investigation into the local farm upheavals.” Then he’d called her and told her we were on our way.

I suspected he sensed my underlying melancholy and hoped to distract me. Either that, or after so many weeks apart and several misfires, he didn't want us to have sad sex with the cloud of my father's intrusion darkening the mood.

The real problem wasn't my father and his machinations—although, I wondered if the man would always be a problem or if he'd ever leave me alone—the true issue was lack of time. We lacked time to connect, truly connect. Over the last week, there'd been so many misfires, moments stolen from us by one emergency or another. We needed time together, just us, no phones, no interruptions, no intrusions. Alone.

"We should take a vacation," I thought and spoke.

"You want to take a vacation?"

"Yes." I looked at him again. "When was the last time you took a vacation? A proper one? Where you traveled somewhere else and relaxed?"

"If you don't count boar hunting in Texas, or my trip to Alaska several years ago, which I don't, then, uh, hmm . . ." He shifted in his seat, more deep thinking as he pulled into Nancy Danvish's long driveway. "Have I ever taken a vacation?"

"See?" Twisting in my seat, I faced him. "You deserve a vacation, Cletus. We both do."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Maybe we'll go on a cruise, someplace warm, and wear bathing suits all day."

"Motion seconded and approved."

"Or maybe we'll go to a ski lodge and spend all day inside under the covers." I grinned, my mood brightening considerably.

"Next motion seconded and approved."

Chuckling, I patted his leg. "I'll plan the whole trip. You don't need to worry about a thing."

"Wait a minute." His eyes slid over to me and narrowed as he pulled us to a stop. "Are you planning to whisk me away somewhere and have your way with me?"

"Yes."

"Final motion seconded and approved for immediate action. Now, let's go inside and get this over with." Cletus cut the engine and opened his door, exiting and crossing around to mine just as I was stepping out. He closed it behind me, and we linked hands, walking up the stone path to Farmer Danvish's front porch.

Before we could knock, she opened the front door and grinned at both of us. "Come on in, come in. I poured mishla for the occasion."

Cletus and I swapped a startled look.

“You made mishla?” he asked, sounding a tad alarmed, and placing his hand on the small of my back as we stepped inside and followed her.

This was only the third time I’d been inside the farmer’s house and everything was just the same. As far as I knew, her walls were unpainted wood everywhere but the powder room, which had trout wallpaper up top and blue wainscoting below.

Nancy Danvish wasn’t fussy, didn’t seem to care much about traditional decorations, and therefore had no art on her walls, no mirrors either, but she had plants *everywhere*. Being inside her house was like being outside in late spring, it smelled like lemongrass and lavender in the family room, basil and rosemary in the kitchen, rose and sage in the dining room. A smattering of skylights dotted her ceiling, making everything bright and cheerful. Her brown leather sofa stuffed with goose down was the comfiest couch I’d ever sat on.

But most impressive as far as I was concerned, the majority of her furniture—oak bookshelves, a pedestal kitchen table with Queen Anne chairs made of cherry, the walnut spindle-legged plant stands with marble and hammered copper tops—she’d made herself.

“You bet I did, a while ago, as an experiment. I’ve been saving it for a special occasion.”

We’d followed her into the family room, and she picked up two shot glasses filled with clear liquid from a teak bar of mid-century modern design. She’d showed me the piece of furniture the last time I was here as she’d just made it and was pleased with the results.

“Take these.” The farmer passed off the shot glasses to us and picked up her own, raising it up, her hazel eyes crinkling at the corners. “To Cletus and Jenn, may all your children have kind hearts, quick wits, and green thumbs.”

“Thank you, Nancy,” Cletus said kindly, lifting his glass before bringing it to his lips and pausing. He cast me a wayward glance—one of apology and worry—and downed the shot in one gulp.

I followed suit, immediately regretting everything in my life that had brought me to this moment. Coughing—my nose, mouth, throat, and esophagus on fire—I gripped Cletus’s arm for balance.

Nancy’s laughter could be heard over my fit, and she picked up an unlabeled bottle, moving as though to pour me another shot. “Here, second one goes down better.”

Cletus moved his shot glass to intercept my pour. “I’ll take hers. She has to work tonight.”

I sent him a look of gratitude through my tears as I gasped for breath.

Continuing to chuckle, Nancy poured Cletus another shot and clinked their

glasses together. “What’ll we drink to this time?”

“How about new ventures? Personal and business.”

Nancy’s clever eyes sharpened, and she nodded, tossing back another shot and wiping her lips with the back of her wrist. Cletus also drank, but not until after taking two deep, bracing breaths. He handed over his glass and mine, which she took. She then disappeared for a moment with a promise to return in a moment.

As soon as I could breathe again, I tugged Cletus down so I could whisper, “What’s mishla?”

“It’s moonshine, made from bananas,” he said low, his features still apologetic.

“Banana moonshine?”

“Yep. Lethal. You could burn a barn with the stuff.”

“I didn’t know she made moonshine.”

He seemed taken aback by that. “Jenn. I don’t know any farmer who *doesn’t* make moonshine.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. Its various applications make it a common staple on most farms.”

“Various applications?”

Cletus ticked off uses on his fingers. “Astringent, disinfectant, antifreeze—add two cups to a bucket of water if you want it to stay unfrozen in the winter, then boil it off if needed—truth serum.”

I flattened my smile at the last one. “You make moonshine.”

“I do.”

“You ever used it as a truth serum?”

“I have.” He glanced around the living room, sniffing. “Do I smell lavender?”

“It’s over there.” I pointed to a big pot in the corner of the room, next to the stone fireplace. “It likes dry climates, which must be why she puts it next to the fireplace. Who?”

“Pardon?”

“Who did you use moonshine on as a truth serum?”

His eyes moved between mine, and I thought for a minute he wouldn’t answer, but then he said, “Billy.”

“Really?”

Cletus nodded once.

“I’d like to hear this story.”

“Not mine to tell.” He glanced over his shoulder as though looking for Nancy, mumbling, “And Billy doesn’t remember some of it.”

“Sit! Sit down. On the couch. It’s the most comfortable couch in Tennessee.” Farmer Danvish walked back in, smiling brightly, and carrying two mugs. “These are for you. It’s cold, and you both look cold, and I don’t like folks being cold in my house.”

“Thank you so much.” I accepted the mug even though I wasn’t cold, wrapping my hands around the warm ceramic. “That mishla warmed me up.”

“Good to see you, Jennifer. I like your hair that color, you look less like a Barbie doll and more like a person, though I got nothing against Barbie dolls nor women who look like them.”

“Good to see you too, Ms. Danvish.”

“How’d you find out we’re engaged?” Cletus asked, giving her a quizzical look.

“You told the sheriff this afternoon. He told Florence at the police station and Florence immediately called me.”

We both nodded. That made sense.

“She’s happy for you too. Said it was a good match.” Nancy smiled, taking a seat by the fire. “I agree. You’re both nice people. Nice people should marry nice people, makes sense. But I forget myself, that’s not why y’all are here.” She stood again and walked out of the room, returning before Cletus and I could comment on her abrupt departure, carrying a portfolio envelope. “Here. Take it.”

Since she was handing me the envelope, I accepted it. “Uh, what is it?”

“It’s the contract for the farm stay business your daddy is pulling together, the overview of his plans.” She took her seat once more by the fire.

“Oh.” I felt the weight of the papers inside, it was substantial.

“That’s why you’re here, right? Spying for your momma?”

“What? We’re not spying.” Cletus waved away her statement, chuckling.

But Farmer Danvish’s eyes were on me, her stare candid, just like her. “Don’t go interfering with matters that don’t concern y’all. There’s a good reason I agreed to your daddy’s business proposal, and none of them are personal. I’m tired. I have no help around here. I’m ready to travel and retire, and the income from the farm stay will let me do that, with little to no hassle to me.”

Straightening my spine, I spoke up. “Farmer Danvish, I’m not here to interfere with your business, yet I am here to spy. But not for my momma.”

I felt Cletus’s eyes on my profile, not exactly shocked. More like equal parts caught off guard and concerned.

“Really?” Nancy dipped her head in a deferential movement, and I couldn’t tell if it was sincere or meant to be mocking. “Then who’re you spying for, Queen of Banana Cakes?”

Ah well. Mocking it is.

No matter.

“Myself,” I said plainly.

Smirking, she didn’t look like she believed me. “And you do whatever your momma tells you to do.”

I debated whether or not to contradict her but decided she wouldn’t believe me if I contested her statement. Everyone in town thought I did whatever my momma wanted, and until just a few months ago, they’d been right.

Instead of arguing, I got right to the point. “Did you hear what happened to Mr. Badcock’s chickens?”

Her expression sobered immediately. “I did. That was a shame. He loves—loved—those chickens.”

“And did you hear about Old Man Blount’s bee boxes?”

“I did. That man is a menace, but his bees deserved better.”

“Did you know that both Blount and Badcock refused to sell to my father or participate in the farm stay business?”

Her gaze grew introspective for a few seconds, and then cagey. “I did not.” She sat back in her chair, her hands coming to settle on the arms. “You think your father sabotaged Badcock and Blount because they wouldn’t sell?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, setting the mug on the coffee table next to the envelope. “But it does seem like an interesting coincidence.”

She seemed to ponder me for a moment. “Or have you considered, it’s also interesting—don’t you think—that me, Miller, Blount, and Badcock all supply, or supplied, your bakery?”

Cletus leaned forward slowly, placing his cup next to mine and his elbows on his knees. “That *is* interesting. Huh.”

I glanced at him and realized he didn’t want me to admit that this line of thinking had already occurred to either of us.

“I’ll tell you something else interesting, and I can’t believe this is a shock to anyone with half a brain, but, Jennifer, you are not well-liked in the baking community. Petty jealousy, I call it. But there it is. And for the record, I’ll sell you honey and eggs again, until poor Badcock and that mean old Blount get their farms in order. Some folks take things a step too far.”

“What does folks being jealous of Jenn have to do with Mr. Badcock’s chicken troubles?” Cletus tented his fingers in front of him, putting on a show of being honestly perplexed.

“Do you need me to connect the dots for you?” Nancy glanced between us before rolling her eyes. “Fine. Some folks think it’s about time someone other than *she* won the state fair, and they’ll do just about anything to make sure that

happens, however misguided and stupid.”

“Even burning bee boxes and almost killing my mother?”

“Those bee boxes never should’ve been touched, I agree with that. But no one was trying to kill your mother.”

“Then why hit her over the head with that shovel?” Cletus stroked his beard.

“Oh, please. A concussion isn’t attempted murder. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. And it wasn’t a shovel. It was a broom *handle* for hootenanny’s sake.”

I felt Cletus stiffen at my side, but he made no other outward sign of catching her slipup.

“Did she say it was a shovel?” Nancy snorted. “Diane Donner always had an overly dramatic, self-involved streak. Even as a kid. She’s fine now, isn’t she? Just a small bump on the head. No harm, no foul.”

Cletus and I swapped looks, and I knew exactly what he was thinking. How could she possibly know what was used to knock out my mother?

We didn’t know.

No one knew.

Except the person who did it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“**N**o great wisdom can be reached without sacrifice.”

— C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*

Jenn

“Are we going to tell Boone?” I asked the moment we pulled out of Nancy Danvish’s driveway and onto the main road. “I mean, we have to tell him, right?”

Cletus wore a considering frown, his eyelids slightly lowered. “Nancy didn’t hit your momma on the head, and she didn’t burn those boxes, but she knows who did. Who does Nancy know? Who told her? Who is she friends with, close enough friends that they would tell her about assaulting your mother?” he asked slowly, like he was speaking while thinking.

“I don’t know, it could be anybody. She’s friendly with lots of folks and I know she sells—or used to sell—to a lot of bakers. Posey Lamont, Deb Brightwell, Ms. Ortiz, to name a few.”

“Well, regardless, Nancy wasn’t present when your momma was knocked out.”

“What makes you say that?”

“First, it was obvious she didn’t like that Badcock’s chickens had been killed, and she also didn’t like that Old Man Blount’s bee boxes were burned. She wouldn’t have any part in destruction of livestock, and I think she feels bad

about it, which is, I suspect, why she offered to sell you eggs and honey again. And second, she didn't know your momma had been dragged over to the boxes and left to die."

"She didn't?"

"No, think about it for a second." His sharp attention flickered between me and the road. "Your momma definitely could've died. That's a fact. But she would've died from the smoke and fire, not the hit to the head. Nancy only knew about the hit to the head, which was why she seemed to think 'attempted murder' was hysterics and drama, not reality."

"So—" I leaned my elbow on the windowsill and pulled at my bottom lip, piecing it all together. "So Nancy knows who hit my momma on the head. Fact. And she thinks the burned bees and strangled chickens have to do with folks not wanting me to win the state fair. Also a fact. But she doesn't know that the person who hit my momma on the head also dragged her over to the bee boxes before setting them on fire, and left my momma to die."

"Or . . ."

"Or?"

Cletus's chest expanded with a deep breath and he looked at me again, his frown now severe. "What if we're dealing with two people? Or more? And they're all working toward a common goal, which, according to Nancy Danvish, is keeping you from winning the state fair baking contest. But maybe they're not all being forthright with their coconspirators."

"How do you mean?"

"It's just"—he made a face of both indecision and irritation—"who in their right mind almost kills a person because of a state fair baking contest? Who does that? Also, Ashley made a good point when we were plucking Badcock's chickens."

"What did she say?"

"She pointed out that chickens are dumb and keeping them alive is difficult. Someone could've just opened the coop door and let a dog in. Sure, Badcock might've heard the dog, but there's a hundred different ways to kill chickens and make it look like an accident if all they wanted to do was interrupt the supply chain for the bakery. Somebody wanted everybody to know the chickens were killed on purpose. Killing them all by strangulation was unnecessary, unless the person—or people—doing it wanted to send a message to Mr. Badcock, or to someone else, that it was done maliciously."

"Ugh." I rubbed my chest. "That makes my heart sick. Poor Mr. Badcock."

"Those chickens were killed to send a message, and your momma was almost killed to send a message. Somebody is being vicious."

I glanced at my hands. “The only person I can think of involved in this mess who is also that level of vicious, and might want my momma dead, is my father. But he doesn’t care if I win the state fair baking contest.”

“Doesn’t he? The bakery is a big draw for the lodge. You winning every year is a big deal on social media and a big feather in your momma’s cap. Your mother spends hours on your Instagram page, curating it, the image she wants to project. Plus, don’t forget about the Tricia Wilkinson connection. She hasn’t placed first, second, or third in the state fair ever since you won, and your father is dating her sister.”

I turned my body so that my back pressed against the car door. “You think my father is using Tricia to destroy bee boxes and kill chickens so that I don’t win the state fair as a way to sabotage my momma?”

“I’m not sure. Nancy seemed to think Badcock and Blount’s troubles were entirely because of jealous bakers, but we can’t forget Nancy is going into business with your father. Clearly, she doesn’t have a grudge against you, doesn’t care if you win the fair or not, but if your father were involved with messy, illegal dealings—destroying livestock and such—it would put her in a difficult position. She’s already signed the contract for the farm stay. If her contract is similar to Miller’s, her farm and income are tied up for three years.”

“Well, we have her contract right there.” Cletus gestured to the envelope she’d given us with a copy of the contract. “I guess we’ll find out.”

“Even if it is similar, she could always start selling eggs, milk, and honey again, even if my father were in jail. It’s not like she’d be penniless.”

“But you heard her, she doesn’t want to do that anymore. She’s tired and has no help. She wants to travel. She wants to retire, and the farm stay lets her retire and collect income.” He turned onto the road that would take us to my mother’s house.

I stared unseeingly out the windshield again. “I wish we could just ask her who hit my momma with the broom handle.”

“If we’d asked about the handle, she would’ve realized her mistake.”

Cletus was right about that. Nancy Danvish was a smart woman, if we’d pressed her on the broom handle comment, she would’ve clammed up. *Unless . . .*

“Maybe if I go back and talk to her on my own, if she trusted me, then she’d tell me who hit my momma over the head.”

“How’re you going to get Nancy Danvish to trust you?” He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. “She’s in business with your father, and she thinks you do whatever your momma wants.”

“What if . . .” I paused, considering, “What if I was in business with my

father and she thought she could trust me?”

He gave me another side-eye. “In business with your father how?”

“What if I went undercover? What if I told him I wanted to work with him and not my mother?”

Cletus made a grunting sound, pulling into my momma’s driveway and slowing the Bronco to a crawl. “He’d never believe you were sincere.”

“I don’t know . . .” I pinched my bottom lip again, thinking back on how I’d left things with my daddy earlier at the diner, all the mean-spirited sentiments I’d wanted to say, but didn’t. I also recalled all the words he’d spoken, how he truly believed I was an idiot and wanted nothing in life but to be pampered. “What did you say about Farmer Miller? ‘When folks think you’re dumber than them, they monologue.’”

He made a face like my statements smelled bad. Cutting the engine once he’d parked, Cletus turned toward me. “The person who left your mother to die is the person who killed Mr. Badcock’s chickens in a pretentious show of malevolence, and I think you’re right in thinking the guilty party is your father. Who else tied to this mess wants your momma dead? And if it is your father, that makes him dangerous, even a little sick in the head. The last place you should be is working undercover to betray a dangerous person.”

Cletus’s conclusion hit an off-note. “No. My father doesn’t know how to kill chickens. Perhaps it was his idea, but he wouldn’t be the one to actually do it. Plus, Boone said whoever dragged my momma over to the burning boxes dropped her a few times, like she was too heavy. My daddy isn’t a big man, but he could carry my momma over his shoulder easily. He wouldn’t need to drag her across a field.”

“Then maybe he’s pulling the strings and someone else—or a few other folks—are wreaking the havoc.” He exited the car, coming around to my side and opening the door.

Meanwhile, I kept on shaking my head, even when I stepped out of the Bronco. “Let’s say, for the sake of argument, my father is pulling the strings. Still, he wouldn’t be at Blount’s to burn the bees, he wouldn’t get his hands dirty that way. Someone—not him—hit my momma over the head when she showed up unexpectedly. Nancy Danvish said it was a wrong place, wrong time kind of thing. But then someone—not him, and maybe not even the person who hit her over the head—dragged my momma to the bee boxes and left her to die.”

He entwined our fingers, pressing our palms together as we walked to the porch. “You think we’re dealing with a conspiracy? Your father pulling the strings and two other folks carrying out his orders?”

“I think I need to go undercover.”

Cletus's steps faltered midstride, his hand in mine giving a small spasm.

"Hear me out," I continued before he could dismiss the entire idea again without listening to my thoughts.

"Your father is a very, very bad man."

"Yes."

"I know about bad men." His voice lowered to just above a whisper, his eyes pointed forward, seemingly unfocused. "And bad fathers."

"Cletus—"

"Is this about revenge?" He halted our progress to the porch, facing me abruptly, his stare searching.

"What?"

"You going undercover, exposing him for what he is, is this about getting revenge?"

"No."

My answer seemed to disappoint him. "Are you sure? If it were, I promise I would understand. And if it's about revenge, there are so many things we can do to make him suffer. I have ideas, lists of ideas, libraries full of ideas. No need to go undercover in order to ruin his life."

"I don't want to ruin his life. It's honestly not about revenge, it's about the truth. It's seeing decent people like Mr. Badcock suffering and knowing his pain isn't a priority to anyone. Mr. Badcock needs to know the truth about who murdered his chickens, he deserves to know the truth. He's a good person."

"But Old Man Blount isn't a good person."

"Maybe not, but it doesn't matter what someone has done in their past, they don't deserve injustice in the present."

Cletus's teeth slid to the side and he sighed, looking frustrated, withdrawing his hand and shoving it in his pocket. "What goes around, comes around."

"Cletus. That way of thinking isn't nice."

"I never pretended to be nice. Couldn't I just ruin your father instead?"

I decided to try a different approach. "Plus, if I go undercover, I could find out where my father put the lodge renovation money and get it back."

"Well, I actually have an idea about that—the money."

"Really?"

"I have a friend, I think I've mentioned him, in Chicago. He's—uh—a hacker. Supremely talented."

"You want him to hack into my father's, what? Bank accounts?"

"No, he won't need to hack into them, he just needs to find them. Once Alex finds the accounts, your momma's lawyer should be able to seize the funds. According to your momma, the prenup disallows your father from touching

lodge assets.”

I tilted my head to the side, my gaze searching his handsome face. “She told you that?”

“She did, during one of our morning chats this week.”

“And your friend Alex would feel comfortable doing that kind of thing? Digging around to find out where the money is?”

Cletus scratched the back of his neck, his gaze evasive. “He has more skills than scruples.”

“Hmm. Sounds like the two of you make quite a pair. How well do you know him?”

“I’d go to his birthday party, if I were invited.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that, but we were getting off track. “Okay. Let’s say Alex of skills but not scruples can find the accounts and get the renovation money returned, that still leaves Mr. Badcock. What about those dead chickens?”

“I assume Alex can’t resuscitate chickens, but I can ask.”

“You know what I mean. Fine, ask Alex to help with my momma’s money predicament, but Boone all but told me he’s been pulled from the case to deal with Iron Wraiths criminal activities. Who is going to find justice for Mr. Badcock?”

Even behind his bushy beard I could see the sharp downward curve of his lips, the rigidity behind his eyes. He looked supremely unhappy but said nothing.

“Will you at least listen to my plan?”

“What if he hurts you?” he blurted, a flash of pain, of anguish—there and gone—sparked behind his eyes.

“He can’t. I don’t care what he says to me anymore.”

“I’m not talking about words. What if he *hurts* you?”

I knew what he was asking. Just like earlier at the diner, he was worried about my father putting his hands on me. And in the same moment I also knew—to the depths of my soul—that Cletus kept bringing up physical violence because he had, at some point in his life, experienced that kind of hurt firsthand.

“Cletus. What did Darrell—”

His eyes dropped, and his voice reminded me of gravel against stone as he spoke, “Darrell, Kip, men like them, if they can’t hurt you with words, they hurt you with deeds. What if he hurts you?”

I couldn’t go another moment without touching him. Reaching out, I encircled his wrist and tugged his hand from his pocket.

Threading our fingers together again, I pressed his knuckles to my chest. “I’ll wear a wire. You’ll hear everything that’s going on the whole time. We’ll record

every moment that I'm alone with my father."

Cletus inhaled, exhaled, gritted his teeth, his gaze penetrating, fiery, and miserable. "I don't like this."

"You haven't even heard the whole plan yet."

Eyes narrowing, he made a grumbly noise. "Fine. I'm not saying I agree to consider or otherwise contemplate your plan, but what do you have in mind?"

"I get my father to trust me. I make him think I've quit the bakery and am no longer working for my momma. I make him think I want to work with him on his hotel idea. I'm certain he'd jump at the chance, if only to stick it to my mother. Then, when I meet with him, I ask him about the farms, I get him to admit his part, his plan, and we—uh—I record him confessing his part. We then take the recording to Boone, my father's arrested, boom. Done."

"Boom. Done." Once more, Cletus removed his hand from mine.

Without his touch, a sense of loss, of melancholy spread through me. Even so, I managed a firm, "Yes."

He pushed his fingers through his hair, visibly agitated. "Easy as that?"

Glaring at my beloved fiancé, I folded my arms. "No. I don't think it'll be easy, but I do think it won't be difficult to get him to talk. Remember, 'When folks think you're dumber than them, they monologue.'"

"I wish I'd never told you that," he muttered.

"I already knew it. Everyone in town thinks I'm a bimbo, my father included. He'll tell me everything simply because he loves to brag and thinks I'm dumb."

"Except, what if he doesn't trust you?"

"What do you mean?"

"How are you going to convince him to trust you? How are you going to convince him you've quit the bakery? You don't think he'll check?" Cletus's question sounded frosty, and his demeanor grew increasingly reserved, giving me the sense he was putting more than physical distance between us.

I stopped myself from reaching out to him again, lifting my chin as I said, "I guess I'll just have to quit the bakery."

"You would do that?"

"Yes. It would only be temporary."

"And what will you tell your mother?"

Without him having to explain, I understood his point perfectly, and I swallowed against a swelling tightness every time I inhaled. "I guess . . ."

Suddenly, I felt breathless. *Damn.*

"You'll have to stage a fight with your mother." Cletus's tone was almost robotic now, his features lacking any expression.

I shivered, disliking this aloof version of him, but croaked out a believable,

“You’re right, I will.”

“And it’ll have to be public, in front of many people.”

“Yes.”

“And she’ll have to believe you. You cannot tell her the truth. If Kip is to believe this is for real, Diane can’t know the truth.”

Damn. Damn. Damn.

He was right.

“I know.” I pressed my hand to my hurting abdomen.

Cletus nodded subtly, blinking once, twice, like he might have something in his eyes, then added softly, “He’ll also have to believe that you and I have called off our engagement.”

My heart skipped several beats, lurching painfully, my mouth opening as it and my brain struggled to harmonize on a response to *that*.

“You know I’m right,” he said, his voice completely devoid of emotion.

“I—I—I—what are you suggesting?”

“Another public fight, but with me.

“What?” I may have shrieked.

No, actually, I absolutely shrieked. I own that horrified shriek, and I meant it.

“Everyone will believe we’re broken up for good. Then and only then will Kip trust you. I’ll have to stay away, but you’ll be safe in that house.”

I would be safe in that house. Jethro had installed two safe rooms when Claire lived there; the security system was state of the art, video cameras along the outside and motion sensors inside; the doors were reinforced steel and even the windows are bulletproof.

Regardless, I didn’t think Cletus could look any unhappier about this plan than when I’d initially began explaining it. I was wrong.

“You and I have a fight, a very public breakup,” he reiterated, almost like he was psyching himself up. “The sooner the better.”

“And where would we have this theoretical fight?” My heart was beating thickly between my ears, my esophagus pressing against my tonsils. I no longer felt sick, I was sick.

“The jam session.” His tone was flat, and the typical spark of life and light behind his gorgeous eyes had all but disappeared. He looked . . . absent. And I didn’t like it. I hated it.

Just the thought, fighting with Cletus in front of a crowd? Saying hurtful things? No.

No, no, no. I couldn’t do it. This was a bad idea.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to forget it, that I’d been silly to suggest such a thing, but he took a step back, his shuttered gaze falling to the

gravel between us. “We’ll do it at the jam session tomorrow.”

“Cletus—”

“Show up late.” He nodded at his own statement, taking another step away and turning back to the Bronco. “I’ll do the rest.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“I guess that’s just part of loving people: You have to give things up. Sometimes you even have to give them up.”

— Lauren Oliver, *Delirium*

Jenn

Tonight of all nights, the irony of arriving on time was not lost on me. But here I sat, two miles from the community center, parked at a gas station, and stuck in my car for the next hour. Reaching for my bag, I pulled out my phone and scanned the messages I’d sent to Cletus during the day,

Jenn: Do you have a minute?

Jenn: Can we talk about the plan?

Jenn: Will you please call me back?

Jenn: Are you trying to freak me out?

<3 Cletus <3: No.

Jenn: Then why won’t you pick up your phone?

<3 Cletus <3: I’m doing my best and I love you.

Jenn: We need to talk about the plan.

<3 Cletus <3: Trust me. I know how important this plan is to you and I will do everything in my power to ensure everyone believes what they see and hear. Just know that whatever I say tonight will be a lie.

Cletus had only sent the three messages all day. I could only presume this was because he wanted to throw me off-kilter so our fight would look and feel real to spectators. Did he know rejecting my calls would tie me into knots? Was he feeling similar anxiety? Raw around the edges and unable to inhale deeply?

“I don’t know, he won’t pick up his phone,” I muttered to the empty car, checking the time on the dash. Fifty-five minutes remained.

If he’d answered his phone, or if he’d listened to my voicemails, he would know that I’d been having second, third, and fourth thoughts, and was inches away from changing my mind. Going undercover and helping my momma, Mr. Badcock, and even Old Man Blount had seemed like a good idea until it meant spending even more time apart from Cletus. This last week, the stolen moments few and far between, had been so much better than the several weeks before, and I didn’t care what we did, just as long as it was—

. . . Liar. You want his body.

Squirring in my seat, I checked the dash again. Fifty-four minutes.

My first fifteen years of life were spent in complete ignorance of such matters and the last seven had been spent living vicariously through my pen pal’s letters on the subject of romantic (or just plain sexual) relationships. It felt both odd and improper to contemplate that Cletus had struck a match within me with his looks, words, and touches. He’d applied flame to kindling which had apparently also been doused in gasoline.

I wanted more time exploring him. I wanted him to kiss me senseless. I wanted more of what we’d only just started back in November. Way back in November. Way, way, way back in November. What we’d done together during those short weeks haunted and plagued me.

Echoes of expectations from my upbringing whispered, *You’re a weirdo and a pervert. Stop thinking about it. You shouldn’t be thinking about these things. It’s unladylike. Good women do not engage in lustful fantasies.*

I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Did all women feel this way about their person? Or was it just because I’d been so inexperienced and Cletus was my first and only? It was like when I had an idea for a new recipe but lacked the ingredients to make it, except ten thousand times worse. Recipes didn’t wake me up at night, hot and bothered, tempting me to touch myself as I remembered all the ways he’d touched me.

And now, because of a situation of my own making, he and I wouldn’t be together like I wanted for days, if not weeks.

Why did I suggest this? Why must I be this way? Why can’t Mr. Badcock go undercover? What is wrong with me?!

“That’s it!” I hit the steering wheel and started the engine. “I’m not doing

this. Forget it. Let people deal with their own problems.”

Checking the clock as I put the car in reverse, I realized I’d only be fifteen minutes late to the jam session, which was the earliest I’d arrived in over six weeks. I wanted—*so badly*—to be with him, for days, alone. Therefore, calling off the undercover nonsense was the only course of action. After that . . . *maybe I’ll kidnap him.*

“Billy will help,” I said, nodding to myself. “And so will Beau and Shelly.”

I’d devised three versions of a kidnapping plot by the time I arrived at the community center and cut the engine. Grabbing just my keys, I bolted out of the car, locked it, and jogged to the entrance. Since the music had just started up a few minutes prior, I encountered the crowd migrating from the cafeteria down the hall to the rooms grouped by genre—country, fiddle, gospel, bluegrass—and ignored the sound of someone calling my name.

Stumbling into the room labeled *bluegrass* out of breath, more from my own emotional upheaval than any physical cause, I looked expectantly to the improvised stage, expecting to find Cletus in his usual spot. My heart sunk. He was not there.

“Huh.”

Someone tugged at my jacket sleeve and I turned to find Jackson James at my arm, wearing a harassed frown. “Jennifer.”

“Oh, hey, Jackson. Have you seen Cletus?”

His frown deepened, grooves forming between his eyebrows, and he encircled my wrist with his fingers. “I’m glad you’re here, but I wish you hadn’t been late.”

“I’m not that late.” I allowed Jackson to pull me from the room, following where he led. “What’s wrong?”

“Well, it’s—it’s complicated. Word got around about your engagement, and so some of the guys were congratulating Cletus and such, nothing untoward. But then—” Jackson sent me an aggrieved look.

“What?”

He sighed, tugging me over to the gift shop and stepping inside, his voice a whisper. “Evans said something stupid about you, and so Cletus made a bet.”

“What? What kind of bet?”

Jackson appeared even more agitated than before. “Evans remarked on how he hardly ever saw y’all together and asked if Cletus was sure y’all were actually engaged or if he was making it up. Evans was just trying to be funny. Teasing, you know?”

“Okay . . .?”

“So he and Cletus went back and forth for a bit, and Evans said something

about you never coming to the jam sessions, or if you did, it was only for a short time, like maybe you didn't like Cletus's music or something—again, just joking.”

My stomach sunk as my heart jumped to my throat. “Oh no. What was the bet?”

“They bet that if you showed up early or on time, Evans would give Cletus his 1951 Chris-Craft twenty-two-foot Sportsman.”

“A boat?”

“Yep. It's not fixed up yet, but they're expensive and difficult to find.”

“What did Cletus bet?”

Jackson seemed to struggle for a minute, like he didn't want to tell me, but then blurted, “If you were late, then—uh—” He winced, peering at me through one eye. “Cletus bet his Deering Clawgrass.”

I gasped, covering my mouth, a thunderbolt of remorse and shock and everything in between striking me momentarily speechless.

“I know.” Jackson seemed just as pained as me, grabbing a fistful of hair like maybe yanking it out would remove unpleasant memories. “I know,” he said again.

“Oh my God.”

“And now you're late, and Evans offered to call off the bet—I can tell he feels bad—but Cletus handed over the banjo already, being stubborn.”

“Oh my God.”

“It's been like a funeral in the cafeteria ever since.”

“Oh my—” I stopped myself before I could repeat the words a third time. My heart galloping in my chest, a cold sweat had broken out on the back of my neck and down my spine. “Why? Why would he do this?”

Jackson's look conveyed nothing but sympathy as he said, “He thought you'd be here on time.”

My mind a mess, I slid down the wall to the ground, clutching my forehead. “He loves that banjo. He's insane. He's crazy.”

Why would he do this? Why? Why?

His text from earlier in the day took on a whole new meaning, *I know how important this plan is to you and I will do everything in my power to ensure everyone believes what they see and hear.*

I wanted to cry.

“Uh, Jenn.” Jackson nudged me with his foot, and I looked up.

Cletus.

His eyes were on Jackson, and his features—except for his eyes—were completely clear of expression. But his eyes . . .

“Hey, Cletus.” Clearly, Jackson needed to work on his acting skills, he sounded anything but nonchalant. “Look who I found.”

I swallowed, or tried to, and stood, pushing away from the wall to step out of the gift shop and only tangentially noticed that the crowd from earlier—the crowd I’d assumed was working their way to the music rooms—had stopped moving. They were now staring. At us.

“Cletus—”

He held up his hand, shaking his head, still not looking at me. “I’m honestly not interested.”

“I’m so sorry.” My voice cracked, my vision blurring, and I knew I was supposed to be playing a part, but all the regret pouring out of me was entirely sincere. I never should’ve worked overtime at the bakery during the busy season. I should’ve been firmer with my mother and stuck to my boundaries. I should’ve made him a priority the way he’d always, *always* made me a priority.

He said nothing, just continued to stare daggers at Jackson, the muscle at his temple ticking.

I tried again. “I am so—”

“Don’t,” Cletus spat, looking fed up. “You’re not sorry. I’m so sick of your lies.” Abruptly, he turned, walking back toward the cafeteria.

I followed, feeling like my heart tugged me forward on a string, hating the grim set of his jaw, that same determined aloofness in his eyes from last night. “I *am* sorry. Will you just—” I caught his arm.

He shook me off easily and kept on walking.

“Listen to me. Please.” Tears running down my face, I caught his arm again and he twisted out of my grip, finally facing me.

But still, he wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“What, Jenn? What should I listen to? Another excuse for why you can’t be bothered to be here?”

“It’s not like that. You know it’s not,” I yelled, wanting to defend myself even as a voice in my head reminded me that this was fake.

It doesn’t feel fake.

“How many special orders was it this time?” His glare moved to some spot over my head, his tone mean. “Who is so much more important than your fiancé? Was it the Queen of England?”

“I never should’ve been late. I’ll never be late again. I just—”

“And I find you with *Jackson*?” His tone cracked like a whip, sharp and sudden, and he gestured beyond me.

“Hey now.” Jackson, suddenly at my side, lifted his hand palm out, as though attempting to calm a wild animal. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Oh. Sure, *Jack*. You think I don’t see the way you look at my fiancée? You think I don’t know about the two of you?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jackson’s hands came to his hips, his voice now outraged. “Jenn and I are friends, and I would never—”

“You would *definitely*,” Cletus cut in bitterly. “And you know what? I don’t care. I do not care. You can have her. I’m done being an afterthought. Take her, and good riddance.”

I flinched, my arms folding over my hurting stomach as he turned again and pushed through the crowd, leaving me. As I watched him go, watched his head full of chaotic curls disappear into the sea of onlookers, I reminded myself over and over that this was not Cletus. He would never do this or speak to me this way.

And yet, he was entirely convincing.

I was convinced.

* * *

“So . . . you want to talk about it?”

Closing my scratchy eyes, I let my head fall back against the headrest of the passenger seat and blew out a shaky breath.

After Cletus left me standing there in the middle of the cafeteria, my heart on the floor in a million pieces, Jackson had put his arm around my shoulders and steered me to the exit, walked us to my car, and insisted on driving me home. I’d accepted; just the thought of backing out of a parking space was immeasurably overwhelming.

Presently, he’d just pulled onto the road leading to my house, and I heard Jackson clear his throat before saying, “He’ll get over it. You’ll see.”

My chin wobbled, and I did not trust myself to speak. I felt so dumb. Even though I’d reminded myself a hundred times that everything Cletus had said tonight was a lie, I still felt terrible, and panicky, and bereft.

Because it actually hadn’t been a lie, had it? Everything, except for the nonsense about Jackson, had been true. *Maybe, I really did lose him tonight.*

Perhaps putting on a show had been the original plan, but as each of his words hit their mark, I had to wonder if he meant them.

Were things over between us? The mere thought made me gasp for breath.

“Jennifer?”

I felt the car shift, turn as he pulled into my driveway, heard the leather creak as he shifted in the driver’s seat.

New tears escaped my eyelids and I sniffled, my hands coming to my face. “I think I’ve lost him.”

Jackson sighed, it sounded pained. “Come on. Cletus ain’t that stupid.”

Dropping my hands, I opened my door to leave as soon as he’d pulled into the parking spot out front. I needed to get inside the house, get rid of Jackson, and call Cletus.

I needed to hear his voice and talk to him about all the truths he’d poured out among the lies. I needed to apologize once and for all and never give him a reason to feel like an afterthought ever again.

Jackson trailed after me as I jogged to the porch. “If you’re willing to forgive him for being an ass tonight, I can’t imagine he’ll waste the chance.”

“You don’t know that,” I mumbled, holding out an impatient hand for the keys.

“I do know. Believe me, I do.” He passed them over and took a step back, giving me space to open the door. “He loves you. He was just upset about the banjo, that’s all. But he’ll get over it. If it were me, I’d be over here first thing tomorrow, begging for forgiveness. And, like I said, Cletus ain’t stupid. He’s odd, but not stupid.”

The door unlocked, I pushed my way inside and tossed the keys back at Jackson. “Here, take my car home. I’ll figure out how to get it later.” I moved to shut the door, but then opened it again quickly to say, “Thank you for everything, and I’m so sorry Cletus said those things about you. You’re a good friend.”

Before he could respond, I shut the door, locked all the dead bolts, and rummaged in my purse for my phone. Finding it, I dropped the bag, nearly tripping over the dang thing as I stumbled to the couch, unlocking my cell on the way and texting,

Jenn: CALL ME RIGHT NOW!

Not waiting for him to respond, I dialed his number, biting my thumbnail until the line connected.

He picked up on the second ring. “Jenn.”

“Cletus,” I said, stinging emotion rushing to my nose and eyes, choking me. “I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Whoa, wait. Wait a minute. Jenn, you have nothing to be sorry for.”

Holding my middle, I rocked back and forth. “I don’t?”

“No. You were fantastic. Heck, *I* believed you.” He made a short sound, like a sigh, but more exhausted. “I am mighty relieved that’s over.”

I expected relief to flow through me, I expected to feel better, and I did. *And yet . . .*

“What you said,” I croaked, telling myself to breathe.

He paused, as though thinking. “Wait, what did I say?”

“About feeling like an afterthought.”

Cletus grunted. “Jenn—”

“And you wouldn’t look at me.”

“If I’d looked at you, I wouldn’t have been able to go through with it.” His tone gentle, his voice deep and reassuring, I sensed his frustration, but also his worry. “Didn’t you see my message?”

“I saw it.”

“I told you, everything I said would be a lie.”

“So you don’t feel like an afterthought? You’re not angry about me being late for the jam session all through December and—”

“We already resolved this.”

I shot to my feet. “Did we?”

“Yes. Last week, we talked it through. You said you’d make me a priority, and I trust you to keep your word. I consider it resolved, and you should too.”

My was head all over the place. “But have I made you a priority?”

He hesitated, again like he was thinking things over. “Jenn—”

“Can you trust me? Can you? Because I don’t know.”

“Honey—”

“I never should’ve asked this of you. I should’ve just let the authorities handle my father. I keep messing things up.”

“You don’t.”

“I do!”

“No. You have a big heart. I would never trade your mammoth, irrationally generous heart for a smaller, more frugal one. I love every square kilometer of it.”

A laugh tumbled from my lips and I lowered to the couch. “Really? It’s that big?”

“It should have its own zip code. And it’s my third favorite thing about you.”

Closing my eyes, I leaned back against the cushions, some of the tension I’d been carrying since last night dissipated, leaving my limbs. “One of these days you’re going to tell me what your favorite thing about me is.”

“Oh, absolutely. But not right now.” The gruffness in his tone made me

smile for some reason.

I sunk deeper into the cushions. “Are you sure, absolutely positive, that you’re not still upset with me about December? Because I—”

“I am not upset with you about December, or anything else. You are perfect.”

“I am not perfect.” Again, I smiled.

“You are to me.”

“Then, can I ask, why did you bring it up tonight?”

“If we wanted our fight to be believable, an old true argument was preferable to a new fake drama.” Cletus’s explanation sounded so reasonable, and I blinked, startled, seeing the wisdom in his words.

Except— “Well then, what about that stuff with Jackson?”

“Oh. That was a new fake drama, total improv, didn’t plan on that. But the opportunity presented itself, an exploitable stroke of luck, as it were.” He sounded almost proud. “Gives folks something juicy to talk about, that way we know the news will spread and reach your—reach Kip Sylvester.”

“That’s true. But I wish . . .” I rubbed my forehead against a headache beginning to form.

“What? What do you wish?” he asked softly.

“Your banjo, Cletus.” Tears began to well up again, guilt flaring.

“Oh! No, Jenn. I didn’t share any particulars—why I needed him to play the part—but Evans was an accomplice. My banjo is safe and sound.”

“Oh, thank goodness.”

“Besides, what would Evans do with a banjo? He played the bassoon in high school. Can’t blow on a banjo.”

I chuckled, finally feeling true relief. “No, can’t blow on a banjo.”

Comfortable silence fell between us, my tired brain turning sluggish, drowsy. But I still ached, a dull, constant pain.

“I love you, Jenn,” he said, his tone serious and stark. “And I miss you.”

My heart spasmed, the ache intensifying. “I love you. I miss you.”

He was quiet for a stretch, and I sensed he debated his next words carefully.

“You should get some sleep. You’ll, uh, need your rest for tomorrow.”

Crap.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow I had to pick a fight with my momma, in front of everyone. But unlike Cletus, she would have no idea it was fake.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Once there was a tree, and she loved a little boy.”

— Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree*

Cletus

I spent early Saturday morning moving a barn to the Winston homestead, the afternoon moving twenty cows from Miller Farm into the barn, and the rest of the day avoiding my family because I didn't wish to lie to them outright. When avoidance didn't work, I deployed evasive maneuvers.

Them: “Do you want to talk about it?”

Me: “Talk about what?”

Them: “What happened with Jenn last night.”

Me: “What happened with Jenn?”

Them: “Cletus.”

Me: “That is my name.”

Them: “If you don't wish to discuss it, just say so.”

Me: “I don't wish to discuss it.”

Them: “Let me know if you want to talk.”

Me: “I shall.”

Them: “I really think you should talk about it.”

Me: “Talk about what?”

And so forth, until they lost their patience and departed. I didn't wish to lie

to my siblings, therefore I avoided and evaded, but there was no evading Diane Donner and her BMW barreling down the gravel driveway just before sunset.

“Cletus! Oh, Cletus.” Diane covered her mouth, tears streaming down her cheeks as she tossed herself out of her car, running toward me as I reluctantly descended the porch steps.

“Ms. Donner. What has happened—”

“You’ll never guess—oh, my heart is broken.” Upon reaching me, she threw her arms around my neck and cried in earnest just . . . all over my clothes. Snot and salt water on my clean shirt.

“There, there.” I patted her back. I did not excel at comforting sad people. My brother Beau once accused me of sounding like that impertinent artificial intelligence, Amazon Echo, when attempting to provide solace. But I did have the presence of mind to offer, “Why don’t you come inside, and I’ll make you tea?”

“The things she said, the terrible things.” She pulled away, wiping at her eyes, while I surveyed the damage done to my shirt. “She called me selfish, said I manipulated her all the time, said she was tired of being treated like a doormat for me to wipe my feet on.”

“Did she?” I led Diane to the porch swing, settled her amongst the pillows and offered her a blanket because that seemed appropriate. Meanwhile, I couldn’t help wishing I’d been there. Even if Jenn hadn’t meant a stitch of what she’d said, and even though it must’ve been difficult for Jenn to do it, I couldn’t help but think Diane would be better for hearing the words.

Looks like Jenn had repurposed an old true argument rather than creating a new fake drama. Good on her.

The woman waved away the blanket, perching herself on the edge of the swing. “And she said that she’d never set foot in the bakery again. She said she quit. She stormed out!”

“Is that right?” My heart made itself known with a tight squeeze. If Diane agonized, I couldn’t imagine how anxious Jenn must be right now. As soon as Diane left, I would call Jenn and check in.

“That’s right, she quit. And I—I don’t know what I’m going to do!”

I patted Diane’s hand. “Don’t fret. I’m sure you’ll be able to find a new pastry chef for the bakery.”

“What? No!” She ripped her hand away, stood, and paced the length of the porch. “I don’t care about that. I don’t care about the bakery. To hell with the bakery! I can’t get a new daughter, now can I?”

My lips parted, and I stared at Diane Donner. Those were not the words I’d expected.

She must've mistaken my stunned expression, because she hurried over to me, sitting down again on the bench swing. "Oh, Cletus. Sorry. I'm so sorry. I know you're going through the same thing, the same difficulty, just a different kind of grief. Scotia Simmons stopped by the lodge this morning, told me all about what happened last night with Jackson."

"With Jackson." I attempted to appear ill at ease and didn't need to work very hard.

"She did. I marched myself over to the bakery to talk some sense into Jennifer. Carrying on with Jackson? That's so unlike her. And she—she—" Diane's features crumpled. "She hates me!"

"She doesn't hate you." That, at least, was the truth.

"Losing Jennifer, I won't survive it—" She clutched at her chest, an extraordinarily sad sounding sob leaving her lips. "I don't know what I'm going to do. What are we going to do?"

"What are we going to do?" I parroted, endeavoring to wear an expression I hoped resembled miserable introspection.

Her hand dropped and she peered at me, another sob wrung out of her, her eyes glazed with sorrow. "Goodness, the way she looked at you. I never thought she'd do such a thing. Not ever. Not in a million years. She loves you. You have to believe she loves you."

"Things aren't always how they seem," I hedged, studying my fingers.

"I guess not. I guess—" she pressed a fist to her mouth, closing her eyes "—I've lost everything, Cletus."

"That's not true, Ms. Donner."

"What did I tell you? Call me Diane."

"You'll get through this. We both will." I patted her shoulder, the movement allowing me to check the time on my watch.

"I don't know if I want to get through this. First Isaac, now Jennifer. Part of me just wants to—I just want to escape, you know? Run away. I've never traveled, never seen the world, not really. And I have nothing here worth staying for."

"Everything will work out in the end."

"I don't see how it can." She shrugged helplessly, her voice small and distressed.

In a way, I felt for her. Diane Donner wasn't a bad person, she was just a terribly flawed person. But then, weren't we all?

Not knowing what to say in the face of her pain, I nodded somberly and went with an old standby statement. "I understand your perspective."

"I think you really do." Her gaze moved over me, both sad and sympathetic.

“I know you loved her.”

“I love her,” I corrected automatically, grimacing at the slipup, squeezing my eyes shut. “Sorry, this is more difficult than I thought it would be.”

She made a soft noise, and I sensed her hesitate before her arm came around my shoulders. “Oh baby, you two belong together, and I’m sure she’ll come to her senses eventually.”

I nodded, fighting a wee twinge of guilt. I didn’t enjoy lying to my family, and I certainly wasn’t enjoying this conversation with Jenn’s mother. Instead of lying, or, technically, telling the truth, I said nothing and gave Diane another somber nod.

She took it as a prompt to continue. “You are such a special person, Cletus Winston. Your momma would be so proud of you, of the honorable, kind, generous man you’ve become.”

Yikes. The twinge of guilt stretched, reshaped itself into an uncomfortable ball sitting heavy on my diaphragm.

“I wouldn’t call me *honorable*—”

“Oh, but you are. You are.” She patted my shoulder, her tone tremendously maternal. “Your mother was the sweetest woman on the face of the earth. She was basically that tree in that book. You know, the one that gave and gave and gave, not asking for anything in return.”

“You mean *The Giving Tree*?”

“That’s the one. And I see a lot of her in you. The honesty, the righteousness, the sweetness.”

I opened one eye, still grimacing, because now I *felt* guilty. I hated feeling guilty. I hated feeling anything I didn’t actively decide to feel, and no one would purposefully decide to feel guilty.

But Diane wasn’t finished. “Your momma forgave everybody for everything, unless they hurt her children. That’s why she could never forgive your daddy. Just like I know you’ll forgive Jenn when she comes to her senses.”

Seeing an opportunity to reroute the runaway locomotive of our conversation, I asked, “What are you talking about? My mother took Darrell back over and over again, even after he hurt us kids.” Maybe my momma was the giving tree with us, but she was also the giving tree with my father, and that was the problem. She didn’t know how to shut off the generosity and forgiveness. Sometimes we’d needed a warrior tree, a momma-bear tree, a vengeful tree, not just a giving one.

“But she didn’t forgive him, and she left him when it came right down to it. At first, your momma thought taking him back was the only way to keep the peace and keep you kids out of serious harm. But when he stepped over the line,

she was done. Everything she did from that point forward was to try and keep y'all safe, including—uh, well now, I'll leave that in the past.”

My other eye flew open, and I examined her profile. “What? Keep what in the past?”

“I'd like to think I'm the same,” she said wistfully, gazing at the horizon like it was the most interesting horizon that ever horizoned. In other words, she pretended to not hear my question. “Both your momma and me, we did our best with manipulative husbands. Mind, Kip never raised a hand to me or the children.”

I thought about contradicting her, reminding the woman that he'd used a belt on Jenn and Isaac when they were kids. Jenn had also said Kip never hit her. Perhaps neither of them considered a belt hitting or raising a hand. Nevertheless, I did. As a child who'd been on the receiving end of a belt many times, I knew all it did was create resentment, a short temper, and inspired subversion.

“I guess he didn't have to. He's just as skilled at emotional manipulation as your father, though a sight less handsome.”

Handsome? “Excuse me?”

“I understood why your mother stayed with him at first, when I was younger.” She chuckled bitterly, shaking her head—obviously at herself. “You know, I was kind of jealous. We all were.”

“Jealous?” I choked. *Jealous of what? Bruises?*

“Darrell Winston has more charm in his pinky finger than most men have in their entire persons.”

“He's also—you know—*super* evil.”

“Exactly. Once that became clear, no one was jealous anymore.” She sniffed, nodding at her own assertion and pressing her lips together, like the discussion was over.

Except, a thought occurred to me, a sudden bee in my britches that chased away any guilt I might've felt, and I leaned away, forcing her hand to drop. “If you knew what kind of man Darrell was, why didn't you do anything to help her?”

Diane sputtered, rearing back, her eyes wide. “Cletus, I—”

“Did you know he hit her?”

Her mouth snapped shut and her eyes moved between mine, searching.

We sat still for several seconds, not quite a minute, until finally she breathed out and her shoulders slumped. “I suspected. Yes. And when I asked her about it, she said he didn't. But anyone could see she was lying.”

“You asked her?” For some reason, my voice cracked.

She nodded, her gaze falling. “We weren't friendly. I suppose she probably

thought I was only asking to get the gossip, but I wasn't."

"Why did you ask? What prompted you to do it?"

Diane folded and then refolded her hands on her lap, her gaze once more on the horizon. "You just don't know what goes on in a person's marriage. Behind those closed doors, minutes turn to hours, hours turn into days, days into weeks, weeks into years, and your life becomes a giant garbage heap with all the trash that's built up over time. But—and this might not make sense to you yet—it's *your* garbage heap. And so you both hate it and love it, because when the garbage is cleared away, it leaves nothing but a huge crater in the ground. A wound that you'll never recover from or fill. Despite the stink and mess and smell, you miss the garbage."

"That's a fascinating analogy for marriage, Diane. But you didn't answer my question."

"Sheriff James asked me to approach her."

I flinched, uncertain I'd heard her correctly. "What?"

Diane squinted at the setting sun. "It happened when your brother Billy was put in the hospital, he was twelve or thirteen, I believe. The sheriff asked me to approach her, and so I did. I'm ashamed to say, it likely wouldn't have occurred to me if he hadn't asked. I was, like most folks, afraid of your daddy by then, and his association with the Wraiths. And Kip told me to steer clear of y'all. He didn't want me getting involved. He told me doing so would be putting us all in danger, and I—" she seemed to swallow with difficulty "—I believed him."

I wasn't surprised about Kip's warnings, but this information about the sheriff was news to me. "What happened?"

"Bethany wouldn't talk to me, or Scotia Simmons. I guess I know why. But when I told Bethany that the sheriff asked us to reach out, she went directly to him while Billy was still recovering."

"And?" I was on the edge of my seat. I'd never heard any of this.

"As I understand it, your momma asked the sheriff to intervene with your father, threaten him in some way, I suspect. So Sheriff James brought Darrell in on a charge of some sort. And then the sheriff, Trevor Payton, and Judge Payton met with your father. After that, I believe your father allowed your mother to legally separate, but not divorce, and he mostly kept away."

"For the most part," I whispered, several puzzle pieces from my family's past clicking together. "But with Billy, it wasn't the first time he . . ." I glanced down at my hands. "But it was one of the worst times. If she'd left him earlier, Billy wouldn't have ended up in the hospital at twelve."

"Don't judge your mother too harshly, Cletus." Her arm came back around my shoulders. "It's not like this country makes it easy for women to leave

abusive relationships. No matter what, she was going to be judged. And it's not just the prejudice of the community, there's also the sense of failure in yourself, the question of your own judgment. *If I was dumb enough to marry this person, can I be trusted to do anything right?* Leaving is hard, admitting failure is also hard."

I didn't look at Diane because, in an extremely twisted way, her words made sense, and thus I simmered in discomfort. Then I also gazed at the horizon like it was the most interesting horizon that ever horizoned.

Eventually, she broke the silence. "And that's what I mean by a garbage heap. A marriage can be a mountain shrine, or it can be a garbage heap. At the end of the day, garbage or shrine, it's still yours. And nothing is quite as difficult as letting go of what's yours."

* * *

Minutes turned to hours, hours to days, days to weeks—almost two, to be exact—and Kip Sylvester made no attempt to approach Jennifer. I spent much of the time ensconced in learning and applying the finer details of being a dairy farmer and would've been enjoying myself if not for the critical dearth of my Jenn.

Her father, the slippery bastard, had all but disappeared from Green Valley. Or rather, I hadn't seen him, and neither had Jenn. But I knew he lurked around town because Deveron Stokes told me so at Genie's.

I'd allowed Roscoe and Billy to talk me into a night of beer and brotherhood that quickly devolved into an evening of shots and self-pity.

"The worst part is, it just never goes away." Smelling of whiskey and misery, Billy stared forward at nothing. "That sense of loss, like part of your soul is missing, and no matter what, you're never getting it back. It's been taken, and the person who has it doesn't even want it."

I grimaced at the raw scrape laced with pain in Billy's tenor, the hollow shine of vulnerability in his eyes. This was why Billy never drank. If he did imbibe, he held himself to one glass of scotch after dinner, and that's it.

Instinct had me looking to Roscoe for help, but to my immense irritation, my baby brother nodded along. "That's exactly what it's like."

"How would you know, dummy?" I scrunched my face at him.

His whole life, Roscoe had one job. One. Job. Cheer up Billy. He didn't know this was his job because I hadn't told him, but he still had just the one job.

"Oh, I know," Roscoe said sloppily, reaching as though to pour himself another shot but stopping when he found the bottle drained. "I know *exactly*

what it's like. I haven't taken a deep breath in years."

My attention moved between the two drunkards who looked like twins rather than youngest and second oldest in a brood of seven, gripping their foreheads, staring at empty glasses like the void within was an allegory for their barren souls.

"This is fun," I said, catching our bartender's eye and signaling for the check. "I can't wait to carry you two idiots upstairs. That's going to be great."

"Wouldn't be the first time." Billy tried to smile, but his lips only managed a sad smirk. "But it's been a while."

"Don't regurgitate or otherwise expectorate on the stairs, Jethro just refinished them. No tattoo this time either." I lifted a warning finger at him, then—for good measure—I pointed at Roscoe. "Don't even think about it."

"Is that how Billy got his tattoo?" Roscoe's sluggish gaze moved between us. "He was drunk?"

"Drunk as a skunk who didn't give a fu—"

"Hey now." I lifted my hand to stop Billy. "That doesn't even rhyme. Put your head down, both of you. Make no eye contact with anyone—especially not with women—I'll be right back after I pay the bill."

"I should get this." Billy sat up, his honorable nature rearing its pretty head, as though remembering where we were and why we were here (i.e. my presumably broken heart).

"Nope." I slid out of the booth and walked backward, not willing to wait for Patty to come by with the bill. "Heads down. No eye contact. One look at either of you and a woman with self-worth issues and more grit than sense will endeavor to make a project out of your broken heart. I mean it."

Not waiting to see if they complied, I stepped up to the bar and intercepted Patty, quickly handing over my credit card. "Here you go."

She surprised me by clasping my hand with hers and squeezing, sending my gaze straight to hers.

"How you doing, Cletus? You hanging in there?"

Caught, I eventually decided nodding was safe. I nodded.

She made a tutting sound with her tongue. "Oh, you sweet, lovely man. I heard about what happened." She leaned closer, up and over the bar, her gaze full of compassion until it became a blur and she kissed me square on the lips.

I flinched back, doubly startled, a shock of disquiet reverberating along my nerves.

Patty's smile was soft as she leaned away, her gentle eyes sweeping over my face. "Time heals all wounds, Cletus. Just you remember that."

"It's been two weeks, Patty."

“You’ll have to start seeing people again eventually, get right back on that horse.”

“Kinda hard when the mare has bolted,” I said on autopilot. I didn’t know what I was saying, the entire situation struck me as entirely bizarre, like one of those *Twilight Zone* episodes where folks die because someone wanted a hundred dollars. I wiped the back of my hand across my mouth, wishing I’d asked for another shot instead of the check.

Her smile grew, and she laughed lightly. “Seriously, Jenn’s loss. I think you’re great. Don’t let anyone tell you any different.”

“So noted. May I pay now?” Patty was nice, a good person, and I knew she meant well, but I did not wish to kiss Patty. I only wished to kiss Jenn, forever and ever, amen.

“Sure thing, love.” She took my card and skipped to the register, leaving me with the sense of being slathered in a sticky film of deceit and disorder. I didn’t usually mind the deceit, likely because my deceit wasn’t typically of the public spectacle sort, but disorder had never been a comfortable state.

“Hey there, buddy.”

I slid my eyes to the side, recognizing Deveron Stokes’s hoarse voice anywhere. He, too, looked at me as though I was to be pitied.

Deveron. Stokes.

Pitied. Me.

Lies and their webs and the strange realities they spun.

“We are not buddies.”

“How you doing, pal?”

“We are not pals.”

“Oh now, don’t be like that, Cletus. I know it’s a hard time for you. Jennifer is a fine woman—and I do mean fine.” He snort-laughed, hitting me with the back of his hand square in the chest like, *you know what I mean*.

“Do not say her name.”

“But, come on man, no need to mope. There’s plenty of fish in the sea.”

“I do not enjoy fishing.”

“What? Fishing is the best part.”

“Too many worms.” I sent him a look that couldn’t be misinterpreted and craned my neck, wishing to discover precisely where in the payment process Patty was with my check.

Deveron quieted for a bit, probably catching the shade I’d been throwing his way, but then cleared his throat and said, “Her daddy seemed happy about it though. Real happy.”

My head whipped around, and I studied him, the man now having my full

attention. “Is that so?”

He grinned meanly, maybe thinking his words were hurtful rather than informative. “That is so. I saw him—”

“Where?”

“At the Front Porch.”

The Front Porch being the only steak house near town, where Deveron worked as a waiter. Tips were easier to hide from the IRS than other types of income, especially when one is doing their darndest to avoid child support.

“Who was he with?” I pressed, but then reminded myself not to sound too eager.

“Not with his daughter, if that’s what’s got you so interested.”

I made a show of looking disappointed and rubbed my neck. “Oh. He was eating alone.”

“Nope. He was with his woman, Elena, on a double date with her sister—Patricia—and Roger.”

“Roger who? I don’t know any Roger.”

“You know Roger. Roger Gangersworth.”

“Oh, him. And Jenn wasn’t there?”

“Nope. But they were talking about her, and how she’d called off the engagement to *you*.”

I nodded, making a fist with my hand on the bar. “I bet they talked about me all night.”

“They did not.” His lip curled. “They talked about lots of stuff.”

“Sure they did. Don’t try to make me feel better. I bet they talked of nothing else but me and Jenn all night.”

“No, I’m telling you, you came up maybe once. Mostly they talked about the state fair baking contest, how stupid Diane Donner was to buy those cows, some sort of new hotel thing they’re working on, and—uh—” His tongue poked out of his mouth and he glanced upward, like he was trying to remember something. Eventually, he smacked the bar. “Oh yeah, and Patricia’s chickens.”

An awareness bell sounded between my ears, but—other than blinking several times—I schooled my expression. Ensuring my voice was both flat and disbelieving, I said, “Chickens? Really?”

“Yep. Chickens. She’s a chicken farmer. Or will be one now, I guess.”

“It’s okay, Deveron. If they talked about me for the entire night, just tell me. I can handle it.”

“I’m telling you, they did not.”

“Sure. Okay. They talked about chickens.”

He huffed, stepping closer. “They did! Look, Patricia said she and Elena

raised chickens when they were little and entered the hens into the fair as teenagers, won prizes and such, but hadn't been raising for a while."

"You got all this from listening to their dinner conversation? Sure thing."

"No. Not all of it. I asked her myself, later, when she was catching a smoke out back. Women like it when you act interested in them and what they say." He gave a superior sniff, like he knew all about women, and fiddled with a square bar napkin, spinning it in a circle on the gleaming wooden surface.

"I thought she was on a double date with Roger?"

"She was. Or maybe she wasn't. But anyway, I got her number and she told me all about her new chickens. She didn't know she was getting them. She's had to keep them inside her screen porch until she could build a coop. We talked for near a half hour. Maybe she didn't like Roger all that much."

Unexpected chickens are unexpected.

"How many chickens we talking about? Two?"

"She made it sound like a lot. At least a dozen, maybe more, and kept going on and on about how pretty they were." He chuckled at that, and then made a face. "She sure loved talking about those chickens."

"But you got her number?"

"I chatted her up, so yeah, I got her number. You know, fishing." He winked his smarmy wink.

"Oh yes. Fishing." My small smile was entirely sincere. "I'm beginning to appreciate the art of fishing more and more."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of a heart.”

— William Butler Yeats

Cletus

Neither Billy nor Roscoe threw up on the way to their rooms, a small miracle for which I sent upward a prayer of gratitude. Next to their beds, I placed a bucket, a glass of water, and several chewable pain relievers. I find it’s easier to chew a tablet than swallow a whole pill after drinking to excess.

I then snuck out to the carriage house and called Jenn, pacing back and forth until she picked up.

“Cletus!”

“Jenn—”

“I missed you,” we both said in unison. We sighed a laugh, also in unison.

Feeling lighter, I sat on the couch, not minding the dim darkness with her voice in my ear. We weren’t technically together—as in, inside the same room—but being with Jenn in any capacity after being apart unlocked and unwound an unwitting tension within me.

Or maybe, like Billy had said, she held a part of my soul. When we spoke or touched, that piece returned home, and the rest of my soul rejoiced at the reunion.

Melodramatic musings aside, it would explain why I found her presence so

addictive, why I yearned to be near her, hear her, smell, touch, taste her. Evidently, this piece of me she carried was essential, and I needed it—her—to feel whole.

“Are you still there?” Her voice sounded a little breathless, or unsure.

“Yes,” I said softly, not minding I could hear my heartbeat, for all the rest of me was now so entirely still. “I’m here.”

“I missed you.”

“You said that already.” I grinned, knowing my voice betrayed it, but I didn’t mind.

We’d been texting every day and talking every night but had agreed seeing each other was too big a risk.

I’d called her after she’d fought with her mother weeks ago, listened to her cry on the phone about how awful it was, and how guilty she felt. She’d been a little better every day since—or, if not better, more resolved—making sure to go out and be places, be seen. Best-case scenario, her father would stumble upon her out in public, they’d talk out in public, and arrange a time to meet not in public.

“I know.” Now she sounded pained. “I just really miss you. Are you sure you can’t sneak over here? You could park down the hill and walk up, no one would see. I just—” she heaved a breathy sigh, and I thought I heard her recline on a bed, or something else soft and aloft, in the background “—really, really, really miss you.”

“Where are you? Right now?” If she didn’t tell me, my imagination would go into overdrive. Hopefully, she was picking her nose or cleaning maggots out of a neglected garbage can.

“I’m in bed.”

I closed my eyes, the steady ache of longing accelerating into the reckless pain of lust.

Temptation, thy name is Jennifer Sylvester.

“Oh,” was all I managed, knowing I’d called her for a reason other than to torture myself, but unable to remember why. Possibly, I’d never speak again, and instead just sit here on the couch, wishing.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“You sound—are you hurt?”

Yes. It hurts.

“Cletus?”

Somewhere, beyond the dark recesses of my mind, a single word burst forth, *chickens.*

“Chickens?”

I blinked my eyes open, breathing in deeply. “Yes! Chickens,” I said on an exhale, the events of the evening returning into focus. “I think I found Mr. Badcock’s purloined chickens.”

“You did? That’s great!”

“And there’s more, but let’s start with the chickens.” Leaning back and getting as comfortable as was possible given the state of my body, I proceeded to describe the conversation I’d had with Deveron Stokes, proud of myself for minimal editorializing of his smarminess.

“You think Patricia—Tricia—Wilkinson has Mr. Badcock’s chickens?”

“Deveron said more than twelve unexpected chickens, fully grown and real pretty. Where else is someone going to get so many good layers all at once?”

“That’s true. All the feedstores round here sell only chicks. Goodness.” I heard sheets rustle and I closed my eyes again, which was a bad idea when combined with the knowledge that Jenn occupied a bed at present and my healthy, heterosexual, testosterone-fueled imagination.

“What should we do? Give Boone the tip?”

My eyes flew open. “The tip?” *What?!*

“About the chickens? Tell Boone to check out her screened porch?”

“Oh. That tip.”

“Yeah. Is there another tip? Did I miss something?”

“No. That’s the only tip. The chickens.” I pulled off my jacket, suddenly roasting. “And, yes, first thing in the morning, you call Boone and tell him to check out Tricia Wilkinson’s porch. If he shows up to walk the place unannounced, she won’t have time to hide them.”

“You don’t want to call Boone?”

“I’d prefer if you called him. I have my reputation to consider.”

“Which reputation would that be?” Her tone held amusement. “I thought you liked Boone.”

“I like Boone all right, but liking a person doesn’t gain that person entrance into my sphere of trust.”

“What does?”

“Family, obviously, with a few notable exceptions.”

“Of course.”

“Shared scruples and valuable abilities.”

“Like your friend Alex in Chicago?”

“Exactly.”

“What about me?” She moved again in the bed, I heard her adjust her pillow, or maybe she stretched.

“What about you?” Still hot, I unbuttoned my flannel shirt.

“Am I in your sphere of trust?”

“Of course you are.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m in love with you.”

Working on the last few buttons, I pressed the phone to my ear with my shoulder. She said nothing as I worked, but then I realized she’d said nothing for several seconds, which made me worry I’d accidentally disconnected us.

“Jenn? You still there?”

“What are you doing? Right now?”

I glanced down at the last button to unbutton. “Sitting on the couch in the carriage house, taking off my flannel shirt, and talking to you.”

She grew quiet again, but I could hear her breathe. I knew she was still there and contemplated asking if she was okay. I thought about asking what she was thinking.

But what I asked instead was, “What are you wearing?”

Her breathing accelerated, and she didn’t answer right away, but when she did, she sounded out of breath. “My pajamas.”

“What do they look like?” We hadn’t spent enough nights together for me to know, and I found myself incredibly invested in her forthcoming description of said pajamas.

“They’re—uh—well.” She cleared her throat. “My friend in France, my pen pal, sent them to me.”

“So they’re from France?”

“Yes. And they’re red.”

“Red?” I sat forward, my breath catching at my mind’s eye image of her in red. I’d never seen her in red, not really. Just the one time when she wore red lace underwear and nothing else.

I’d like to see her in red.

“Red, with lace for the bodice and red silk for the skirt part.” Jenn’s voice lowered to a rushed whisper, like she’d told me a secret, and I guess I knew why. What she wore currently—as described—didn’t sound like pajamas.

“Jenn.”

“Yes?”

“That doesn’t sound like pajamas.”

“What does it sound like?” Her husky question had me closing my eyes, fighting another swell of reckless lust, and driving the air from my lungs, replacing oxygen with fire.

Jennifer was in bed. *Fact.*

Wearing red lace and silk. *Fact.*

I was not with her. *Cruel reality.*

My throat working, I surrendered to a future with another cold shower. “I think maybe I should—”

“What are you wearing?” she asked, urgency in the question.

She couldn’t see me, but I shook my head. “Jenn, I don’t want to do this.”

“What? You don’t want to tell me what you’re wearing?”

I smiled reflexively at her playing dumb even though all I felt was frustrated, ferocious discomfort. “You know what.”

“But why?”

“Because I’ll go crazy. I can’t—” I breathed out, hoping some of the fire would leave my lungs. It did not. The fire spread behind my eyes, down my arms, spine, and legs. I launched myself off the couch. “I have to go.”

“Come over.”

Pressing my forehead to the nearest wall, I shook my head. My imagination did not allow me the luxury of the thinking without the doing, I wasn’t wired that way. *Maybe if these last two weeks hadn’t been part of a larger period of austerity—*

“Come over.”

Lowering the phone to my side with one hand and gripping my forehead with the other, I wondered if it were possible for physical desire to tear a person in two. Lifting the phone again, I resolved to say goodbye.

But before I could, she said, “I’m touching myself.”

I groaned. I hurt. This hurt. I couldn’t breathe.

“My hand is in my—my underwear and my middle finger is drawing a circle around my—”

“Get on your knees on the bed, face the headboard.” I didn’t know where that command had come from. Furthermore, I didn’t remember pressing my palm to the front of my jeans, stroking down, but here I was.

I heard her shift, a change in the ambient noise level—like she’d put me on speaker—and the sound of her breathing filled my head along with the image of her moving to obey.

“I’m on my knees,” she said, her tone eager. “What do you want me to do?”

“Take off your underwear.”

A pause, and then a breathless, “Okay. Done.”

“Spread your legs.” I unzipped my pants. I reached inside. “Wide.”

“O—okay.”

“That’s how you’ll sit on my face.”

She moaned, her breath hitching.

“Palm your breasts, feel their softness, their perfect weight. Imagine I’m there, beneath you, my mouth and tongue tasting you. All the time, I’m looking up, watching you play.”

“Can I—”

“No, not yet.” My hand moved inside my boxers, stroking, seeing her. “Move your hips, I want you to move above me. Watch me lick you.”

“Cletus, please. Can I—”

“No. Suck on your fingers, get them wet. I’m still watching, put on a show.”

She panted, moaning again, the image in my mind real, vivid. Existence became something else, a blur of the darkness in the carriage house, Jennifer alone in her bed saying my name, and also me beneath her, devouring her body while she rocked against my mouth, spread open, tasting like heaven.

“Now, make your fingers into a V and touch yourself.”

A hitching breath, a high-pitched whine, a shuttering sigh.

Straining, sweating, burning, I gripped the hard length between my legs, now agonizingly painful, knowing this exercise was only for her. For me, it would be another moment of frustration, another moment spent foolishly wanting and wishing, a step closer to the crossroads of discontent and misery.

“You wish it were me, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You wish my tongue was inside you, my eyes on your body.”

“Yes!”

“After I make you come, I’ll want you on your hands and knees.”

“Oh God.” Her tone dipped, deepening, her voice shaking.

“And when I push inside, it hurts a little, and you can’t move, but it also feels good, so good. And you’re afraid, embarrassed, that I’m fucking you like an ani—”

I stopped because she came, her cries rising over my filthy speech, and I listened with desperation. I listened to her lose control, the sounds she made, and could almost taste her on my tongue, if not for the bitterness. Gritting my teeth and pushing away from the wall, I zipped my pants over the painful erection, my jaw aching. I wiped my brow.

“Oh, Cletus,” she purred, drowsy, content, a little shy. “You are very good at that.”

Evidence of her pleasure sanded some of frustration’s rough edges, and I leaned against the wall, knowing I wouldn’t be able to sit. “You’re very good at following directions.”

She laughed, and I heard her sigh happily before saying, “Shall I tell you what happens next?”

I needed a minute to combat the rising animosity that was in no way her fault. It just was. Having her talk dirty to me over the phone might—one day—be enjoyable. But not now. Not after two months of having her so close and yet removed. Like so many weeks ago, the desire to punish her for neglecting me frayed at the edges of my control. But I wouldn't. I would never.

"I'm . . . tired. I'm—uh—it's been a long day. I'll call you tomorrow. Sweet dreams." Not giving her a chance to respond, I ended the call. I would push her from my mind.

I made a list of all the cold places I'd never been and would like to visit. But when I couldn't stop imagining her with me at each of those places—in various stages of undress and capitulation—I made a list of all the items I required from the hardware store. But when that list started including items for a sex swing, I made a list of all the biting insects in East Tennessee.

And then I subjected myself to the world's coldest shower.

* * *

Simmering in discontent, I drank my coffee with open scorn, read the newspaper while unabashedly glowering at the headlines, scoffing at the bylines, and berating the reporters under my breath for burying the lede.

Which is why Roscoe should've known better than to shuffle noisily into the kitchen, walk loudly to the sink, and effect a sigh like air leaving a tire.

"Really, Cletus? Really?"

Lifting just my eyes, I stared at Roscoe, wondering why in tarnation he was up so early while I waited for him to realize today was not the day.

He realized nothing and gestured to the unwashed pots piled on one side of the sink. "Why can't you just do your dishes like everyone else?"

Setting the paper down, I debated how best to irritate and antagonize him. "Would you believe me if I told you I'm using those pots to conduct a biology experiment?"

Roscoe scratched his head, his bloodshot eyes a little less irritated. "That's what you're doing?"

"No, course not." I stood from the table and walked toward him, carrying my newly empty coffee cup. "I merely asked if you would believe it."

His irritation spiked anew, and he snapped. "What? Why would you want to know if I'd believe you?"

I shrugged, leaving the dirty mug—unwashed—next to the pile of plates. "Because I'm actually conducting a psychology experiment."

He growled as I turned for the cabinet, selected a new, clean mug, and proceeded to fill it with coffee—the last of the coffee.

“You are so *infuriating!*”

Ignoring him, I seasoned my coffee with molasses and apple cider vinegar, and returned to the table, picking up the newspaper once more.

He huffed, he slammed cabinets, he made a big production of making more coffee, he threw himself into the chair on the far end of the table, he cleared his throat. I bent the newspaper down and peered at him.

“If it isn’t too much trouble, given your delicate constitution and inability to comprehend even the most rudimentary acts of decency and manners, pass the sports section. Please.”

I examined my youngest brother, marveling at the intensity of his pettiness. Truly, it was the only thing he and I had in common.

I fully and freely admitted to dwelling in a state of peevish discontent this morning. Nonetheless, Roscoe’s continued beleaguering badgering regarding my dishes made no sense, and here is why:

A) I made dinner on Wednesday nights for the entire week. If I didn’t, Billy—in particular—would waste away to skin and bones, or consume an unbalanced diet, or—God forbid—eat inferior takeout, predisposed as he was to ignoring his own needs (but I digress).

B) On Wednesday nights, after making all the dinners, I loaded up the dishwasher, but many of the pots and pans didn’t fit, or needed to soak. Sometimes, I went ahead and did the pots and pans right away, except—and most importantly—I often used Grandmother Oliver’s cast iron skillet. Anybody worth their salt knows cleaning a well-seasoned cast iron skillet is a production that cannot and should not be rushed. No one else in the household re-seasoned the skillet to my exacting standards.

That is to say, usually I didn’t finish cleaning up until Saturday. I worked early and a double shift on Thursdays, and early again on Fridays. Everyone knew I had the jam session Friday night.

C) Lastly, and the most confounding of my points, Roscoe ate the dinners I cooked.

Let me repeat that, Roscoe ate the dinners.

He ate them on Thursday when he returned home from school, and Friday, and Saturday, and sometimes Sunday nights. Furthermore, I often made him portions to take back to school, which he happily did.

In conclusion, Roscoe’s frustration with the dirty pots and pans made no sense.

“Here is the sports section.” I tossed it to him.

“Thank you.” He picked it up and scanned the first page. “I know that must’ve been a trial.”

I fought the sudden and bizarre urge to laugh, instead turning the page of the front section and preparing another volley when Billy’s voice said, “What happened last night?”

Lifting my eyes, I scanned my debonair brother, presently dressed and ready for work, looking no worse for whiskey except the glassy quality to his eyeballs.

I returned my attention to the paper. “You got drunk to make me feel better.”

“Do you feel better?” Billy moved around the kitchen, completing his typical morning routine.

“I feel better than you.”

He chuckled self-deprecatingly, sitting next to me at the table. “I can’t imagine anyone feeling worse than me right now.”

“I feel pretty terrible,” Roscoe muttered, pouting at the sports section.

Billy leaned back, as though to get a better look at our brother. “Why do you feel terrible?”

“He also got drunk to make me feel better, and—you know—him getting drunk did make me feel better. Thanks, Roscoe.”

Roscoe didn’t deign to look at me, just took a tense sip of his coffee, the vein at his forehead in sharp relief.

Smirking at his discomfort, I lowered my attention once more to the paper.

But then Billy said, “Hey. Cletus,” his voice barely above a whisper.

“That is my name.”

I sensed him lean closer. “You need to talk about this thing with Jenn, eventually, even if it’s not with me.”

My eyes cut to his. Yes, they were still glassy, but they were also wide with concern as he continued. “But I want to make sure you know you can talk to me. Anytime.”

“I know.” I picked up my coffee, abandoned the paper to the kitchen table, and exited the kitchen. The last thing I felt like doing right now was continuing the ruse with my family, especially since I wasn’t sure anymore why I’d agreed to this shit in the first place.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Billy said, trailing after me to the living room.

“Okay.”

“Have you seen her?”

“No.” I did a lap around the couch and then decided to hide in the library. It had a door.

“Have you tried to?”

“What?”

“Have you tried to see her?”

“No.”

Billy inserted himself between me and the hallway, blocking the path forward. “Why not?”

Because if I see her, I’ll call the whole thing off. “I’m giving her time to do what she needs to do.”

“You need to apologize.”

A short, bitter laugh burst forth even though I grit my teeth. I needed to apologize, I did. I needed to apologize for wanting the woman so fiercely for going on several months at this point, that the love I felt for her had begun blackening at the edges, singed with the darkness of my selfish thoughts.

My laugh made Billy frown. “Cletus, you need to apologize,” he said more firmly.

Emptying my features of telling expression, I swallowed and nodded once. “I know.”

Blue eyes moved between mine, searching, piercing; his dark brown eyebrows drew together. “Do you want me to talk to her?”

I looked beyond him to the hallway he blocked. “If you wish to speak with Jennifer Sylvester, you should.”

He made a short noise of frustration. “How about check on her? You want me to check in?”

“She’s okay.” *Last night, she was better than okay.*

“I doubt she’s okay.” Billy’s voice, heavy with restrained sympathy, deepened to a compassionate baritone. “I imagine she’s the opposite of okay. You know Jenn loves you.”

I took a step back, setting my coffee cup on the entryway console table. “We’ll see.”

“Cletus.” Billy waited until I looked at him again before continuing. “Listen, it’s not like me and—and her. It’s not like us. You two don’t have anything keeping you apart.”

My temper fractured. and I spoke my thoughts on the subject without regard to their possible effect. “You two don’t have anything keeping you apart. But here you are, and there she is. Apart.”

“You know what I mean, it’s different.”

“You’re correct there. It is definitely different.” I checked my watch, immediately irrationally angry that I’d lost all my morning relaxation time to Roscoe’s sense of entitlement and Billy’s questions about my fake fight with Jenn.

When would this untenable limbo end? Did Jenn enjoy this? Being

separated? Torturing us both? I told her I loved her big heart, and I absolutely did, but when would she finally put herself and her needs above others? *When?!*

“And it’s been two weeks,” he went on, audibly determined, bringing me back to this inane conversation. “I can see you’re suffering. Maybe it’s time for you to go over there, see about setting things right. The longer you wait to apologize, the worst it’ll be for both of you.”

“I thought you said you wanted to check on her.”

“I do.”

“Then check.”

“Cletus—”

“Go. Check.” I turned for the front door. “And leave my coffee mug right there, I’ll clean it up tomorrow.”

“You should come with me to see her.” Billy continued to stalk me, onto the porch, down the steps, lifting his voice.

“I absolutely should not,” I called over my shoulder, pulling the Bronco’s keys from my pocket. I’d planned to put on coveralls before leaving the house, but I had an extra pair at the shop I could use instead.

“I wish you would come with me.” My brother stood just behind me, and I spotted his reflection in the Ford’s window, arms crossed, glaring daggers of disappointment at my brain stem.

I tossed his disappointment right back. “And I wish you’d drive your backside to Nashville wearing one of these custom suits you favor”—I gestured to his bespoke clothing—“and pick up Scarlet at a bar, or break into her apartment and let her find you naked in the shower. Hey—do that. She’d love it.” I yanked open the door.

“Stop deflecting.”

“Stop avoiding.” Sliding into the driver’s seat, I fit the keys in the ignition and turned.

“Being respectful of another person’s boundaries is not avoiding.”

“Well, there you go. I’m being respectful of Jenn’s boundaries.”

“You’re being a stubborn asshole.”

“You would know.” Pulling the handle, I slammed the door shut, necessitating that Billy glare at me through the glass. But then, as I switched the gear from park to drive, a thought occurred to me, and I rolled down my window.

“You change your mind?” He asked before I could speak.

“No.” I shook my head. “Just wanted to remind you, the clock is ticking. You got four years left.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Hate is by far the greatest pleasure; men love in haste, but detest in leisure.”

— Lord Byron, Selected Poems

Jenn

I left a voicemail at the police dispatch number for Boone first thing Friday morning about Tricia Wilkinson’s windfall of chickens, as Cletus and I had agreed. I also left him a voicemail on his personal cell phone, just to cover all my bases. Then, having not much else to do but stew, I put on a pair of overalls, boots, a flannel, and went out to the backyard.

Just as I finished pulling on work gloves and picked up a shovel, a voice asked, “What are you doing?”

Turning, I discovered Billy Winston standing at the back corner of the house.

“Is Cletus with you?” I dropped the shovel and crossed to where he stood, hope swelling, searching the side yard behind him.

“He’s not with me,” he said quietly, his gaze apologetic.

“Oh.” My steps halted, my heart slowing to a sluggish, disappointed thud.

“What are you doing?” he asked again, lifting his well-groomed beard toward the back. “What’s all that dirt for?”

“Prepping for spring.” I brought my hands to my hips, glancing over my shoulder. “I want to plant a garden. I’m mixing perlite, there”—I pointed at the pile of volcanic glass pieces—“with compost from the zoo, there.” Now I

pointed to the much larger mixture of rich, deep brown dirt and fertilizer. “I’ve been filling feed sacks all week, getting everything ready. But I need a saw to cut wood for the raised boxes.”

“The zoo?” He meandered closer, picking his path carefully. Billy wore a long black wool coat, a distinguished—and by all appearances—cashmere scarf, and shoes that looked like they’d never stepped on anything but plush carpet.

“Yep. What do you think they do with all the excess herbivore poop? You don’t want to throw that stuff out, it’s garden gold. A full-grown elephant eats between one hundred to one hundred twenty-five pounds each day and defecates between eight and ten times every day.”

“That’s a lot of, uh, defecating.”

Something about his inflection made me smile, and I said, just to tease, “You mean shit. That’s a lot of shit.”

He laughed, but also tried to mock shock. “Jennifer Sylvester! Such language.”

That made me laugh, and there we were, laughing. It felt good to laugh. I’d been going out into town every day, hoping to run into my father and schedule a meeting, pretend I was open to a relationship. Thus far, I hadn’t seen him, and I hadn’t done much talking with anyone since the blowup with my mother at the bakery two weeks ago. I hadn’t laughed for days before that.

I missed Cletus. Missing him was akin to balancing a heavy stack of books on the top of my head, one of the exercises my momma used to make me do to improve my posture. Last night, after he’d abruptly ended the call, the stack of books had migrated to my chest, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that what we were doing—pretending to be broken up—was not only a waste of time, it was ruining us.

Every day felt longer than the one before. It didn’t matter that this was the first time in years I had more than one day off in a row, nothing about this leisure felt restful.

Billy openly scrutinized me while our laughter dissolved into smiles, his blue eyes wary. “You seem to be doing okay.”

“Do I?” I asked, scrutinizing him in return. “I don’t feel okay.”

His expression sobered and he immediately opened his arms. I stepped into the offered embrace and he squeezed, the warm strength of him made me want to cry. Instead, I inhaled deeply. *He doesn’t smell like Cletus.*

“My idiot brother isn’t doing okay either,” Billy’s voice rumbled from where my ear pressed against his solid chest.

“What do you mean?”

“Cletus is miserable.”

Ugh. His words were a sucker punch.

“Don’t feel bad for him, he brought this on himself.” He sounded so grumpy. “It’s good he’s miserable.”

“Billy, no. I don’t want him to be miserable.”

“Then you two should talk to each other, sort this out.” Billy’s chin came to rest on the top of my head. “And he needs to apologize. Jealousy makes people do crazy things, but that’s no excuse. I’ve told him every chance I get.”

I chuckled, a sound devoid of humor. “Please don’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“He doesn’t need to apologize.” *He’s a saint, and he’s doing all this for me, AND I MISS HIM!*

“He *does* need to apologize. I love my brother, but Cletus can be sneaky and stubborn.”

“I promise you, that’s not at all what’s going on here.”

“There are always two people in a relationship contributing to its success, or its failure, Jenn. He needs to take responsibility for his part.”

“No, I mean—” I turned away, frustrated.

Was this what Cletus dealt with every day? His family harassing him about mistreating me? I’d lied to my mother, but that’s it. I’d been alone with my thoughts and loneliness, it hadn’t been necessary to *lie* to my loved ones daily.

But Cletus, he was surrounded by people who cared about him, and he’d been lying all this time because I asked him to.

I rubbed my chest, feeling heartsick and just plain sick.

“Jenn—”

“Just let him be, okay? He hasn’t done anything wrong. I’m the one . . .” *Crap.* I kicked a rock. It jumped, bouncing against the side of the house and then down the path to the frozen grass. Kicking it did not help me feel better.

Billy’s concern seemed to dwindle, eclipsed by apprehension. “Are you—are you saying that Cletus was right? About you and Jackson?”

“No! Of course not.”

His suspicion fled, replaced with renewed worry. “Then he needs to—”

“It’s a lie! It’s all a lie!” I threw my hands up, stalking back to Billy. “We didn’t break up. We’re still together. Cletus did nothing wrong. I asked him to do it. It was all staged.”

Billy reared back, standing straighter and suddenly looking very, very tall. “Pardon me?”

“It was a mistake, and it’s all my fault, all my dumb idea,” I muttered, peeling off my work gloves, shaking my head at myself and my nonsense. “I wanted to go undercover, to get my father to trust me, so I could find out who

hurt my momma and killed Mr. Badcock's chickens. But now it's been two weeks and my father is nowhere, and I'm going crazy missing Cletus. That's it, I'm calling it off, and I'm sorry we lied to y'all, but don't blame your brother."

The big man stared in my direction, but I could see his attention had turned inward, his mind working to untangle my words. After a protracted moment, he pulled his phone from his pocket, unlocked it, navigated through a few screens, and lifted it to his ear.

A thoughtful frown in place, his attention flicked over me as he spoke into the cell. "Hey, Cheryl. It's me. I'm not coming in today . . . that's right."

My cheeks burned as I listened to Billy continue his conversation with his secretary, the heat of embarrassment shining brightly from my pores and itchy discomfort at the back of my neck.

"Tell Dolly first. Shift all my meetings and calls to next week. Text me with any emergencies . . . Okay. Sounds good. Bye." Billy wrapped up, tucking his cell back in his pocket.

I braced myself for the unavoidable and mortifying conversation with Billy Winston. But you know what? I also felt relief. It was over. I could call Cletus today and tell him it was over, and we would be together tonight, hopefully laughing about how silly I'd been—

"Jennifer?" A voice called from somewhere at the front of the house, and the sound of it cut a chill through the fire of my chagrin. "I see your car in the drive. Open the door."

"I'm in—in the backyard," I yelled, not wanting him to get fed up and leave. *It's finally happening.*

Billy twisted at the waist to glance behind him, stiffening when he saw who it was. Whereas I didn't need to look to know the voice belonged to my father.

Billy's gaze cut back to mine, his eyes wide but not worried, kinda like he was asking, *What do you need me to do?*

Shoot. I needed a minute to think, but I didn't have a minute.

"Jennifer? Who's that with you?"

"I'm back here, with—uh—Billy Winston," I called, stuffing my work gloves into my back pocket. My eyes were definitely wide with worry as I whispered, "Follow my lead, I guess."

He gave me a single nod, seeming to understand without me needing to say anything else, tranquility flawlessly slipping into place as he moved to stand next to me. I marveled at his composure, but then I supposed having all those siblings, Billy often had to play a role and play along at the drop of a hat.

Shaking my hands in front of me, I struggled to pull myself together and remember all the questions needing answers. At the last second, just before my

father crested the corner of the house, Billy grabbed one of my hands and tucked it into the crook of his elbow, covering it with a steady palm as though to lend me some of his serenity.

“Daddy,” I said when my father appeared, surprised at how calm I sounded. I thought about saying something else like, *It’s good to see you*, or, *What are you doing here?* but swallowed the urge. He probably wouldn’t believe the former, and the latter would make me sound nervous.

“Jennifer.” He gave me a nod, his eyes on Billy as he reached out his hand. “Billy Winston, good to see you.”

Smoothly, Billy transferred my fingers on his elbow into his hand, accepting my father’s shake. “Mr. Sylvester, it’s been a while. How are things?”

“Mighty busy, actually.” He beamed at Billy, looking proud of himself, but also more than a little enamored with the second oldest Winston brother’s presence. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Oh, well.” Billy glanced at me, a small smile playing at his lips. “I like to check on Jennifer.”

“Do you?” The older man’s attention came to me, appraising. “That’s kind of you. I’m sure she’s grateful, aren’t you Jennifer? Tell him how grateful you are.”

Billy’s hand holding mine tensed at my father’s words, and his eyes seemed to narrow a smidge, but the benign smile on his features didn’t budge.

“I’m very grateful,” I said softly, slipping so easily back to that other version of myself, the quiet avoider, the dutiful puppet, the shadow.

My father grinned, beaming approvingly, and my nerves settled and firmed, changing from liquid anxiety to solid steel. And quite suddenly, I was very, very angry.

“That’s my good girl.” He looked between us, seeming to enjoy the view of us standing together, but then abruptly frowned. “Jennifer. What are you wearing? Are those overalls?”

I glanced down while he continued, sounding exasperated. “Come on, baby girl. A man doesn’t drive over special to see a woman like that.” Then to Billy, he sighed, rolling his eyes. “She knows better than to look a mess. Next time, my daughter will be properly attired for your visit. You can count on that.”

A fair amount of Billy’s composure had begun to crumble, his lips pulled back resembling a baring of teeth rather than a smile, and so I tugged on his arm, forcing his eyes to me.

“Thanks again for coming by, Billy. It means so much to me.” I hated the voice I used, it wasn’t me, but it was who my father would trust.

“Anytime. Anything you need.” His words were halting, as though he chose them carefully.

“And yes, I’d love to go out tonight. Shall we say four thirty?”

“Perfect.” He nodded, playing along, but I sensed his reluctance to leave.

“I’ll see you then.” Lifting to my tiptoes, I whispered, “Call me in one hour if you don’t hear from me, and tell Cletus everything,” hiding the action by giving him a kiss on the cheek.

With a terse smile and a terser departing wave for my father, Billy excused himself.

My father watched him go, waited until Billy was out of sight and the sound of his footfalls had ceased, and then stepped close to me, his tone hushed yet bursting, “Well done. I couldn’t have been more surprised when I saw him standing there. Good timing on the split with his brother—is that why? How long have you two been seeing each other?”

I opened my mouth to respond but didn’t get the chance.

“No matter. You did what you had to do, and in the end, it worked out. No one will judge you for upgrading, that’s for certain.” He’d grabbed my upper arm and pulled me toward the back door of the house. “I would’ve come to see you sooner, checked in last week once I heard what happened with your momma at the bakery.” He made a sound that was part laugh, part grunt. “Elena told me to wait, she and that sister of hers wanted to make sure you’d really quit, but I knew better. Between you and me, it’s jealousy. But you’re my daughter, and I’m basically the majority holder in the business, more or less. I should get to decide. And who could blame you? I’m surprised you put up with that woman as long as you did. It’s a testament to your angelic temperament, such a good girl, my daughter. You came to your senses, didn’t you?”

We were now inside, and he’d released me in the kitchen, walking around and inspecting the space.

Without looking at me, he flicked his wrist, a vague movement in my direction. “Make me coffee. Eggs too. I haven’t eaten yet. Three, but just the whites. Well, you know what I like.”

Squelching the instinct to tell him to make his own damn eggs, I painted a pretty smile on my face and did as ordered while everything Cletus had said about revenge—a notion I’d rejected at the time—came vividly into the forefront of my mind.

“Is this about getting revenge? If it were, I promise I would understand.”

When Cletus had asked, I’d said it wasn’t about revenge, and I’d meant it. But now? Right now? This moment? The desire to utterly humiliate my father burned brightly within me, incinerating any and all altruistic intentions. How had I put up with it, with his nastiness, for so long?

“Tell him how grateful you are.”

“Next time, my daughter will be properly attired for your visit.”

“No one will judge you for upgrading.”

“Such a good girl.”

As incredibly demeaning as it was to hear myself discussed in such a way—a way I’d been indoctrinated to all my life and had once accepted as my lot—it was also liberating to feel outrage rather than surrender and dejection.

“You’ll change while I eat.” I heard the scrape of a stool. “There are some people I want you to meet, and we have to be there at noon, though you know them already. Or you know *of* them, and they certainly know of you.” He chuckled, clearly considering what he’d just said to be supremely funny. “And there will be jealousy, but it is what it is. I can’t let an opportunity like this one pass me by. You still control your social media accounts? Those are yours, right?”

“Yes, Daddy.” I prepped the eggs and poured them into a waiting nonstick pan, no butter, no spray.

“Good. I’ll need the passwords—I’m assuming you changed them? When you quit the bakery?”

“No, Daddy.” I walked to the cabinet and pulled out a mug, filling it to the top with coffee while wishing iocane powder were real.

He made a sound of aggravation, sneering at me as I placed his coffee down in front of him, knowing he liked a spoon even though he didn’t use cream or sugar. “Jennifer, I don’t know why your lack of brains continues to surprise me. Baby girl, you need to change those passwords A-S-A-P. Those accounts belong to me now, and I can’t have that woman thinking she still has any control, got it?”

“What are you going to use the social media accounts for?” I tilted my head to the side, inspecting the thickness of his neck rather than reaching across the countertop and strangling him.

Scanning my face, his screwed up in disgust. “Don’t you have any makeup on? You’re a beautiful girl when you wear makeup.”

“Just a little.” I touched my face. “But I was fixing to work in the yard.”

“None of that anymore. You look awful.”

Turning back to the stove, I folded his plain, egg white omelet. “I can change the passwords, that’s no problem. But why do you need the—”

“Advertising. Everything is online now. It’s the digital age. But you don’t need to worry your pretty head about that. I’ll do everything, and I got a good photographer who’ll take your photos.” He chuckled again, once more thinking whatever he’d just said—or was about to say—was hilarious. “Oh man, I can’t wait to see your momma’s face when she realizes you’re working for me now.”

“What will I be doing?” I served the omelet to him on a warmed plate. He didn’t like his eggs to touch a cold plate. I’d been reprimanded for cold plates on many occasions.

“What you do best: baking and looking pretty. Why? You know how to do anything else?” He snorted and smiled at his own words.

Red filled my peripheral vision as I watched him pick up his fork, cut into the omelet, and grin as it sliced neatly. “My, my. I’ve missed this. You’re going to make Billy Winston a very happy man.”

I wasn’t listening to him. I was busy remembering what Cletus had said two weeks ago.

“And if it’s about revenge, there are so many things we can do to make him suffer. I have ideas, lists of ideas, libraries full of ideas. No need to go undercover in order to ruin his life.”

The words helped me focus and keep hold of my calm, the promise of suffering-inducing, life-ruining ideas, and I—

Wait. Wait a minute.

When had I become so vicious and bloodthirsty? Was this really me? Was this Cletus’s influence? Was this who I wanted to be?

“No one makes an egg white omelet like my baby girl.” My father moaned his approval of the food, but his smile fell again as soon as he looked at me. He lifted the tines of his fork to inches from my face. “Go change and look proper. I can’t have you embarrassing me, now can I?”

I turned, the smile on my face evaporating but the steel in my veins holding strong, and I felt certain of two things:

Yes, this change in me, the ability to contemplate revenge as a course of action, was most certainly Cletus’s influence.

And yes, this vicious, bloodthirsty version of myself was absolutely who I wanted to be.

* * *

My cell rang while I applied the last of my mascara. The unexpected buzz had me jumping half a foot before I realized what made the noise. But then I remembered I’d told Billy to call if he didn’t hear from me within the hour.

I lunged for it, swiping to answer, and pressing it against my ear with shaking fingers. “Billy?”

“It’s Cletus, I’m using Billy’s phone, and he’s right here. He told me what transpired this morning. What is happening now?”

Pressing my fingers to my forehead, I fought the fluttering and flustering and general ruckus of emotions vying for my brain's attention, including a fair measure of heavy, hot longing. The last time I'd talked to Cletus, he'd made me orgasm with just his sexy voice and his scandalous suggestions. Therefore, speaking with him now aroused a spectrum of complicated and contradictory . . . feelings.

"Jenn? Are you there?"

"I'm here," I whisper-squeaked, and then blurted, "I miss you."

"I miss you too." His voice held both sweetness and grim resolve. "Tell me what's happening."

I shuffled backward until I fully entered the bathroom, closing the door behind me and telling myself to focus. "He, my father, wants me to go with him this afternoon, to meet some people."

"Where?"

"He hasn't told me. He said he knows you and I split up, he assumes I'm with Billy now, and he heard about the fallout with my momma." I proceeded to fill him in on the rest of our conversation as best I could remember, leaving out the insulting details and sticking to the facts.

"Wait, do you know what he meant when he said there would be jealousy? Who is jealous?"

"I'm thinking he's talking about Tricia, maybe? It seems like he's convinced himself I'll be baking for the farm stay business, which will give him access to my social media accounts to publicize the whole thing. Maybe Tricia thinks she'll be baking . . . or something? I don't know. But I assume I'll find out more when we go to wherever we're going this afternoon."

"I don't like this," he said darkly, his frustration obvious. "We don't have any idea where he's taking you, it could be hours away."

"Can you track me? Where I'm going?"

"I can and we are. When Billy imparted the details of this morning's events, I asked my friend in Chicago to—uh—trace your phone. Hope you don't mind."

"Of course not, I don't mind at all." I tried to keep one ear pointed toward the door, just in case my father walked into my bedroom, impatient to get going.

"But there's no time to wire you. I asked him to use the trace to leave a live line open and record everything that's said through your phone."

"Wait. Your friend in Chicago—Alex—can tap into my phone and use it as a recording device? Without me knowing?"

"I'm telling you right now. Technically, you do know."

"But he can do this to anyone? Without them knowing?"

"I can't say that he doesn't or does have the ability to not do something such

as, but not including, however similar to, should the need arise, and only under duress or not.”

“Cletus.” I rolled my eyes heavenward. “That sentence made no sense.”

“Point is, we’ll be listening the whole time. Keep your phone out if you can, on the counter or a table, say you’re checking the time because you don’t want to miss your date with Billy tonight.”

I scrunched my face. “Billy told you about that?”

“He did, good quick thinking. Gives you a reason to be back in town. And if you need us to come get you, or you feel unsafe *at all*, you should have a code word, or a phrase.”

“Where will you be?” I thought I heard movement in my bedroom, so I crept toward the bathroom door and pressed my ear to it.

“Wherever he takes you, we’ll be less than a mile away, listening in.”

“We?”

“Billy took the day off work. I did too.”

“Oh.”

“And Beau.”

“What—”

“And Shelly.”

“Who’s at the auto shop?” I whispered, turning my back to the door again.

“We closed it for the day.”

“Cletus—”

“All hands on deck. We have the two Buicks as decoy getaway cars, Shelly in one and Beau in the other.”

“I’m not foreseeing a need for a getaway car. It’s not like we’re dealing with the Wraiths, just my father and a bunch of bakers.”

“‘Bakers’ is one vowel away from being ‘bikers,’ and at least one of these folks you’re meeting today murders chickens, bees, and attempts murder on ladies.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“Discover what you can, then get out of there.”

“I will. And Cletus?”

“Yeah.”

I twisted my fingers in the skirt of my dress. “After this, after this meeting, I’m not undercover anymore. This was foolish and I’m done, I’m so done. I miss you. I’ve been thinking about last night when we—”

He coughed loudly, sounding like an old man with advanced lung disease. I heard someone—not Cletus, maybe Billy—clear their throat and ask, “You okay there, Cletus?”

I closed my eyes, pressing my forehead to the cool tile on the wall. “I’m on speaker, aren’t I?”

“*Cor-rect*. Let me just—excuse me, will y’all?”

Something clicked, the faint buzz of background noise I hadn’t noticed until now ended.

Cletus, his voice sounding clearer, said, “You still there?”

“Yes.”

“I took you off speaker.”

“Thank you.”

“They needed to hear the plan and putting you on speaker was most efficient.”

“I understand. I just wanted to say, the ruse is done this afternoon, once the meeting is over. I’m finished fixing other folks’ problems. I’m letting the authorities handle things from now on.”

He said nothing.

I waited.

When his silence persisted, I said, “Cletus?”

“I’m here.”

“Did you hear me?”

“I did.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“Jenn. Loveliest, cleverest, gentlest, excellentest Jenn. I know you, I love you—deeply, ceaselessly, greedily—so of course your statement is something I want to hear. However, at the end of the day, it’s you who must confront the insomnia of regret, whatever form or shape that regret takes, whatever the cause.”

“I miss you, and I can’t sleep because I miss you so much.”

“And I miss you— deeply, ceaselessly, greedily—but as Grandmother Oliver used to say, ‘Make choices that allow you to sleep at night.’”

I pressed my forehead to the tile again and sighed. “That’s really good advice.”

“That’s the only kind of advice she gave, good advice. My dearest, I want you with me always, of course.” I heard Cletus inhale, and his voice lowered, softened to its most earnest as he added, “But I also need you to be well rested.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“When analytic thought, the knife, is applied to experience, something is always killed in the process.”

— Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values*

*Jenn *

We decided on, “Goodness, where has the time gone?” as my emergency come-get-me phrase, and then my father knocked on the outer bedroom door, irritated I’d taken so long.

Ten minutes later, I sat in the front seat of my father’s car. Thirty silent minutes after that, I walked behind him into an abandoned storefront on Main Street next to Udderly Ice Cream, paper covering the inside of the windows to block passersby from peering inside. I heard voices as soon as we were inside but couldn’t make out what they were saying or who their owners were.

He ushered me toward the back of the empty shop, and I allowed myself to be steered until we reached a small conference room filled to the brim with bakers.

“I’m here, and I look who I have with me.” My father gestured to my body with an exaggerated movement, like I was one of those game show cars up for grabs and he was one of those game show models, waving his arms around.

I walked to the table and took the second to last empty seat while several sets

of eyes moved over me, most of them felt various shades of unfriendly, which didn't unsettle me one bit. Walking in here reminded me of entering the judging barn at the state fair, an apt name for the building where the judges sampled confections prior to announcing the ribbon winners, but also where fellow contestants judged each other.

Only one gaze did not feel unfriendly, Elena Wilkinson's. The woman, sitting in a folding chair at the edge of the room rather than at the table, sent me a small, shy smile, but didn't quite meet my eyes. I'd known her for many years as my father's secretary, and though she was soft-spoken, she'd always been lovely to me when we did talk.

Conversely, her sister's gaze was the most hostile, and she made no attempt to disguise the intensity of her dislike. She sat at the head of the conference table, and if looks could kill, I'd be dead three times already.

Pulling my phone out of my bag, I made a show of checking the time before placing it on the table surface, facedown—Cletus said face up or down didn't matter.

Meanwhile, my father was still talking. "I believe you all know my famous daughter, Jennifer Sylvester. But I don't know if she knows each of you."

It was on the tip of my tongue to contradict him because I did recognize everyone present. They were the same folks gathered at Daisy's two weeks ago, the only addition being Elena. Tricia Wilkinson, Roger Gangersworth, Posey Lamont, Deb Brightwell, Josephina Ortiz, and Hamell Jefferson.

"She knows us," Roger Gangersworth cut in, currently leaning against the back wall rather than sitting at the table with most everyone else. His gaze seemed more exasperated than unfriendly as it moved to me. "It's nice to see you," he said, the words unconvincing, but at least he made an effort at manners.

"It's nice to see you too," I said automatically.

The older man gave me a brief, emotionless smile, and then pointed his attention at my father. "Can we get on with it? Many of us have day jobs we need to get back to and only have an hour for lunch."

"Fine, Roger. Here's how things stand. As you all know, Jennifer has left the Donner Lodge as of two weeks ago and is a free agent. She and I have negotiated a deal, just this morning, where I'll be taking over her social media accounts—with all those millions of potential customers—and she'll be a face of Farm Bakes. The Banana Cake Queen will rebrand all her social media presence to Farm Bakes, and—"

"No." Tricia Wilkinson leaned forward in her seat, her hands on the table balling into fists.

My father sighed dramatically, rolled his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his

nose. “Tricia—”

“No. We don’t need her.”

“Now, Tricia. We’ve talked about this. Over a million followers on Instagram alone, last I checked. That’s a lot of folks. Building that kind of audience from scratch—if we ever even managed to do so—would take years. When Jennifer announces Farm Bakes, reservations will come pouring in immediately. Not only does that mean instant proof of success for Farm Bakes, that means all y’all will be able to quit those day jobs earlier rather than later.”

“I agree with Kip.” Josephina raised her hand. “I’m tired of doing the books for my sister’s law firm. I’ve always wanted to be a baker, that’s my passion, and Jennifer has access to all those people. We should take her up on the kind offer.”

“I also agree.” Roger lifted two fingers in the air. “I’ll still keep my day job, for a time, until we see what’s what, but people all over the world love the Banana Cake Queen persona. That alone is a brand that’ll give everything we do credibility.”

Tricia closed her eyes, shaking her head slowly. “Not you too, Roger. Not you, of all people.”

“You and Deb and me did what we did, but now it’s time to move forward and let the past go.” He sent me a quick glance, one that seemed to be tinted with guilt. “If we want Farm Bakes to succeed and get the farm stays booked, dangling the promise of her involvement is a winning idea. Folks would—will—pay good money to take a cooking class with the Banana Cake Queen.”

“Fine.” Tricia’s eyes flew open, her lips curved in an unhappy downward arc. “Then we’ll take over her social media accounts for the audience, but nothing else changes. I’m still the head baker. Farm Bakes and Tennessee Treats are mine, not hers.”

“Tricia, come on. That’s not going to work.” My father strolled over to where Elena sat at the edge of the room, his tone one I recognized as one he used to employ on my mother when he wanted his way. “Besides, it doesn’t matter who has the title of head baker.”

“Shut up, Kip,” Tricia snapped, pointing at him. “The only reason you’re here at all is because of me. I’m the one with all the connections. I’m the one with the business plan. I’m the one—”

“But I have the capital, don’t I? And I have the largest stake, and therefore the largest vote.” My father placed his hand on the back of Elena’s chair.

“But you don’t have fifty-one percent of the vote, Kip. Without me, you need at least three others to side with you.” Tricia seemed to take pleasure in reminding him of this fact, and it was the closest she’d come to smiling since I’d

entered the room.

“I’m with Tricia.” Deb Brightwell hit the table with the flat of her palm. “This is Tricia’s brainchild, and she should get to decide who is involved.”

“I’m sorry, but I disagree. We’re all invested, we all get a say. At first, Jennifer should be listed as the head baker. It only makes sense,” Posey Lamont said softly, using a gentle voice I’d never heard from the woman. “Then, once we have her audience interested in the product rather than the person, you take over as the public face, Tricia. You’ll still be calling all the shots in the background the whole time. We just use her face. How does that sound?”

“This is such bullshit.” Tricia shook her head faster. “This is my idea. This was all my idea!”

“And it’s a brilliant idea, but Kip is right.” This came from Hamell. “Using that one jumps us ahead five years, at least. And look at her”—he motioned to me without looking at me—“she’s a beautiful, *young* woman. That’s a huge part of her success that can’t be overstated. Sex sells. Now look at us”—he gestured to the rest of the bakers, including himself and Tricia—“we’re a bunch of middle-aged, average-looking folks. No one wants to have sex with us.”

“Hamell, you are disgusting.” Deb Brightwell lifted her nose and sniffed, like Hamell’s words stank.

“Whatever, Deb. You know it’s true.” He sniffed right back. “The point is, why would anyone want to follow us on social media? She’s a movie star, and we’re the chorus. She has the looks, we have the talent. Let’s use her to get what we want—which is establishing Farm Bakes, then spinning off Tennessee Treats as a global brand, sold in grocery stores. There’s nothing wrong with this change to the plan.”

“That’s exactly why I think this change to the plan is a bad one, the wrong one.” Tricia stood, like she couldn’t stand to listen to any of them any longer. “I don’t want her”—she pointed at me—“and I don’t want her audience. Her audience isn’t our audience. People who want sex appeal over substance. She shouldn’t get to win—Every. Single. Time—just because of what she looks like, that’s not what we are about.”

“You know as well as I do, that girl’s cakes are fantastic.” Hamell pointed at me too, again without sparing me a glance. “She doesn’t win just because she’s sexy.”

I looked at my father, expecting him to . . . say something? But then again, he’d always told me that a woman was responsible for the lust she inspired in others. He likely considered Hamell’s comments my fault.

“No. No!” Tricia lifted her hands to her ears, covering them. “No. I started Farm Bakes and Tennessee Treats in opposition to everything that little tart

stands for—which includes nepotism and sleeping your way to the top.”

Many of them began talking all at once, and Tricia lowered her hands to join in the yelling match, but the only two statements I heard clearly were Roger saying, “That’s uncalled for,” and Josephine saying, “Tricia, that’s enough.”

Josephina stood, her chair scraping against the floor, and pointed at Tricia. “Some of you may not like that this young woman has won the baking blue ribbon every year for the last six years, and I understand your frustration, believe me, I do. I want to be a baker. I want to share that love with others. I wanted to be a part of Farm Bakes, teaching the farm stay tourists what I know. That’s why I’m here. I don’t care who gets the credit, or who is the ‘face’ of Farm Bakes or Tennessee Treats. I was opposed to that sabotage business”—her glare bounced between Roger, Tricia, and Deb—“and now I refuse to sit here and listen to y’all tear Jennifer down for nothing but being young. She is an excellent baker, you know she is, and she earned those blue ribbons.”

“On her back,” Tricia said meanly, sending me another murderous look.

Who, precisely, she thought I’d slept with, I had no idea. I’d been underage when I’d won the first time, and all the judges were in their seventies and eighties. Clearly, Tricia’s view of the world was more than a little askew.

“That’s it.” Josephina stepped away from the table, throwing her hands in the air, and making for the door. “I’m done. I will not be a part of this venture. If someone wants to buy me out, you know where to find me.”

“I’ll be in touch!” my father called after her, stepping away from Elena’s chair, an unconcerned smile on his features.

“You can’t afford those shares.” Tricia crossed her arms, her eyes narrowing on my father.

He merely smirked. “Oh, we’ll see about that. Now, let’s vote.”

“No!” Tricia leaned forward, placing her hands on the table. “We need time to discuss this. We’ll vote next month.”

“We don’t need any more time.” Roger pushed away from the wall, looking and sounding tired. “You just want the time to bully people into voting with you.” Then to my father, he lifted his chin. “Go ahead, I think we all know who’s going to win.”

“All those in favor of bringing Jennifer—and her social media accounts—on board, raise your hand.” My father’s hand was already in the air as he asked this, an unperturbed expression pointed at Tricia’s homicidal one.

All the bakers except Tricia and Deb lifted their hands—Hamell, Roger, and Posey. I noticed Elena didn’t raise her hand, but then no one seemed to expect her to participate. *She must not have any shares.*

Grinning, my father dropped his arm and shrugged. “Well, looks like we’re

all about to get a lot busier.” His gaze slid to me, and he winked. “And my wife is about to receive another hell of a wake-up call.”

* * *

My father and Elena drove me back to my house, sticking around and requesting I make him—and Elena as a byproduct—his favorite chicken and broccoli recipe for lunch. But he made sure to tell Elena five times that they needed to leave around 3:00 PM so I could make myself presentable for Billy Winston.

Gag.

While he sat on the couch, flipping through TV channels, Elena sat on one of the stools in the kitchen, watching me as I prepared the extremely simple dish. For good measure, I placed my phone on the countertop, figuring—if I had to suffer through another few hours with my father—I might as well pump his mistress for information.

“I’d like to learn how to make this dish for him,” she said, a genuine smile on her face. “He talks about how great of a cook you are all the time. I’ll probably never be as good as you.”

“No problem.” I returned her smile, not for the first time wondering what sway my father had over this sweet woman. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“No, thank you.” She seemed to squirm on her stool, looking at me like she wanted to say something but held herself back.

As I patted dry the chicken breasts with a paper towel, I asked, “What’s on your mind, Elena?”

“I’m so sorry for my sister,” she said, the words launching out of her mouth.

“You don’t need to apologize for your sister. I understand her perspective, having an idea and feeling like someone else is changing it without her consent. It must be hard.”

“You are the sweetest, Jennifer. I keep trying to tell her how kind and noble you are, not at all like your *momma*.” Her voice and eyes seemed to harden with the words *your momma*. “I’m so glad you and your daddy are free from her.”

Working to keep my expression neutral in the face of Elena’s dislike for my mother—the woman whose husband she’d been sleeping with for six years—I pulled the broccoli out of the fridge.

“Anyway.” Elena visibly shook herself, trying real hard to force her mouth into a smile. “If Tricia actually talked to you, she would know. But she’s just—just—” Elena cut herself off with a sharp sigh. “She’s had a hard life, and she does things—bad things—because she doesn’t know how else to get her fair

share.”

Considering the older woman for a moment, I thought back to the meeting, what had been said about *sabotage* and such. Then and now, I felt absolutely certain that Tricia had been the one to kill Mr. Badcock’s chickens. She’d also hit my momma on the head, dragged her to the bee boxes, and left her for dead—or she had some big part in it. Roger and Deb had, apparently, helped her in some capacity too.

But despite everything, I still couldn’t see Roger burning bee boxes and dragging my mother to her death. *Plus, he’s strong enough to carry momma, he wouldn’t have to drag her.* No. Roger may have supported the attempted sabotage, but I suspected the furthest his contributions went was buying up all of Mr. Badcock’s eggs.

“Your sister reminds me of my brother, Isaac,” I said gently, because it was true. “He was always very stubborn, certain of himself in a way I never was. I admired him for it.”

“Your father never talks about Isaac.”

“Doesn’t he?”

“No. He’s said for a while now that he only has one child.” She tipped her head toward me. “He loves you a lot, you know.”

My hands stilled. In fact, every inch of me stilled except for the angry beating of my heart. That man didn’t love me. He wanted to control me. Love had nothing to do with control, not one bit.

Knowing this wasn’t a good topic of conversation if I wished to keep my cool, I asked, “Deb and your sister must be good friends, huh? It was nice to see them stick together like that.”

Tricia nodded enthusiastically. “Oh yes, they’ve been friends forever, ever since 4-H, when we all raised chickens together.”

Chickens. 4-H. *Hmm . . .*

“You know, I’d love to have chickens, but I hate the idea of cutting their poor necks, all that blood. I wish there were some other way of doing it without the cone and knife.”

Elena sat straighter, her eyes brightening. “Oh! There is! You can wring their necks.”

“But isn’t that difficult? I’m awfully small, and—”

“You use a broom. Tricia is the master at it. She can do ten chickens in five minutes, and they make no fuss at all.” Elena beamed, obviously so proud of her sister’s abilities as the chicken grim reaper.

And all I could think was, *Poor Mr. Badcock.*

She continued, not seeming to notice my dismayed frown. “And Deb is just

as fast. They really are best friends and do absolutely everything together. They even used to have a bakery in town, before—uh—well, before the lodge’s bakery kinda took over.”

I frowned, searching my mind for any memory of a bakery in Green Valley when I was growing up. “I did not know that. What was it called?”

“Tricia’s Treats. She started it all by herself, with help from no one.” Elena clicked her tongue, a soft sound of sadness. “She hasn’t been the same since it closed. But there’s just not enough business for two bakeries, and with the Donner Bakery being such a big name and—well, never mind. Now she works at one of the big grocery stores in Knoxville as a cake decorator and Deb works with a few local farmers, helping with chores and such. Anyway, Deb has always been there for us. I think she’d do just about anything for Tricia.”

I smiled at Elena, seasoning my father’s chicken with rosemary and sage, and wondered if “anything” extended to attempted murder.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“I know that you're selfish, selfish beyond words, and I know that you haven't the nerve of a rabbit, I know you're a liar and a humbug, I know that you're utterly contemptible. And the tragic part is”—her face was on a sudden distraught with pain—“the tragic part is that notwithstanding I love you with all my heart.”

— W. Somerset Maugham, *The Painted Veil*

Cletus

“**W**hat do you think?”

“I think . . .” Stroking my beard, I stared at the empty sandwich plate in front of me. “I think the only thing Kip Sylvester is guilty of is cheating on his wife, being a shit father, and a terrible human.”

“Agree.” Shelly leaned forward, placing her elbows on the kitchen table.

We’d just finished eating sandwiches prepared by Beau, my phone sat in the center of the table, and we were gathered around it as Jenn’s cell continued to feed us audio. But neither she nor Elena Wilkinson had spoken for the last several minutes.

After following Jenn and Kip into downtown Green Valley earlier, we’d parked at the Chamber of Commerce during her meeting with all the bakers, all of us listening on the secure website Alex had arranged. Hearing those reprobates—except Ms. Ortiz, she was a nice lady—speak about Jenn as though

she weren't in the room, discuss exploiting her, using her, had me adding several more names to my *to maim* list, and I prayed Jenn would allow me more than one revenge indulgence a year.

I needed at least ten, seven at an absolute minimum.

Then, when it became clear Kip intended to drive her right back home after, we headed to Beau and Shelly's house on Bandit Lake. Jenn's place was less than a mile away.

"Tricia's hands are covered in feathers, if you catch my meaning." Beau picked up my plate and stacked his on top of it. "She killed those chickens, and Deb helped."

"Agree," Shelly said again. "So who hit Diane over the head?"

"It wasn't Roger," Billy chimed in, wiping his hands on a napkin. "Roger's a big guy, he would've carried her, not dragged her. Besides, he doesn't have it out for Diane, not like Kip."

"Kip would have just carried her too," I said. "Diane Donner weighs no more than a hundred pounds."

"So that leaves Posey, Josephina, Hamell, Tricia, and Deb." Beau ticked off all the bakers on his fingertips.

I shook my head. "You're missing someone."

"Who?" Beau's eyebrows pulled together in question.

"Elena."

Shelly and Beau traded a look, which they then traded with Billy, but Billy was the first to speak. "Elena Wilkinson. You think that tiny, timid woman did it?"

"Tiny, timid people are capable of malevolent acts just as much as big, bold folks. Look at Kanye West and Napoleon."

Before anyone could respond, Jenn's voice came back over the feed. "There. That's how you fry broccoli without using any fat. White wine, garlic, and butter powder."

"Now that sounds like a crime," Beau whispered, pulling a face. "If you don't use fat, it ain't frying."

"Kip Sylvester is into clean eating," I said, motioning for Beau to hush, but then leaned close to him and added, "And I agree. That's a felony against the broccoli. White wine is basically salad dressing with less salt."

Billy nodded, and thus the matter was settled, but Elena was talking again. "Your daddy said your momma tried to make this dish, but it never turned out as good as when you made it."

"Did he?" Jenn asked, and I applauded her ability to deflect, to talk without saying anything at all. *I'm so proud.*

“He did. I’m glad you cooked for him, otherwise I don’t know how he would’ve survived all those years with her. Oh—wait, that’s my phone, I think. Let me just get that.”

Beau’s lip curled and he turned an irritated glare to Shelly. “This woman sounds like a brainwashed loony.”

“Yep,” the taciturn mechanic agreed immediately.

“You should’ve heard the shit Kip said this morning when he showed up.” Billy—whether consciously or not—balled his right hand into a fist. “Made me want to punch him in the face.”

“Maybe later, it’s still early,” I said, biting and chewing on my bottom lip. “Everyone quiet, Elena’s talking to someone on her phone.”

“ . . . slow down. I can’t understand you. Why would the police be at your house?”

We all stiffened in unison, leaning forward, straining toward the phone.

“Oh no,” Elena said, sounding truly fretful. “Okay. Okay—just meet us at our place. We’ll figure something out. Can’t you just say you bought them? Say, uh, it was a lie?”

“Bought what?” Billy mouthed, looking to me.

I ignored him, struggling to hear.

“It’ll be fine, Tricia.” Elena’s voice seemed to grow harder, like she was angry. “We’ll figure something out and Kip will take care of it, I’m sure.”

Police. Tricia.

“The chickens!” I jabbed a finger into the air. “Someone call Boone. Ask him where he is.”

Beau extracted his phone from the back pocket of his jeans and stood, walking from the kitchen.

“Is everything okay?” Jenn asked, just the right mixture of concerned and curious. *I’m so proud.*

“Everything is just fine,” Elena said, her voice too bright. “It’s all a misunderstanding, I’m sure. Listen, I’m going to have to steal your daddy. Do you mind packing up the lunch? We’ll take it on the . . .”

Her voice grew muffled, too far away for us to hear.

But it didn’t matter. Jenn’s plan had been a success. I’d bet my banjo Boone found Badcock’s remaining twenty-one chickens on Tricia Wilkinson’s porch along with the broomstick used to whack Diane Donner over the head. Of course, we’d claim Jenn had recorded the conversation all on her own. With the recording of the meeting providing motive and Jenn’s conversation with Elena afterward describing means, Boone would have everything he needed to press charges against Tricia Wilkinson.

And now, hopefully, with the farm mayhem reign of terror over and the resulting justice for chickens, bees, and Diane's head, Jenn and I could finally return to a harmonious—and as of yet elusive—state of bliss.

That is to say, naked.

“Cletus.”

Alone.

“Cletus.”

Together.

“Cletus!”

“What?!”

Billy gestured to the screen of my phone, standing, and said harshly, “Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“Jenn. She just said the phrase. The emergency phrase, ‘Goodness, where has the time gone?’”

Shaking myself, I also stood, staring at the phone intently. Jenn spoke, but it was hard to hear what she said, and then finally, “—back in time for Billy? I don't want to miss our date.”

I snatched the phone off the table, pointing at Shelly. “You and me. Take the GTO.”

She nodded and turned to Beau. He must've heard because in the next moment he'd tossed his keys and Shelly caught them with one hand.

“That's to be determined, isn't it?” Kip said, his voice harsh. “Give me that phone.”

“We'll follow in the Bronco,” Billy said unnecessarily, hot on my heels as Shelly and I ran out the front door.

“I can't wait to hear your perfectly good explanation—” Elena's sarcastic voice was cut off by a scuffing sound, presumably Kip taking the phone from Jenn.

“We'll see about that,” came his muffled reply just as Shelly and I slid into Beau's car.

“Put on your seatbelt, Cletus.” Shelly sounded as cool as the underside of a pillow, buckling hers and bringing the muscle car to life.

“That hurts! Elena, let me go,” Jenn said, her voice distant but perfectly clear, and my heart went wild.

“You called the police? You betrayed my sister!” Elena screamed, the wail enraged.

“Go, Shelly. Go!” *Damn.*

GODDAMMIT.

Shelly peeled out of the drive, working the clutch and gearshift like they were an extension of her body, and we were on our way. We'd be there in less than two minutes.

Less than a mile away.

We listened as an argument ensued, raised voices but none of the words were audible. There seemed to be a struggle of some sort, Kip cursed, Jenn screamed, and I leaned forward in the passenger seat, covering my face and grabbing fistfuls of my hair.

"If he hurts her—"

"I'll kill him," Shelly said.

I peeked at the typically imperturbable woman, the slight narrowing of her hawkish eyes, and knew she would.

But not if I killed him first.

Finally, less than ninety seconds after leaving the Bandit Lake house, Shelly spun a quarter donut at the end of Jenn's driveway, placing the GTO directly in front of Kip Sylvester's car. The spin sprayed dirt and red clay and a fair bit of rock debris all over the shiny black hood of his BMW.

"Hey you!" A man shouted—*Kip*—running off Jenn's porch, face red and pointing at Shelly. "Dumb bitch!"

Shelly didn't bother cutting the GTO's engine, instead pushing the driver's door open, jumping out, and running over to where Kip stood screaming his head off.

"I just paid a fortune for detailing and—"

Her strong hand closed around his throat and she shoved him back, deftly hooking a foot behind his leg such that he stumbled, tripped, and fell hard on his ass.

A moment later, one of her boots on his wrist, the other next to his face, she glared down at his stunned features. "You. Stay down or I'll break your jaw."

"You can't threaten me," Kip snarled.

She put more weight on his wrist, and he yelped.

"Shut the fuck up, or get fucked up, asshole," came her monotone response, her face placid as the surface of a lake.

If the situation had been different, I think I would've been content to pull up a lawn chair and watch the imposingly tall, fiercely beautiful woman intimidate the hell out of Kip Sylvester all day long. But as it was, seeing Jenn and needing proof of her safety were the only thoughts in my head.

Running up the porch steps and ignoring Elena Wilkinson where she gripped the railing, gaping at me with horror-stricken eyes, I marched to the front door and pounded. "Jenn? Are you there?"

The door swung open, and in the next second she'd launched herself at me, her arms coming around my neck. "Cletus. Oh, Cletus," she cried. Or, apparently, she continued her crying. Her wet face pressed against my cheek and jaw. "I'm so glad you're here. He—he—"

"Shh." I smoothed my hands down her back, holding her close. She was shaking, hard. "Honey, are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"Call off your bitch, Cletus Winston, or I'll—" Kip didn't get another word out because Shelly kicked him in the face with her steel-toed boot.

"I said shut the fuck up, or get fucked up, asshole. Follow directions or more boot."

"He hit me." Jenn's words were muffled, but they sent an electric shock of pure, white-hot rage through my entire body.

As gently as I could manage—especially now that my hands were shaking—I palmed her cheeks and eased her back, gritting my teeth at the sight of her bloody nose, split lip, and swelling eye.

"I'll kill him," I said and thought, the words a promise to myself.

Elena made a sound of distress and I heard her approach at the moment I perceived another car pull up the driveway.

"She betrayed him! She let him think she was on his side, he was angry. What else was he supposed to do? She betrayed my sister—she called the cops, told them lies, set her up. Tricia was right, you're a spoiled brat, just like your momma. Jennifer deserved all she got and more."

Turning slowly, I looked at the woman, allowing her to witness the power, passion, and promise of my wrath. I memorized the dawning comprehension and fear spreading over her features like the rising waters of a tsunami.

The darkness within me enjoyed how she shrank back and stumbled down the stairs. "You're crazy," she whispered, breathless.

"You bet I am," I said, then smiled.

Car doors closing had me shifting my attention to the newly arrived Billy and Beau exiting the Bronco and taking a survey of the situation.

"Hey, sugar plumb," Beau said, winked at Shelly, grinned, and walked slowly toward her. "What do you have there?"

"The little pig."

"You mean the one that goes wee, wee, wee all the way home?"

"The very one."

Billy, meanwhile, was staring at Jenn, a storm gathering behind his blue eyes. I knew that look, but he'd have to get in line behind me and Shelly. *It's a shame a person can only be murdered once.*

Shifting my attention to Kip, still writhing on the ground beneath Shelly's

boot, I kept hold of Jenn's hand and caught Shelly's eye. "Give Jenn's phone to Ms. Sullivan and she'll let you stand up."

Shelly nodded, then released Kip's wrist, backing up and allowing him to stand. The older man, breathing hard, struggled to his feet and gripped his jaw. He pulled the phone from his pocket and dropped it to the ground as though it burned him.

As soon as he was up, he faced us, but his ire focused squarely on his daughter.

"You're dead to me," he spat. "You hear me? Dead."

I stepped in front of Jenn, blocking her from view.

But it was Billy who, with an amused lilt to his voice, said, "That's okay, Kip. 'Cause soon you'll be dead to everybody."

Looking between us, Kip worked real hard to hide the flicker of fear fracturing his show of outrage, puffing out his chest. "You sneaky bastard." He pointed at me this time. "You did this. You turned my daughter against me! You took a good girl and ruined her. I'll make you pay. I'll—"

Shelly lunged forward an inch, a fake-out move, but it was enough to make Kip shrink back and almost trip over his own feet. It also made Beau laugh.

Kip's frantic stare on the menacing woman, he ran backward, now pointing at her. "I'm pressing charges and you're going to jail."

"For what, exactly? Stopping my attacker?" Jenn stepped around me, shouting, more enraged than I'd ever heard her as she gestured to the ceiling of the porch. "I have video cameras up here—you sad, pathetic, little pig of a man—and they recorded the whole thing! You think *I* won't press charges?"

Kip opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, real panic undermining his attempt at a scowl. "Jennifer Anne Sylvester, we'll talk about it later."

"No we won't, because I ain't visiting you in jail. Now get off my property and enjoy your last night of freedom. And enjoy that prison food! I hear they use lard and butter."

* * *

"I'll send the pictures, but I wanted to prepare you before I did. Cletus will send the video this evening via email. It's cut and dried, he attacked his daughter, threatened her, we all heard it. Mm-hmm." Billy's deep voice filtered into Jenn's family room from the kitchen, all business. "I suggest Judge Kelly, you won't have a problem securing a warrant with him."

I thanked heaven for his cool head.

As soon as Kip and Elena left, Billy ushered us all inside, giving everyone orders for what to do next. I helped Jenn. Beau pulled the surveillance digital files. Shelly prepared and brought over several ice packs while Jenn, once we were all gathered and sitting, curled up on my lap, told us her version of events.

Basically, Tricia had called Elena while Jenn was preparing lunch and demanded to speak with Kip. A moment later, Kip had come into the kitchen, grabbed Jenn around the back of the neck, and pushed her toward the front door, threatening her.

“How did they know you were the one to call Boone about the chickens?” I asked.

“I have no idea. I didn’t hear what Tricia said, just Elena and my father’s reaction to it. But once we made it to the porch, I realized I couldn’t let them take me.” Jenn’s hollow tone sent a knife straight to my heart. “Elena was pulling on my arms, screaming at me for betraying her sister, telling me I would pay for it. I fought them, knowing if I could just get back inside, I could run to the panic room. Then my father, he—” Her face crumpled.

I wanted to turn away. The tempest of emotion, witnessing her in pain, watching her hurt, suffocated me. The lack of retaliatory action available in the moment felt unnatural, wrong. He’d put his hands on her, and therefore he should suffer at my hands until he felt and understood the foolishness and imprudence of his choices.

Nevertheless, I stayed put and I forced myself to watch Jennifer in pain. She was so beautiful, my Jenn, with bruises and cuts and blood on her face. She would always be beautiful because her beauty was in her strength and resilience, her goodness and generosity, her cleverness and compassion, and no one—least of all her rat of a father—could ever steal or change who she was.

“You don’t have to tell us what happened, Jenn,” Beau said, sitting on the edge of a big recliner, his tone gentle. “If someone needs to know, they can watch the video. There is no reason to relive it, unless you wish to.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Even though she’d whispered the word, her voice cracked.

“I’m sorry to ask this, Jenn. But we need to take pictures of your face and any other—uh—injuries.” The deepness of Billy’s baritone belied just how uncomfortable the request made him. “The existence of the video means you won’t have to recount how it happened, but the pictures will keep you from having to describe the extent of your injuries during trial.”

“Assuming he doesn’t plead guilty in exchange for a lighter sentence,” Shelly mumbled grumpily.

“Oh, that road won’t be available to him,” Billy said with the barest hint of glee. “I’ll see to that.”

It was then decided that Billy would call the sheriff directly while Shelly took the pictures, which brings us to now.

Presently, Beau reviewed the video for a third time while I paced the living room floor. Shelly was taking the pictures, helping Jenn clean up and change, and Billy continued his conversation with Sheriff James in the kitchen.

Billy and I shared a brief, commiserating smile, and he continued his conversation with the sheriff. “In addition to the warrant, I want a restraining order against Elena Wilkinson, Patricia Wilkinson, and a few other names I’ll be sending through in an email tomorrow. They’re all connected to the attack.”

“Hey, Cletus.” Beau pulled off the headphones connected to the laptop where the video played, motioning me over. “You need to hear this.”

“I don’t want to see it.” Seeing it once had been enough. *Again, it’s a shame a person can only be murdered once.*

“Then listen.” He held the headphones up.

I shook my head. “Just tell me.”

“Elena says something interesting, when they’re pushing Jenn out of the house.”

My gaze flickered over my younger brother and his earnest expression. Admittedly, I hadn’t heard anything said on the video, the imagery had been more than overwhelming.

“What does she say?”

“She says . . .” Beau pulled a face. “That Jenn is heavier than her momma, heavier than Diane.”

Heavier than Diane.

I stopped pacing. “What exactly does she say?”

Beau put the headphones back on, presumably rewinding the video, then hit play. He was quiet for a moment, his eyes staring off at nothing as he listened.

Abruptly, he hit the space bar, and seemed to be quoting as he said, “‘You’re heavier than your momma, but if I can drag her across that field, I can drag you to that car.’”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“I wanted movement and not a calm course of existence. I wanted excitement and danger and the chance to sacrifice myself for my love.”

— Leo Tolstoy, *Family Happiness*

Jenn

“I love your family.”

“They love you.” Cletus’s chest rose and fell beneath my cheek, his steady heart drummed a soothing song in my ear.

Cletus’s brothers and Shelly had left just about a half hour ago with promises to return soon. After Billy finished his phone call with the sheriff, he’d called Roscoe and filled him in on the situation. Roscoe offered to make dinner and bring it over—which, when Billy asked if that was okay, Cletus accepted with a, *It’s about time!* Roscoe also offered to call Drew and Ashley and bring them into the loop.

They were all due back within the hour.

“I’m so glad this is over.” I snuggled closer, closing my eyes as Cletus’s arm gave me the gentlest of squeezes.

It was obvious he was trying his darndest to be careful no matter how many times I told him I was fine. My face had suffered the worst of my father’s temper. It had stopped throbbing after the ice packs and a few pain relievers. Other than scratches and bruises on my arms from Elena, I was perfectly fine.

In fact, I felt so fine, I worried that there was something wrong with me. Shouldn't I be more fragile than this? Shouldn't I be terrified, crying myself to sleep in my pillow, inconsolable? I'd just been attacked by my father. I didn't feel at all like I thought a victim should feel.

Strange.

"We're going to have to tell you mother, sooner or later," Cletus said, interrupting my train of thought.

"I'm not looking forward to that conversation." I grimaced.

"Me neither. She was just starting to like me, and that felt like a miracle."

"She'll get over it." *I hope.*

His finger tapped out a rhythm on my hip where his hand was splayed. "Would it make a difference, do you think, if my friend Alex restores the renovation accounts for the lodge? So she doesn't even have to involve her lawyers?"

I hesitated, pausing to think about his words, because if Cletus just said what I think he said, that seemed incredibly illegal. "Alex can do that?"

"I can't say that he doesn't or does have the ability to not do something such as, but not including, however similar to, should the need arise—"

"Oh brother. A simple yes would suffice."

I sensed his lips curve in a smile.

"But, yes, for the record, if you could get your friend Alex to restore the accounts before we talk to her, I think she'd probably take our deception much better. One thought though, if we just let the money stay where it is, couldn't my father be arrested for stealing it? If so, I'd like to see his prison sentence be as long as possible."

Cletus placed a kiss on my forehead, shaking his head. "No. What your father did by taking that money was not illegal, since your parents are still married. He didn't steal it. It was just a violation of their prenuptial agreement is all. He can't go to jail for withdrawing the money."

"Well, in that case, absolutely yes. Just have Alex get it back as soon as possible."

"By the way, you sure you don't mind everyone coming back over for dinner?" he asked, sounding worried. "Everyone should start arriving any minute. Roscoe and Billy will likely get here first, but I'm sure they wouldn't mind if we canceled. I can make us something, tell them to stay home."

"Not at all. The company will be nice." I lifted to my elbow so I could see his handsome face. I missed it. "It's been lonely here, by myself, for the last two weeks."

"You've lived here on your own for just about two months, but only the last

two weeks were lonely?”

“I was so busy between Thanksgiving and New Year’s, I think I was lonely for a different reason. But”—I tilted my head back and forth in a considering motion—“since you bring it up . . .”

His eyes narrowed slightly, moving between mine. “What is it?”

“Would you consider moving in?”

I waited, watching him expectantly. His lips parted, forehead wrinkled, but he said nothing, and I got the sense I’d surprised him.

I sat up in bed, prepared to list all my very good reasons using my fingers. “First, we’re engaged already. Second, I miss you when I don’t see you, and I want to see you more than on holidays or stolen moments during daylight hours. Third, I want to sleep with you, every night. Fourth, I want to see your stuff here, I want us to make a home together.”

“These are all great reasons.” He also sat up, resting his back against the headboard. “But Jenn, as you said last November, you’ve never lived by yourself before. You said you wanted to give that a try, and now I tend to agree.”

“I know what I said last November, but I’ve changed my mind. You’ve never lived by yourself either.”

“That’s true. Except, with Billy and me at the homestead, and Roscoe there on the weekends, it’s like living with roommates.”

“Why can’t you be my roommate?”

His gaze grew cagey. “Roommates don’t typically engage in sexual congress.”

I threw my hands up, honestly a little frustrated he was fighting me on this. “Well, neither do we!”

Now he squinted, his mouth a flat line. “Not for lack of trying.”

“Really?” I countered, crossing my arms. “Because it seems like you’ve been holding yourself back. In fact, it seems like you have a history of keeping yourself separate from me. Often.”

“What nonsense are you speaking?”

“You haven’t slept over here since Thanksgiving. Why is that?”

“You said you wanted to live alone, and I don’t want to hover or inadvertently overstep,” he said peevishly, giving me his grumpy face and tone.

“If you overstep, I’ll tell you.”

“I’d prefer to not overstep in the first place.”

“That’s not fair.”

“What? Jenn—”

“No, really. It’s not. Avoiding me because you’re trying to avoid overstepping isn’t fair. You’ve left dinners in the fridge, you’ve done my

grocery shopping, you've been over here plenty *when I'm not here*. Why not stay and be with me when I get home? Unless you don't want to?"

He was gritting his teeth, no longer squinting but glaring at me through droopy lids. "Really? You want me pawing you after an eighteen-hour shift at the bakery?"

"Absolutely."

"That seems counterintuitive." Cletus shook his head, obviously stressed, tossed his legs over the side of the bed, and stood. "I'm not going to do that."

I lifted to my knees and followed him as far as the end of the mattress. "You seem to be suffering from a case of grandiose nobility, Cletus Winston. What? Do you think you'll scare me away?"

"Maybe." He paced away, his strong shoulders a distraction in the thin fabric of the white T-shirt he wore. My mouth watered as I followed the line of his back to where his sides tapered just before the waist of his jeans, knowing every inch of him was solid, hard muscle and hot skin. *Then there's that delectable bottom of his.*

He turned, and my gaze shot upward to his face. My cheeks heated.

"I don't want to scare you away," he said on a rush, like the words were a confession.

"You're not going to scare me away."

"I don't know about that. It's difficult for me to admit, I don't know what I'm doing with you. I can't seem to read your mind."

That made me smile. I knew he meant the words in earnest, but he was so silly sometimes. "No one is a mind reader. And I don't want you to read my mind. I want you to be yourself."

"Selfishness now isn't going to get me what I want in the long run."

"And you only know how to be selfish?"

"So far, prior to you, yes."

I huffed at his ridiculous assessment of himself. "Then what do you want in the long run?"

"You." He said simply.

"Cletus, don't you realize? You already have me. Stop being so careful."

"And if I make a mistake?"

"Trust me to forgive you."

His gaze moved over me—even my cut lip and the purple ugliness on my face—as though I were the most beautiful, desirable person he'd ever seen. He shifted back on his foot, spearing his hair with his fingers and sending the chaotic curls in every direction. "You've been through a trial today, and now isn't the time to discuss my ignoble impulses. Maybe we should talk about this

later.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but the doorbell rang. We both sighed.

Standing from the mattress, I walked to him and slipped my arms around his neck, pressing a soft kiss to his lips.

His hands came to my forearms, caressing his palms from my elbows to my shoulders. “Your skin is so soft,” he said on a whisper, making me think he was talking to himself.

I leaned my forehead against his, inhaling him, wishing for the right words to convince him. I wanted him more reckless with me, less inhibited. “I appreciate you wanting to be noble with me, Cletus Byron Winston. But I *love* it when you’re selfish.”

The doorbell rang a second time and he straightened, peering down at me. The want and restraint behind his gaze stole my breath.

“Then I guess I’ll have to be a little more selfish . . .” he muttered, his hands sliding down my sides, but then halting at my hips. “After you’ve recovered.”

I twisted my lips to the side, ignoring the slight sting at the movement. “I don’t know if I’ll be better anytime soon. You might as well sleep over every night, like a roommate.”

“Jenn—”

I pulled away, strolling out of the room. “Roommates sleep together, right? Naked? I think I read that in a book.”

“Fine. Lend me that book and we’ll do it,” he said, coming up behind me and, in an unexpected move, he pinched my bottom.

I jumped, squeaking, stopping, then watched his body as he walked past me to the door, a little flutter in my belly rising up to my chest, making me feel warm all over. *He’s mine.*

Cletus Winston was mine, brain and backside and everything in between. Maybe if I took advantage, just a little bit, every once in a while, he’d follow suit? It was worth a try.

The doorbell rang again. “Coming, coming!” Cletus shouted, and then grumbled under his breath, “Keep on your skinny jeans, Roscoe.”

Chuckling, I shuffled to the kitchen, yawning but then stopping and wincing when my lip pulled and stung. Cletus opened the door. I figured it must be either Ashley and Drew or Beau and Shelly because I heard a female voice. Bending, I searched the bottom of the pantry for a bottle of red wine, and when I straightened and turned, I got the shock of my life.

The unopened bottle of red slipped from my grip, falling to the floor, and—by some miracle—hit the ground with a thud but did not break.

“Hello, Jennifer,” Tricia Wilkinson said, holding a gun to the back of

Cletus's head.

* * *

The house had two panic rooms, one in the back near the utility area, and one off the open hallway to the master bedroom. Where Tricia held us—in the living room, sitting on the couch, our hands on our knees where she could see them—the panic room off the hallway was closest.

Cletus had caught my eye earlier and glanced at the hallway. I knew he was thinking what I was thinking, which meant he was also working on a plan to get us both into that panic room.

Presently, Tricia stood with the coffee table between us, her gun still on Cletus, but her attention on the screen of her phone. She'd said nothing other than "Hello, Jennifer" and "Go sit on the couch, right now." We'd been sitting in silence for what felt like hours but was probably closer to five minutes. Finally, just in the last few seconds, I was coming back to myself.

Folks who've ever had a gun on them will tell you that it's an incredibly surreal experience. All is confusion, your mind checks out, your mouth stops working, and your heart is all you can hear.

But now my mind had rebooted and worked overtime through potential escape plans. If I could only get the table out of the way, for example, I'd be able to tackle her to the ground. She wouldn't be expecting that from me, I was certain. If the opportunity presented itself, to shove her and knock her over, I'd take it.

"This is a small town, Jennifer," she said abruptly, lifting her eyes from the phone. "You don't want people to know something, you don't leave a message with Flo McClure."

"I . . ." I frowned, confused. *What?*

"That was incredibly stupid. But then, your daddy told me over and over how slow you are."

"What are you—" OH!

Oh shit.

I closed my eyes, feeling like the idiot she thought I was. "The voicemail with dispatch meant for Boone this morning, that's what you're talking about. Florence heard it."

"Ding, ding, ding. That's right. And Flo called Nancy, and Nancy called Deb, and Deb called—"

"You," Cletus filled in, and I looked at him, combating the urge to apologize.

I should've known.

Deb Brightwell.

What had Elena said earlier while I'd been preparing that tasteless chicken and broccoli dish? *Deb works with a few local farmers.* Tricia's good friend was also Nancy Danvish's good friend. Deb had been the one to tell Nancy about Momma getting hit, that's how she had known it was a broomstick and not a shovel.

"Ah, you're seeing the full picture now." Tricia shifted the gun from Cletus to me. "And you expect anyone to believe you win blue ribbons on merit? You can't be dumb and be an excellent baker, those two just don't mix. You never should've been allowed to enter in the first place. You were too young, it was a joke, an embarrassment, to all of us!"

Cletus suddenly stood and Tricia flinched, the gun moving back to him. "Hey. What are you doing?"

Cletus stepped around the coffee table, hands up, and strolled to the sideboard. "If I'm going to have a gun pointed at me all night, I think I'll pour myself a drink." He twisted at the waist, looking over his shoulder at me. "Want one?"

"Hey!" She lifted the gun. "Did I say you could move?"

Cletus pulled two tumblers from the cabinet and a bottle of scotch my momma had left over Christmas. "Where can we go? We're basically trapped in a hyperbolic chamber."

"Another idiot." She rolled her eyes, her grip on the gun easing. "I think you mean a *hyperbaric* chamber, Mr. Winston."

"No. We are stuck, in this chamber—i.e. this house—with a person—i.e. you—who is in love with their own hyperbole. Hyperbolic chamber." Cletus glanced at me over his shoulder again, lifting one of the tumblers. I stood slowly, my hands up, and walked over to him. Clearly, he wanted me to drink a glass of scotch.

Her eyebrows pulled together. She looked confused as she glared at us, her mouth opening as though to argue.

He didn't give her time to parse his statement, already moving on. "So what's the plan here, huh?"

She lifted the gun again, her arm straight. "Shut up," she said. "I don't have to tell you my plan."

"Do you have a plan? I mean, other than boring us to death." Cletus handed me the glass of scotch and clinked mine with his.

"Oh, your death is definitely part of the plan, believe me." Her mouth curled in a sneer. "Now tell me where the security system is."

“Why? You’re already in the house.” Cletus took a gulp of his drink, watching her over the top of the glass.

“Yes, but Kip said it records the front porch. I want the recording of me entering the house.”

“Why?” Cletus turned, backing up a step—another full foot toward the panic room—and motioned that I should drink. I took a sip, watching him the whole time for a sign as to what he was planning.

Tricia gave the gun a little shake. “Because I’m going to erase it, obviously. Then I’m turning off the whole system so we won’t be recorded when we leave.”

“Oh? Are we leaving?” Cletus reached over and gripped the floor lamp next to the hallway’s opening, standing casually, tilting his head.

“Let go of that.” She pointed the gun at the lamp.

He let go immediately, shuffling a little away from it and closer to the hallway, his palm out. “Sorry. You were saying something about us leaving?”

“Yes. We’re leaving. We’re all leaving together.”

Cletus drained his glass, handing it to me. “Could you refill that, hon?” And then to Tricia, he asked, “Then what?”

“You’ll find out when we get there.”

“Where?”

“We’re—” she began, and then snapped her mouth shut. “I’m not telling you that.”

I refilled Cletus’s glass, then walked over and handed it to him.

“I don’t think you have a plan,” he said, stepping around me for the sideboard, pushing me further into the hall. “Honey, I said a refill, not a thimble.”

Tricia’s gaze bounced between us, her frown deepening. “I do have a plan, but I’m not telling you. Where is the security system?”

“It’s this way.” Cletus, having added another splash to his glass, walked past me and into the hall. “Come on. I’ll show you.”

“No! Not you.” The gun remained on Cletus, but her gaze moved to me. “You do it.”

“Sure. I’ll just stay here.” Cletus, again, walked around me, and in doing so positioned me several more feet into the hallway.

My heart climbed to the back of my neck because I was, quite literally, four steps from the panic room, Cletus was six, and Tricia was still across the room, at least twenty paces away.

“You will not stay here,” she ground out. “I’ll take both of you. Go.”

“Sure thing. Let me just finish my drink.” He took another step toward me. “You too, Jenn. Finish up.”

I lifted my glass and took a sip. Cletus moved as though he would do so as well, but at the last minute he lowered the scotch and scratched his head. “Here’s what I don’t get. Why aren’t you telling us the plan? I mean, if we’re dead—or going to be tonight—what’s the difference? Unless you lied and that’s not part of the plan.”

“It’s—”

“I still don’t think you have a plan.”

“I do have a plan!”

“Then why aren’t you following the plan?”

“I am!” She shifted her weight to her back foot, shaking the gun again. “I’m just waiting for my partner.”

“Deb.”

She said nothing, but her gaze cut to her phone on the coffee table.

“The other chicken choker.” Cletus pointed at her with his scotch glass, also shifting his weight to his back foot.

“Sure, whatever.”

“I mean, that was the two of you, wasn’t it? The two of you killed those chickens.”

“Deb wouldn’t do that to Mr. Badcock, they’re friends,” she said stiffly, still twenty paces away.

“Ah. It was you and your sister at Badcock’s that night.”

“Think you’re so smart?” she spat. “How long did it take you to figure that out?”

“But it was Deb at Old Man Blount’s? Deb and Elena, right?”

“Everyone hates Blount.” She took a step back.

Cletus’s hip brushed against mine, forcing me to the side, and another step closer to the hidden room. “So Deb hit Diane Donner over the head with a broom and left her by the car to light the bee boxes. Deb was okay with breaking so many laws?”

“No one cares about what happened to Blount’s boxes. That man is a stain on the farming community. And Diane Donner recovered just fine.”

“But then, after Deb left, Elena dragged Diane out to the burning boxes and left her for dead.”

Tricia grew very still, her glare clouding.

I took the opportunity to take another small step toward the hidden door, Cletus did as well.

“What? She did what?” Tricia looked up, looking less angry and more confused.

“You didn’t know? Oh, I see. Your sister didn’t tell you. After Deb left,

Elena figured she'd kill two birds with one stone—or rather, a bunch of bees and one lady.”

Tricia shook her head. “She wouldn't do that.”

“Well, it was either Deb or Elena.” Cletus bumped me with his hip again and I sipped my drink, leaning against the false wall. All I needed to do was press in the right spot and the door would swing open.

“Diane didn't drag herself into the fire,” he added conversationally.

“What makes you think Diane was near the bee boxes?”

“The police told Jenn, when we showed up at the hospital. Diane almost died of smoke inhalation, but they kept that quiet from the public. Only me, Jenn, the police, and the person who dragged Diane to the bee boxes know it happened, and Elena knows it happened. And now, you know too.”

Again, her arm straightened, but the shake of her hand didn't look purposeful. “If you think this is helping keep you alive, you're mistaken. You think I'm going to let you put my sister in jail for attempted murder? Now I have no choice but to kill you. You do realize that, right?”

“Then what's the plan?” Cletus huffed, coming to stand next to me, placing his hand on the wall above my head. “How are you going to make my death look like an accident?”

“Shut up. You weren't even supposed to be here. It was supposed to be *her*. Just her.”

“And yet, here I am, and here you are, and you still have no plan.”

“I swear to God, if you don't shut up, I'll shoot you right now.”

“But . . . wouldn't that mess up your plan?”

She made a face of pure frustration, her eyes squeezing shut, a growl tearing out of her, and I knew the moment had come.

I pressed the release button for the door.

Cletus's hand above my head pushed, and the door swung backwards.

We bolted in.

The gun went off just as Cletus shoved it shut again, locking us inside. The gun then went off several more times and Tricia shrieked, less of a growl this time and more of a desperate, “Nooo!”

I slid down the far wall, unable to catch my breath. The sound of bullets ricocheting inside my house felt like a hammer inside my brain. “Oh God. Oh my God.”

Cletus was there, removing the crystal tumbler from my hand, downing it in one gulp, and setting it on the floor. He gathered me to him and squeezed me tight, apparently forgetting all about trying to be careful. I curled around him, more shots and more screams sounded from beyond the wall, and then loud

cries.

“You did so great.” He kissed my cheeks, my mouth, his hands moving over me as though to convince himself I was real and all in one piece. “So great. So fucking great. You’re amazing.”

“You’re amazing!” I grabbed his face as he leaned away, forcing him to kiss me again, but then a thunderbolt of alarm had me pushing him backward. “Cletus!”

“I know. My family.” He reached in his back pocket and pulled out his phone, lifting it to his ear a second later. “Pick up, pick up, pick up—Ashley! Where are you? Don’t come over. There’s a homicidal maniac here and—no, I am not pranking you. It’s Tricia Wilkinson. She pulled a gun on us. Turn around and have Drew call Billy right now, you hang up and call Beau. Tell them to steer clear. Okay . . . yes, okay. She’s fine. I mean, she’s not fine, but—never mind. Call Beau. Bye. Love you, too. Bye.”

A loud bang—not a gun—reverberated against the wall followed by an anguished grunt and words I couldn’t decipher. She was still there, shouting, and from the sound of it, hitting the wall with a piece of furniture.

Cletus pressed a few buttons on his cell’s screen and put the phone on speaker, holding it between us, his gaze locking with mine.

“Hello?”

“Hello? Flo? Go fuck yourself. But first, put the sheriff on. Tricia Wilkinson is trying to kill us, and we could use some help. And for the love of God, don’t tell Nancy Danvish.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“How easy it is to judge rightly after one sees what evil comes from judging wrongly.”

— Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*

Jenn

“I don’t understand why y’all didn’t just tell me the truth. I could’ve played along.” Leaning against the island counter in the bakery kitchen, my mother’s eyes shone with hurt.

“It was my decision.” I stood straight, angling my chin, determined to defend and hold my position.

After the last twenty-four hours—living through my father’s insults, and then that terrible meeting with my father’s business associates, and then my father’s violence, and then Tricia Wilkinson’s attempt to murder both Cletus and me, *and then* all the hours of police questions while Tricia was hauled away to jail—exhausted didn’t begin to cover how I felt.

I wasn’t giving my mother—or anyone else—a single inch.

Not a millimeter.

Nothing.

“If I was going to do it, I needed to make certain daddy believed it.”

She frowned so deeply and intensely wrinkle lines penetrated the dense mask of makeup on her face.

The moment she'd caught sight of my face this morning she'd burst into tears, loudly proclaiming in front of the entire bakery staff that she'd kill my father if it was the last thing she did.

Cletus had mumbled, "Get in line."

I'd then steered her into the kitchen, dismissing the staff and promising to explain everything to my mother, start to finish.

After we'd given her a brief accounting of events leading up to last night's dangerous spectacle, plus a description of how we'd escaped Tricia Wilkinson's clutches and how my father and Elena had been arrested this morning for assault and attempted kidnapping, she'd excused herself to touch up her makeup. Point is, the present density of cosmetics was thicker than her normal application.

"You don't think I would've been believable?" She sounded offended. "I know how to act!"

"No," I answered honestly. "I don't think you would've *let* me do it."

Momma stared at me, no longer frowning, her freshly painted lips pressed into a stiff line. On the drive over, Cletus and I had talked through all likely outcomes and scenarios for this morning's impromptu meeting with my mother. I'd prepared myself for fits and hysterics. I'd prepared myself for the cold shoulder and dismissiveness. Whatever she ultimately decided, that was just fine. I was prepared.

But if she wanted me to come back to the bakery, and I knew she did, I wasn't allowing her to use this situation as a way to guilt me into anything. Or use it to push my boundaries. Or buttons.

"Our discussion from three weeks ago still stands. If you want me back at the bakery, I'll be ready to return to work February first." I'd decided to give myself another few days off now that Cletus and I could spend those days and nights together. *Even if he hasn't agreed to the nights yet.*

"February first?!" My mother shrieked, pushing away from the kitchen island. "Jennifer, I don't think you understand how difficult your abrupt departure has been for me, for everyone around here. And now to discover it was all a ruse?"

I held firm. "And, as we discussed, you have until the end of February to find a second pastry chef, and you will assign someone else to pick up all the supplies, except the bananas."

Those supplies included Mr. Badcock's eggs again. Boone had told me this morning that the chicken farmer had been beside himself with gratitude when the twenty-one hens had been returned yesterday afternoon, safe and sound. Mr. Badcock even called and left a voice message on my phone when he'd learned I had been the one to share the tip with law enforcement.

But the bakery supplies did not and would not include Mr. Blount's honey—he'd sworn off beekeeping—or Nancy Danvish's honey either. According to Boone, Farmer Danvish was more than a little miffed that Flo McClure had been placed on administrative leave for sharing police business. Furthermore, she was pissed that my father had been arrested, leaving the whole farm stay business in limbo. Therefore, she had once again declared she would not sell any supplies to me or the Donner Bakery.

And that was just fine.

I wouldn't buy from Nancy Danvish again if she were the last beekeeper in all of East Tennessee, seeing as how she'd played a critical role in Tricia Wilkinson's rampage last night. For now, I was holding a grudge. It was the first grudge of my life, and I can't say I felt sorry about it.

Sighing as though harassed, my mother's attention flickered to Cletus—who'd been mostly silent since we'd entered the kitchen—and then back to me. "You being gone for the last two weeks lit a fire under me to find the new pastry chef. I guess that's one positive to come out of this mess. And, if I'm being completely honest, I guess I see your point."

"Which point?"

"The one about me trying to stop you from your crazy, dangerous plan." She sighed again, like she wanted to argue the point, but then lifted and shook her hands. "No, no. You're right. Knowing myself, I wouldn't have played along. I would've tried to talk you out of it."

Cletus and I shared a quick glance. His eyebrows ticked up, ostensibly surprised by my mother's logical and completely reasonable response. Truthfully, so was I.

"And I'm not going to give you a hard time about it, especially since your father and that woman were arrested this morning for assault and attempted kidnapping. Thank goodness for Sheriff James! I hope they both rot in jail."

Along with Tricia Wilkinson, I thought. I didn't know which surprised me more: the fact that my father and Elena stuck around her house in Green Valley to be arrested this morning, or that Tricia was still attacking the panic room door with my floor lamp when the police showed up last night. That woman certainly was, as Cletus would say, nuttier than a pecan pie.

I did wonder if maybe my father thought I'd been bluffing about pressing charges, and that was why he and Elena had stayed in town . . . *underestimating me to his detriment*.

"But I'm still allowed to be sore about it, about being lied to." My mother, still not finished, pointed a finger at me, then at Cletus, giving us each a long, meaningful look. "Even if I do understand your reasons."

“That’s good of you, Diane,” Cletus said evenly.

“Well.” She sniffed, peering down her nose as she inspected her fingernails. “My life coach says I can’t control other people’s actions, but I can try to understand them in order to improve and strengthen relationships.”

“Life coach?” She had a life coach? This was news to me.

“The Instagram life coach?” Cletus asked, scratching his newly tamed beard.

He’d gotten a haircut and beard trim this morning first thing, explaining that he wished to look respectable for the meeting with my mother. I loved how much thought and care he put into trying to establish a relationship with her, especially since I could sense how crazy she made him.

“Yes. My Instagram life coach.” Now my momma lifted her chin, standing straight, ready to defend and hold *her* position. “I am getting a lot out of our sessions, and I plan to continue. Indefinitely.”

“That’s great.” Cletus unleashed his solemn head nod, but then surprised me—and clearly my mother—by saying, “I’m proud of you.”

I looked at Cletus, wondering what the heck he was talking about. Proud of her? For seeking out and using an Instagram life coach? Some hack, probably.

Goodness, I am in a grumpy mood.

Rolling my lips between my teeth, I decided to keep my mouth shut on the matter until Cletus and I had a chance to discuss it in private.

“Wait a minute.” The stubborn set of my mother’s jaw diminished, and her stare bounced between us, searching. “I still get to plan the engagement party, don’t I? I mean, y’all promised.”

Again, Cletus looked to me. If I read his expression correctly, he didn’t care who planned the engagement party. Neither did I.

So I said, “Of course. If you still want to plan it, go for it.”

“Well, that’s a comfort.” She exhaled a relieved sounding breath, giving some of her weight to the counter. “I promise, it’ll be elegant and tasteful.”

“Of course it will. I wouldn’t expect you’d know how to throw any other class of event.”

“Thank you, Cletus.” My mother sent Cletus a warm smile, pushing away from the kitchen island. She stopped directly in front of me, seemed to hesitate, and then pulled me into a hug. “My dear girl, I am ashamed of your father and who he’s become. But I am incredibly proud of you.”

I sunk into the embrace and the maternal comfort she offered. My mother hadn’t always—or often—been the kind of parent I’d wished for, but she’d always been free with hugs.

Leaning away, her gaze skated over my face, inspecting the bruises and cuts.

She made a soft sound with her tongue. “Mark my words, I will murder that

man.”

I gaped. She sounded entirely serious. I looked at Cletus to see what he thought of her statement and found him inspecting her with a very particular expression, like he’d just realized something profound or was having deep thoughts about a matter.

Bringing my attention back to my mother, but before I could find my words, she turned and walked to Cletus, placing a hand on his shoulder. “I expect you to protect her, Cletus Winston.”

“I will.” He nodded once, solemn and sincere.

Her eyes seemed to narrow, and her voice held a distinctly threatening edge as she said, “See that you do.”

* * *

My grumpy mood seemed to disintegrate over the weekend. Mostly.

Saturday night dinner at the Winstons’ helped. Watching, listening, and laughing as they all teased each other raised my spirits and served as a good reminder that the dark times in my life wouldn’t last forever. I might struggle, encounter roadblocks and sorrow, but then there’d always be a Winston family gathering on the horizon. I’d always have their banter and shenanigans to look forward to.

An impromptu soap making session on Sunday with Ashley and Shelly also helped. Another reminder that good things were just around the corner. I had the luxury of being responsible for my own happiness. I could either decide to be happy, or decide to be miserable, or any variation within that range.

Therefore, as of Monday morning, I decided to be content and introspective, but I was not yet ready to be happy.

When I spoke to Cletus about it over breakfast before he set off to work—we’d driven to Daisy’s for pancakes and coffee—he’d seemed to understand. “Too much has happened in too short of a time. Forcing happiness now would be like painting over rust.”

“Exactly. Oxidation doesn’t disappear with a coat of primer, you have to sandblast it first.”

He grinned, giving me that look of his that I loved, like I was the most beautiful, desirable person he’d ever seen. But then he dropped his gaze to the table between us.

“I got a message on my phone this morning from Boone. You know how Tricia, Kip, and Elena were arraigned on Saturday? Well, it’s a good thing Alex

cleared out your father's bank accounts and transferred the money back into your momma's renovation accounts."

"Why's that?"

Cletus blinked a few times at his plate of pancakes and reached for his coffee, it was obvious something weighty was on his mind. "It looks like Kip was going to use it to post bail. He, Elena, and Tricia are all maxed out, their bank accounts empty due to the farm stay initial investment. Now they either have to take out a loan or sit in prison until trial."

A weird kind of warmth, I assumed it was vengeful righteousness and satisfaction, burned within me. I caught Cletus sizing me up, presumably checking to see what I thought of this latest development.

I gave him a tight smile and shrugged. "I guess that's too bad for them. Shouldn't go around trying to murder people—or chickens—if you don't want to go to jail."

His lips tugged to one side. "Seems pretty straightforward to me. But there's something else."

"What's that?" I added just another teaspoon of sugar to my coffee, then stirred. For some reason, I was in the mood for sweet coffee today.

"Tricia is claiming that she hit Diane over the head at Old Man Blount's and dragged her to the bee boxes. She's saying she did it all herself."

"Why would she do that?" This information did not sit well with me. Elena needed to be held accountable for the part she played.

"Looks like Tricia is trying to take the fall for Deb and Elena, spare them prison time related to the attack on your momma, the chickens, and the bee boxes."

"Can't we go to the police and tell them the truth? Stop her from confessing?"

"We can try, but I doubt they'll do anything about it. Boone said they don't have any evidence that Deb was involved at all—other than telling Tricia about Nancy's gossip—and nothing that links Elena to the bee boxes. I think they're going to take Tricia's guilty plea and move on."

"It's not right."

"No, it's not." Cletus nodded. "But we can make sure justice is served in other ways."

I narrowed my eyes on him. "You mean us taking revenge."

Now he shrugged, painting on an expression of innocence. "I mean, if that's what you want to do, who am I to argue?"

A short snort of disbelieving laughter burst from my lips. "Yeah. Right. Okay. I guess you're rubbing off on me because that doesn't sound like such a

bad idea.”

He smiled, but then tried to hide it behind a sip of coffee and by clearing his throat. “Anyway, we don’t have to decide anything right now. Best to marinate in it for a bit. I’ll be off work by four. Do you want to come over to the homestead for dinner? Or should I bring you something?”

“I’ll make dinner.” I chewed on my lip, deciding to contemplate Cletus rather than the awful people who’d made this last month hell. We’d have our revenge, one way or the other, sooner or later. Of that I was certain.

Moving on to more agreeable matters, I considered the (handsome as he was clever) man in front of me. I wondered why Cletus, who obviously loved me, had consented to spend the night at my house but would not sleep with me in my bed.

Well, actually, that wasn’t quite true.

Cletus had slept—just slept—with me the entirety of Friday night after all the chaos. But every night since, he’d stayed in my bed until I fell asleep, and then moved to the guest room until sunrise. I wasn’t frustrated about it, per se. I understood why he persisted in his carefulness and nobility, given all that had transpired. But I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t counting down the hours until he made a move.

“Do you need me to pick anything up?” he asked, his attention on the plate of pancakes. I got the sense he was avoiding eye contact or trying to distract himself from the direction of his thoughts.

“I think I have everything I need. Momma stopped by yesterday afternoon with groceries while Ashley and Shelly were over. Oh, and get this, she brought me a book by that Instagram guru she’s using.” I shook my head. “I just don’t understand her. If she wants help, why not seek out a professional? Why go to a social media celebrity?”

Cletus’s gaze moved over my head, thoughtful as he picked up his coffee cup, took a slow sip, set it down, and finally said, “Fundamentally, there are ten types of two types of people in the world.”

I lifted an eyebrow, tilting my head to the side. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You know, when folks say, ‘There’s two types of people in the world, X and Y,’ and fill in the blank with an either-or statement. Like, there’s two types of people in the world, those that like blueberries and those who are serial killers—that kind of thing.”

I smiled. “Yes. I’ve heard those before.”

“Well, fundamentally, there are only ten types of two-types-of-people lists. There are two types of people based on active ability, whether a person can or can’t do something. There are two types of people based on innate competence,

whether a person is naturally one way or another. There are two types of people based on preferences, liking one thing more than another. There are two types of people based on some innate factor not having to do with ability, being born one way or another; for example, looking one way or another. There are two types of people based on experience, either a person has done or experienced a thing or they haven't. There are two types of people—

“What’s your point?”

“Well, I was getting to that.” He sent me a grumpy, harassed look, clearing his throat. “There are two types of people, those that have a particular desire and those that don’t.”

“Okay.”

“Your momma and your daddy have both made mistakes, big ones, mean ones, hurtful ones. But what makes them fundamentally different is that your momma—even being blind to the nature, depth, and breadth of her own failings—knows she has flaws.”

“That’s . . . true.”

“Thusly, I contend there are two types of people, those that want to be a better person and those that don’t think they need to be. Your momma, bless her heart, wants to be a better person. We may not agree with her methods for growing and changing, using the Instagram life coach and such, but at least she’s self-aware enough to have the desire. Self-improvement is not something that should ever be ridiculed, no matter how clumsy the attempt.”

“Huh.” Inspecting him, I marveled at his truly wonderful observation. “Sounds like you’ve given this some thought.”

“When you decided to maintain a relationship with your mother, I wanted to support you in your quest, but I needed to understand why you’d wish it.”

Picking up my fork, I pushed a slice of pancake around in a pool of syrup. “Well, I appreciate you making the effort.”

“If something is important to you, it’s important to me. That will always be true. But I must admit, the effort with your mother was time well spent. She . . .” His eyes moved up and to the right. “If my mother was the giving tree—you know that book, *The Giving Tree*?—well, if my mother was the giving tree, then your mother is a polar bear. She’s fierce in a way my mother never knew how to be. She’s protective, maybe a little overprotective at times. But there’s no doubt in my mind, if she thought someone hurt you, she’d tear them apart limb from limb. That is, if she got the chance. Your father included.”

“She’s made serious mistakes,” I said, reminding him without wanting to spell out all the ways her overprotection had been overbearing while I’d been growing up. Plus, she’d been overprotective of my father too; turning a blind eye

to his abuse because she loved him.

“That’s true. She’s made mistakes, mistakes that ended up hurting you both. Absolutely. I’m not defending her, or giving her a free pass, I’m just saying, our mothers were so different. It’s fascinating. Because of their differences, they both kept us safe and also put us in harm’s path, just in two completely different ways.”

“It is interesting, now that you put it like that.”

“I’m grateful I took the time to know Diane better, doing so helped me understand my own mother better. I guess—” Cletus began, frowned, glanced down at the table this time, and then gave his eyes back to me. “I guess you’re rubbing off on me too, Jenn. And I can’t say I’m sorry. You make me better. Thank you.”

I felt an enormous, automatic smile claim my mouth as a delicious, tender, and—yes—happy warmth swept through me. *He’s mine.*

Mine. Mine. Mine.

“Oh! Before I forget.” Cletus snapped his fingers, leaning to one side and reaching into the pocket of his coat. “This is for you, from Shelly.” He slid a greeting card-sized envelope across the table.

Picking it up, I worked my finger into the flap and gently tore the envelope open. “Why didn’t she give it to me yesterday?”

Cletus scratched his jaw. “Well, see, it’s really from me, but Shelly owed me a favor, so it’s also kind of from her. You’ll see.”

Quirking an eyebrow at him, I pulled out two pieces of stiff cardboard which seemed to be protecting a photograph between them. Discarding the top piece of cardboard, I stared at the picture for several seconds before it dawned on me what I was looking at.

My gaze cut to my fiancé. “Why are you giving me a photograph of male bottoms?”

“Those aren’t just any male bottoms. Those are—” he reached over and pointed to each bottom in turn “—Billy’s, Beau’s, and Roscoe’s. And that’s mine, but you already knew that.”

I wrinkled my nose, but I also smiled, and then I laughed, turning the photograph facedown on the table. “Why are you giving me a photograph of your brother’s bare bo—oh my God!” I leaned forward, dropping my voice to a whisper. “Is this about that day? When my mom bought the cows and I flashed your brothers?”

“Well, technically, you mooned them. But yes. That’s what this is about.”

“Cletus! How—why—what—”

“Revenge,” he said, looking at me like he was confused by my confusion.

“Obviously.”

“So you got Shelly to, what? I mean—” I looked at the picture again, studying it. “It looks like y’all posed for this.”

“We did. Shelly told them it was for an art project.” Cletus took a sip of his coffee. “Beau, of course, was all gung-ho. Roscoe too. Only Billy took convincing.”

I covered my face, now laughing in earnest. He also chuckled, but he sounded a shade sinister too. After a while, I tucked the photo back in the envelope and wiped at my eyes.

“I can’t believe you.”

“Do you like it?”

“You are . . . unbelievable.” I sighed happily, placing my elbow on the tabletop. My chin fell to my upturned hand. “I love you, Cletus,” I said dazedly, in a dazed daze, seeing only him and his gorgeous lips, his clever eyes, and his magnificent beard.

His focus dropped to my lips, and Cletus answered my grin with one of his own. But his voice seemed to be roughened with emotion as he said, “And I love you, quite a lot more than can be adequately expressed with words.”

“Then I guess you’ll have to show me.”

Cletus’s gaze sharpened, jumping to mine, almost harsh in its intensity. It sent a shock of something both wonderful and overwhelming from my heart to my fingertips and toes and everywhere in between. I held my breath, transfixed.

“I guess I will,” he said, and the words sounded like a promise.

But they also sounded, just a little bit, like a threat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Selfishness must always be forgiven you know, because there is no hope of a cure.”

— Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*

Cletus

Operation Food for the Starving Badger was a go. And for the record, I was the badger.

Tasks had been completed in order and in an orderly fashion. Events were running according to schedule. All the equipment and materials had arrived at the community center without incident and had been placed backstage behind the curtain of the cafetorium while successfully avoiding any pesky authority figures milling about—i.e. Jackson James.

I’d been avoiding Jackson James for years, but even more so recently, for obvious reasons. I sensed he felt badly about things with Jenn, my errant assumptions and accusations. Apparently, Jackson James was not a villain, an irritating development. The (Armadillo?) designation would have to be removed, once and for all.

Now some of y’all might be wondering why I’d chosen the backstage area of the community center’s cafetorium on a Friday night as the place and time for

my seduction plan. The reason was simple: stage lighting, backdrops, and rafters for the quick appearance (or disappearance) of set pieces. Nowhere else in Green Valley could I make seduction quite a production. Well, nowhere else in Green Valley with less than five days to make it all happen.

But I digress.

Beau sat in his usual spot, eating coleslaw, and flirting with Shelly. *Right on time.*

Drew and Ashley were on my right, holding hands, gazing deeply into each other's eyes, and discussing poetry, or philosophy, or some such palaver. *As was typical.*

Billy, my wingman for the evening who didn't know he was my wingman, sat across from me holding court. *Exactly as I'd planned.*

If everyone remained focused on Billy and his unprecedented appearance at the jam session two times in the first two months of the year, then no one would notice my presence, or lack thereof. Some folks were still giving me a wide berth after the pretend fake fight with Jenn three weeks ago. She and I hadn't been seen together in public since, and I imagined there'd be a lot of curiosity once we did step out again as a couple. But for now, tonight, they left me alone.

Furthermore, they should all follow Billy out of the cafeteria portion of the cafetorium, leaving the audience area vacant for maximum privacy during the critical moment. *Excellent.*

Surreptitiously surveying the crowd gathered around my older brother, I checked my watch. Half past five. The jam session would begin promptly at 6:00 PM, which meant everyone would start clearing out of the cafeteria between 5:45 and 5:50 PM. *It's time.*

I looked at Shelly—who, technically, might've been my actual wingwoman since she was the only one privy to the plan and was responsible for emptying out the cafeteria—and gave a nod.

"You don't look so good," she said, like a robot.

No matter. Shelly often sounded like a robot. What mattered was she got the lines right.

"You know, I think my stomach is bothering me." I rubbed my belly.

"That's not good," she said, a little twinkle in her eye even though she still sounded like a robot.

"Don't feel good?" Ashley scrutinized me, her brow wrinkling in concern. "That's too bad."

"You should go home, Cletus," Shelly said, nodding a nod eerily similar—in nodding pace and facial expression—to my somber nod.

I squinted at her. She almost smiled.

“I think I will go.” I said my lines, standing and holding my abdomen for effect. “Tell everyone in the bluegrass room I’m sorry I had to leave.”

Offering perfunctory salutations and departing regards, I left the cafeteria at exactly 5:42 PM, walked to the bathroom and washed my hands, and then strolled to the entrance just as Jenn crossed the threshold at 5:45 PM on the dot, folding her jacket over her arm.

And for the record, she was the food. Furthermore, she looked delicious. My mouth watered as my eyes devoured the sight of her dressed in a pair of black lace patterned tights, black leather boots with a spiked heel, and a body-clinging black long-sleeve dress. Her hair was long and wavy around her shoulders, and her lips were painted bright red. *Fuck me.*

“Hey, honey!” She threw her hand in the air and waved, skipping when she saw me, which wasn’t at all odd if you knew her well. In fact, her excitement to see me, each and every time we met, was precious to me, just like her. Jogging over, she wrapped her arms around my neck and placed a sweet kiss on my lips, the soft curves of her pressing against the hard planes of me, and my body stirred, awoke, restless. *Starving.*

I inhaled deeply, holding on to the breath while we embraced, because this was not the place or the time to lift her skirt up, pin her against the wall, and have my way with her body. The place was less than fifty paces away. The time was in five minutes.

But once we’re there and the clock reads 5:50 PM, all bets are off.

After a moment, Jenn’s hands slid from my neck to my shoulders. She pulled away. Her eyes were wide with curiosity.

“Are you okay? Why are you so stiff?”

I knew she meant my chest, arms, legs, back, and the breath I held, not the disobedient part of me which had been methodically diverting blood from my brain all day long in anticipation of this very moment.

And since my brain wasn’t in full working order, I grabbed her hand, yanked her down the hall toward the door leading to the backstage area, and muttered, “Come with me.”

She said nothing as she followed, but that might’ve been because she had to jog to keep up.

Once there, I opened the door without the key, having covertly propped it open earlier. I then shut it behind us, testing to ensure it locked *completely*, and continued in the pitch black toward our destination. She couldn’t see, but I could. I reasoned that the darkness would heighten her delight when the full magnitude of my surprise was revealed.

“Where are we going?” she asked on a whisper, sounding excited. “Is this a

surprise?”

The crowd from beyond the curtain continued their chatter, providing sound cover and homogenous background noise. Soon—in less than four minutes—it would be silent. I trusted Shelly to drive out the crowd.

We were just about to the bed, and I blinked around the floor of the stage in the dimness, searching for the button. Finding it, I set my hands on Jenn’s hip, positioned her just a foot away from the mattress, and stepped on the button.

A few things happened at once: we and the bed behind her were illuminated by overhead strands of fairy lights, set in a crisscross pattern to resemble the night sky and stars. A backdrop of the northern lights as viewed from Iceland fell in front of the curtain. Overhead colored lamps flickered on and off, recreating the effect of the ebbing and glowing photons caused by charged particles from the sun striking atoms in Earth’s atmosphere. A bottle of champagne within an ice bucket on top of a bearskin rug placed on a platform descended from the rafters, showering rose petals as it lowered.

Also, Jennifer gasped.

She spun all around, as though she didn’t know where to look first, and when she spotted the bearskin rug settle in place on top of the petals, she laughed with delight, giving me back her eyes.

“Oh, Cletus. It’s so—”

I kissed her.

Fisting my hand in her hair, I yanked her head back and kissed the fuck out of her and knew that this had been a mistake.

This plan? A mistake.

What had I been thinking? Champagne? Caviar? Bearskin rugs? Watching a simulated version of the aurora borealis while slowly seducing her? Using the backstage area of the cafetorium at the community center instead of just fucking her senseless in her bed at home? All of it foolishness. I was done waiting, I was so hungry, there would be no finesse or control.

Her fingers came to my shoulders for purchase, and it was a good thing because my hands were already under her skirt, lifting it, analyzing the type and thickness of the underwear she had on so that next steps could be taken with all haste.

But then, I found none.

She pulled away long enough to rasp out, “I’m not wearing any,” then her mouth was back on mine.

I growled like a starving badger, unable to keep a leash on this fierce longing for another second. I didn’t even think about stopping, couldn’t comprehend it. I grabbed her bare backside and realized her tights were thigh-highs suspended to

a garter belt.

Another growl rumbled out of me, and I pushed her back on the bed. She fell, bouncing upon impact, her eyes big and watchful as I yanked down the zipper of my pants and placed a knee between her legs. Spreading her wider, her skirt pulled up over her hips, revealing her dusty pink opening, her clitoris, the smooth, pale skin between her thighs. Gripping myself, I reached into my back pocket, tore open a condom, and rolled it down my shaft.

“Cletus,” she said on a hitching breath, watching me, her fingers gripping the fabric of her skirt like she didn’t know whether to pull it down or hike it up.

Wordlessly, I sprang on her, taking the material of her dress out of her hands and pushing it up, exposing the rest of her body. She leaned forward, helping me pull it completely over her head. I swallowed another growl because she wasn’t wearing a bra either. *Too long. It’s been too long.*

I fastened my mouth to her breast, swirling my tongue around her nipple, biting, eliciting a soft, urgent cry. Hungry for the taste of her, the feel of her soft, smooth skin beneath mine, I sucked again, palming her other breast. Settling between her legs, I gave her clitoris a long stroke, and then another.

Turning her head to the side, she gasped for air as I reached between her legs, finding her hot and wet, silky and slick to the touch. Her greedy walls clamped down and pulled on my finger and she moaned, her eyes closing, her head lifting, her lips seeking mine.

I evaded her mouth, wanting her ticklish and tender neck as I positioned myself and pushed inside, sucking in a deep breath that filled my lungs even as they burned to take and claim this woman, to brand her as she’d branded me. *Starving.*

I moved, and it felt so fucking good.

Rolling my hips, flexing my stomach and bottom, the most erotic sound left her, an animalistic, thoughtless, senseless cry. Her eyes opened but they’d glazed over, like she was lost in a labyrinth of lust and longing. I bit her neck, slid my hands to her wrists and held them next to her sides as I bowed my back and looked down. I wanted to watch, I wanted to see, I wanted evidence beyond the sensation, and the sight was exquisite. It was art, beauty and gluttony and purpose.

My gaze trailed upward to her stomach, ribs, and I thrust deeper, harder, her body pushed higher on the bed. Her hips seemed to rock instinctively, increasing in tempo, searching, straining.

She said my name. She made promises. She said please. She said a lot of things. Each syllable, each word fueled me, though I did not really hear or process them. She was close, and so was I, and I wanted her orgasm first. I

needed it.

And then I would make her orgasm again.

Releasing her wrist, I moved my thumb between us and circled her clit, tapped it. She trembled, sucking in an unsteady breath. Jenn pressed her head back, exposing her neck, her body taut. She came, and I followed, losing control of my rhythm, the last of my thrusts inelegant, hedonistic, selfish.

Jenn's arms came around my torso, encouraging me to give her my weight, which I did. But just for a moment. I placed a kiss on her lips, her jaw, her neck, her breast. I stood and turned away to dispose of the condom. On my way back, I pulled my shirt up and off, tossing it away . . . somewhere. Next came my shoes, socks, pants, and boxers.

She propped herself up on her elbows, watching the reveal of my body, a lazy smile on her face.

But then she stiffened. "Cletus. It's quiet," she whispered, glancing over her shoulder at the aurora borealis backdrop between us and the front curtain.

I stretched out on the bed, laving my tongue across the center of her breast, having admittedly forgotten where we were or that I'd had a plan, and part of that plan had been the complete clearing out of the cafeteria and the locking of the doors, never mind champagne and making love on a bearskin rug.

"Cletus!" She gripped my arm, shaking me. "What if someone heard us?"

"They're gone." I wrapped a hand behind her knee and tugged, encouraging her to straddle me because I wanted the view. My single-mindedness in this moment should've concerned me. I could not be bothered to be concerned. *I want her again. Now.*

Jenn allowed me to move her, and I slid my palms down her sides to her hips, liking the way my hands looked on her body.

She squirmed, a little puff of air leaving her and drawing my attention to her face. "Are you okay?" I asked, bracing myself for her answer. It's not like I'd been especially communicative about my actions or solicitous of her desires.

On the other hand, she came. So . . . we're probably good.

"I feel sublime." Jenn stretched, her breathtaking body arching in a mesmerizing curve, her delectable breasts distracting me from the giant, satisfied grin on her lovely face.

"Really?" I asked her breast, massaging the pliant perfection. I loved her breasts so much. *They deserve love notes. Sonatas and sonnets.*

"Yes. Why do you look surprised?"

"Now that we've completed phase one and you can ruminate on the events of the evening, you're not upset? About me being sneaky and high-handed?"

"What are you talking about?" Her amused question brought my eyes back to

hers. “This wasn’t sneaky! This was wonderful. I love it when you take control, then I can just enjoy myself and not wonder if I’m doing everything right.” She made a face, like she thought I was funny. “Do you want me to pretend to be upset? Fake reluctance? My pen pal told me some men and women like that kind of thing, but only when both people are one hundred percent on the same page ahead of time.”

I flinched back, momentarily at a loss for words. “Are you—are you talking about role-playing?”

“Yes.” She nodded vehemently. “But before we do that, we should talk about it. I don’t want to do anything that’ll make you uncomfortable.”

I wracked my brain, trying to come up with something Jenn could do—which also turned her on—that would make me uncomfortable. If it ended in her orgasm, I couldn’t think of a single thing.

“Again, why do you look so surprised?”

“I . . .” I scratched my temple, my brain suddenly too full of ideas, future sexy encounters, situations, costumes, props.

PROPS!

I loved props. And wigs.

“You don’t believe me.”

“It’s just, I lured you here under false pretenses, and then forgot to seduce you.” Not that I had any regrets. In about ten minutes, I’d likely lose my mind again, it was good we were having this conversation now while I remained somewhat coherent.

“Then why do I feel seduced?”

“You do?”

“I loved every minute of it. I love seeing you go crazy for me.” Shifting so that she leaned over me, she traced the tip of her finger along my cheekbone to my temple. “You seem to think I’m not obsessed with your body. I assure you, I am obsessed with your body, and all the things it can do, and all the things I want to do to it, and all the things I want it to do to me.” As though to punctuate this statement, her hand trailed enticingly down my chest and stomach, a hard, grabbing, greedy caress and scratching nails. After a moment’s hesitation, she lifted up on her knees and fisted me in her hand.

I sucked in a breath, gritting my teeth. “Don’t do that unless you’re ready for phase two of the plan.”

She grinned again, widely. “There’s a phase two?”

“Yes. And it requires a tarp.”

“A tarp!” She tugged on me, her eyes bright with excitement.

I hissed, and she let me go, maybe thinking her ministrations were painful.

They were, in a way, but her enthusiasm was pure perfection.

Grabbing her wrist, I brought her hand back and closed her fingers around the thick length. She watched our hands move and I watched her, showing her what I wanted *now*, which was slightly different than what I'd wanted before.

"Like this?" she asked, seemingly entranced.

"Just like that."

Her tongue darted out to wet her lips, and her eyes returned to mine. I admired the hazy quality of her gaze, the hunger, the eagerness to please.

"Cletus," she whispered, swallowing, her hand still stroking me. "I may not know everything about sex yet, like the logistics of all the positions and such, but I think about your body all the time—and, obviously, your heart and your mind." She added *heart* and *mind* as though they were afterthoughts. "But just so we're clear, I'd like you to lure and seduce me, all the time."

"I don't want to be selfish," I said on a rush. But then I realized that statement was a lie, and I would not lie to Jenn, no matter what. My ten-minute window was looking more like five.

"Actually, that was a lie. I do want to be selfish," I grumbled.

Before she could respond, I pushed her hand away and grabbed her torso, starving for the taste of her skin. I closed my mouth over her luscious breast and sucked, biting the already tender flesh.

She squirmed, panting. "Oh, that kinda hurts. Do it again."

I did, my hand sliding between her legs, fingering the slickness of her opening. "I want this."

Her throat worked, her nails digging into my shoulders, and she nodded.

I lifted the finger that had been inside her, painted her lips, and then dipped it inside her mouth, my body tensing with anticipation as she swirled her tongue around me, sucking, hot and wet and restless.

"I want this."

Her eyes on mine, she nodded, opening her mouth to release my finger and moving down my body as though to accept another part of me.

I shook my head, catching her arm. "But first . . ." Encircling her wrist, I tugged. "I want you to sit on my face."

She gulped, looking uncertain but nodding. Gingerly, she sat up, placing a knee on one side of my head, her gaze on mine. She hesitated.

"Will you be able to breathe?"

"Oh yes." I grinned, cupping the perfection of her bare backside, encouraging her to place the other knee into position and open herself up to me. And then I licked.

She shivered, her hands reaching behind her for balance. "I—I—"

Jenn didn't finish her sentence, couldn't, and I watched every trembling breath, every sway of her breasts and body above me as I feasted and she rocked her hips against my tongue. *Gorgeous.*

I craved my Jenn to distraction, to my detriment, but also to my gain and benefit. We were still at the beginning, *our* beginning, and I'd never been as truly happy in my entire life as I lived and breathed and endured during the moments we spent together. As I watched her thoroughly come apart, relinquish control, and give herself completely to me, I marveled at the satisfaction I received in return. And it felt selfish.

But then, maybe selfishness and sacrifice can be one and the same, when they're done in love.

-The End-

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Penny Reid is the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* Bestselling Author of the Winston Brothers, Knitting in the City, Rugby, Dear Professor, and Hypothesis series. She used to spend her days writing federal grant proposals as a biomedical researcher, but now she just writes books. She's also a full time mom to three diminutive adults, wife, daughter, knitter, crocheter, sewer, general crafter, and thought ninja.

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SNEAK PEEK: BEARD WITH ME, WINSTON
BROTHERS BOOK #6

AVAILABLE NOW!

“Nothing takes the taste out of peanut butter quite like unrequited love.”

— CHARLES M. SCHULZ, CHARLIE BROWN / PEANUTS

Scarlet

Caution tape barred the way to the chorus room. Gulping a hard bubble of air, my attention moved from the yellow tape to the hallway beyond it, to a white poster board next to the door. The sign had been set on an easel and it read, WET PAINT – DO NOT ENTER.

“No. No, no, no!” My eyes darted again to the yellow tape.

I gripped the paper sack holding my free school lunch. A sound of despair tumbled from my mouth. Heart galloping, pits sweating, my tongue tasting sour with dread, I had *a moment*.

And by *a moment* I mean I freaked out.

Officially, I wasn't allowed to eat in the chorus room. No one was. But early on in my freshman year, I'd snuck in and hid myself between two rows of chairs, careful to dash inside before Mrs. McClure arrived for her lesson planning hour. I'd become quite skilled at leaving unnoticed after the bell rang for fourth period, when her students wandered in.

This had worked for the last (almost) year and a half, but it obviously wouldn't work today. Making matters worse, this was the last month of school before winter break. There was no sneaky way to find a place to sit in the lunchroom when I'd spent the majority of the year *not* eating in the lunchroom.

Tugging on the recently repaired strap of my very, very old backpack—some might even consider it an antique—I stuffed the food inside, harsh movements

made clumsy by swelling frustration. But then I paused, taking a slow, deep breath, and telling my shaking hands and thundering heart to cool it.

“How does the ocean say hello to the beach?” I asked myself, quietly supplying the answer, “Gives it a little wave.”

The stupid joke helped ease the tangle in my stomach and I cracked a smile, laughing lightly.

Don't be stupid. This is no big deal. Whatever.

The first fourteen and a half years of life had taught me many valuable lessons. One of the most important was that the magnitude of disappointment was directly proportional to the magnitude of expectations. I'd known this for a while, but the concept had finally solidified in my mind this year during physics class when we'd learned about Newton's third law: *For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.* It applied to life and hopes and dreams and expectations too.

Now I had a math equation to estimate my level of disappointment based on my level of expectation. Isn't that nice?

My first mistake was coming to rely upon the chorus room. Second mistake was allowing myself to look forward to this moment. Today was Friday. Eating lunch in a quiet, heated place was a luxury. Free of people, free of bugs, free of people who behaved like bugs. Now I had nowhere to eat my lunch that wasn't free of bug people.

“Come on now, Scarlet. You know better,” I murmured, rolling my eyes and angling my chin. “It could be worse. It could be the *first* month of school.”

My crack of a smile widened, and I sighed as I turned to the tricky zipper of my bag. I needed to be careful. If it was unzipped past a certain point, it wouldn't re-zip and I'd go the rest of the day with my books and papers falling all over the place.

Plus, I'd have to find a new zipper to sew inside and that would be difficult. Blythe Tanner, who was usually my source for clothes and such items in return for help with can and glass recycling, wasn't speaking to me ever since my dad threatened to disembowel her dad two months ago. Her father owned the junkyard and my father wanted to store stolen cars in his junkyard. Mr. Tanner—not being a criminal—refused.

A shiver raced down my spine and I promptly submerged it—and thoughts of my father—using a trick I'd picked up at ten years old: rephrase a situation as a scripted comedy TV show. *Good old dad, always threatening disembowelments. What a character!*

Yeah. I talked to myself a lot. I told myself a lot of jokes. I even had inside jokes . . . with myself. I guess folks needed to talk to someone, and it was mostly

just me around for conversation. But that was just fine. I was an awesome conversationalist.

Closing my eyes, I knelt on the ground and placed the backpack carefully on the floor so I could gently tuck my food inside on top of my jacket. The back of my hand brushed against my prized possession, a Walkman CD player, and I was careful not to knock it around. With my eyes shut, sounds that were usually background noise sharpened and increased in volume. The rumble of students talking and eating became a roar, trays being set on tables, soda cans opening, laughter.

My stomach sunk, but only for half a second. Squaring my shoulders and lifting my chin, I immediately demanded that my stomach turn itself around and return to my middle. I did not have time for sinking stomachs, not over something so silly.

Lunch would be over in forty-five minutes. *Forty-five minutes is no big deal. I'll figure it out.* Pretending to fiddle with the front pocket of my bag, just in case a teacher happened by, I debated my options.

The lunchroom was not a possibility. Two choices awaited me within: Try to sit with the other Iron Wraiths kids, or try to sit with anyone else, because there would be no empty tables. Green Valley was bursting at the seams, too many students and too few seats.

I couldn't sit with the Iron Wraiths kids. They'd most likely let me, seeing as how my father was the club president, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Prince King would probably try something horrible to get my attention or make me angry, and then Carla Creavers would do something to get Cletus's attention—who never seemed to sit at the same table twice—maybe flirt with Prince King. Prince King looked like Jared Leto, but he was a complete jerk.

Anyway, Prince King would then get overaggressive with Carla, and then Cletus would intervene—even though it wouldn't be about Carla, it would be about Prince being “ungentlemanly”—and then there would be a fight and we'd all get detention.

But I couldn't sit with anyone else. No one wanted to be my partner for class projects—ever—and I honestly didn't blame them. Who would want their kids hanging out with one of the Wraiths kids? And the president's daughter? No. Plus, I was under no delusions about the state of my clothes and appearance. Clothes and appearance in high school are everything, and my nickname since seventh grade had vacillated between Smelly Scarlet or Sweaty Scarlet.

“But, you know, their loss,” I mumbled, shrugging.

Another option was the hallway just off the cafeteria, but I quickly dismissed this possibility. Principal Sylvester had forbidden students from the corridor

during lunch since last month, after Cletus Winston and Prince King had gotten into a fistfight. Now it was off-limits and heavily patrolled.

A noise snagged my attention, the sound of a toilet flushing, and I turned my head toward it. A few seconds later, two girls exited the bathroom, deep in conversation. I lowered my eyes to my backpack and redoubled my pretend fiddling while they walked past, paying me no mind. As soon as their voices faded, I returned my attention to the girls' bathroom door and EUREKA!

Of course!

With my lunch tucked safely in my backpack—and the tricky zipper closed—I brought the bag to my shoulder and stood; my decision made easy by the obvious choice.

“What did one toilet say to the other?” I muttered to myself, walking toward the bathroom and answering in my head, *You look flushed.*

My lips curved at the joke, and I chuckled. “You look flushed. That’s funny. Or maybe it could be, *you look pooped.* Or how about, *why are you so pissed?*” The last punchline had me laughing and shaking my head at myself again, muttering, “Good one, Scarlet. You should write that—”

I was so lost in my self-congratulations for the superior punchline, I almost collided with the boys' bathroom door as it unexpectedly opened, missing a door handle to the groin by jumping backward and to the side. But my quick thinking meant that my shoulder and chest collided with the boy who was exiting the bathroom, which meant that I fell backward on my ass.

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. As previously noted, this law applies to life, hopes, dreams, expectations, and masses traveling at varying velocities, especially when one of those masses is a huge boy and the other mass is me.

“Are you—” the boy started, taking a hasty step in my direction that made his sneakers squeak on the linoleum, but then he stopped speaking and moving just as suddenly.

I froze, a colossal spike of renewed dismay chasing the air from my lungs. I fought to keep the grimace from my face, and not just because my tailbone was going to be sore for several days as a result of my graceless fall. I didn't need to look up to know this boy who'd accidentally knocked me down was none other than high school junior, current star quarterback of the Green Valley football team, every girl's fantasy boyfriend, and my childhood nemesis, Billy Winston.

Nowadays, I avoided him and he ignored me. Actually, in the scheme of things, it was probably more accurate to say I was beneath his notice. So . . .

“Scarlet,” he said, like the word was a dirty one, and then released a quiet, drawn-out, annoyed huff. “Are you okay?”

I nodded wordlessly. He didn't move.

When we were kids, I would've thrown some insult at him. I would've felt anger and irritation at being knocked down by Billy, even if it was an accident. I had a kind of fearless confidence when I was a kid, like I really mattered. All that changed in middle school; not because of any one big event or wound; more like thousands of tiny cuts (literally and figuratively). I'd grown tired of fighting the world because the world always won.

ANYWAY.

Presently, my eyes on his feet, I kept my mouth shut, waiting for him to leave.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, like he was about to leave. But he didn't.

"Here." His tone laced with impatience, he reached out a hand. "Let me help you up."

Instinct had me flinching back and tucking my chin to my chest.

"What the hell, Scarlet? It's not like I'm going to hit you," he grumbled, sounding even more exasperated.

I sat frozen, heat climbing up my neck and cheeks. *Just leave*, I wanted to holler. *Just freaking go!* Little kid Scarlet would have.

A moment passed and his hand dropped. Another moment passed and I heard him exhale a sigh, louder this time. Without another word, he walked around me. I listened as his footsteps carried him away, until the sound was swallowed by the maniacally cheerful cafeteria chatter.

Then and only then did I allow myself to breathe. But I would not allow myself to think about what had just happened.

"No. Nothing happened," I said. "Nothing happened. I tripped and I fell. He was never here. Nothing happened."

"Uh, I'm pretty sure something happened."

My head snapped up and I found Ben McClure standing not more than fifteen feet away, his hands stuffed in his jeans pockets, his attention on the other end of the corridor where the cafeteria was, and where Billy Winston had just disappeared.

"Hey, Scarlet," he said, sounding distracted.

"Oh. Hey, Ben," I croaked. My cheeks probably matched the color of my hair by now.

If Billy Winston was Green Valley's picture of the perfect high school boyfriend, Ben McClure was their image of an ideal man, full stop. Ben was about two years older than Billy, but they were both tall and big and square-jawed and deep-voiced. Until last year, when he graduated, Ben had been the

starting quarterback of the football team. Billy had taken his place.

But that's about where the resemblances ended.

Where Billy's hair was dark brown, almost black, Ben's was golden blond. Billy had icy blue eyes that felt sharp and piercing, like needles and knives every time he looked at you. Honestly, Billy's looks were off-putting. He was just too handsome, movie-star handsome, looking at him directly hurt just a little. But Ben's blues were warm and pretty, like bluebells in the summer. His handsomeness was softer, more approachable, boyish.

Both considered good mannered, but Billy's idea of polite was coldly formal, whereas Ben treated everyone like his best friend.

Also, Billy never smiled. Even when he was a kid, he never smiled. Ben's smile was near constant, just varying in size and intention based on the occasion. He had his smile of greeting, his smile of encouragement, his shy smile, his amused smile, his mischievous smile, his—

Ahhhh. Stop it, Scarlet. Stop torturing yourself.

In case you hadn't guessed by my gushing, I had a bit of a crush on Ben McClure. But in my defense, I think everyone in town did too. Men, women, children, dogs. He was so darn friendly and *good*. He was the best at everything.

"Whatcha doing?" I felt his gaze come to rest on me where I still sat grimacing on the ground.

Swallowing around the unidentified oral object—an UOO, if you will—making my throat tight, I forced a chuckle. "Uh, well. That's a valid question. When I figure it out, I'll let you know."

I snuck a peek at him as I found my feet, certain my grin was goofy rather than charming. But that didn't matter. First off, we were friends . . . of a sort. Ben was nice to me and went out of his way to engage me in conversation whenever we happened upon each other. That didn't make me special. Ben was friends or friendly with most everyone in town.

Regardless, it still meant something to me. One of my favorite things about Ben McClure was that he didn't care about who anyone's parents were, or where they were from, or how old their clothes were, or how old *they* were. He might've cared about how I smelled on summer days when showers were hard to come by, but he never said anything about it.

Point was, he was kind to everybody, all the time, no matter how much of a fool you made of yourself, no matter who you were.

Basically, he was perfect.

Sigh.

Ben's eyebrows pulled together as he crossed to me, his eyes traveling over my person, and his examination made me hotter under the collar.

“Are you all right? That was quite a fall.” He looked and sounded uncharacteristically irritated as he said this.

“Y—you saw that?” I asked haltingly, wrestling with both my mortification and my heart, which had suddenly gone squishy.

“Yeah, I saw it.” He gave me a small smile that seemed to be tempered with concern. “You keep running into doors like that, I’ll have to follow you around to catch you.”

“Oh. Ha. Hahahaha.” *YES PLEASE.*

He lifted his chin toward the cafeteria. “Was that William Winston? Knocking you down and not helping you up?”

Yikes.

I shook my head quickly. “It wasn’t his fault. I wasn’t looking where I was going, and he was just minding his own business, and there I was, flying down the hall, not paying attention. And he offered to help me up, I just—”

“Scarlet.” Ben lifted his hands, showing me his palms. “You don’t need to be defending William to me. I know how he is.”

I repressed my urge to set Ben straight about defending William—Billy—Winston. I just didn’t want Ben going to Billy’s momma and repeating what he witnessed. Then Mrs. Winston would talk to her son and make him apologize or something. The last thing I needed was Billy’s ire. And besides, he did offer me a hand. I was the one who refused to take it.

“That looked like quite a fall.” Ben stepped forward, his pretty eyes losing any trace of frustration or resentment; the result caused a warming effect on my stomach.

Or maybe I was just hungry.

“Are you okay?” he asked quietly, looking concerned.

I made a clumsy little snorting sound, waving away his worry. “Oh me? Nah. I’m fine. It would take a lot more than that to hurt my backside. Have you seen how much padding I got back there? That thing is well protected.” Now I snorted conspiratorially, as much as one can snort conspiratorially . . .

Dear Lord in heaven, why am I such a dork?

Truth be told, concern made me uncomfortable and I wasn’t thinking about my words or my snort, I just wanted to change the subject. Growing up, folks never seemed to show me overt concern without an ulterior motive, and I’d known Mrs. McClure’s son long enough to know he didn’t ever have an ulterior motive. Therefore, Scarlet the Grand Dame of Dorkiness, always emerged when he showed concern. Somehow, I’d have to figure out how to subdue the Grand Dame before she reigned supreme.

Meanwhile, Ben straightened, shoving his hands back in his pockets, his eyes

skipping over my shoulder to look down the hall. “I haven’t—I would never—” He shook his head, like he was clearing it of something. Then he laughed lightly. “Scarlet, if you’re sure you’re okay, I’ll let it drop.”

“I’m fine.” I grinned, dorkily, I’m sure showcasing a mouth full of crooked teeth. His teeth were straight as pine trees planted in a row. How I envied his teeth.

“Okay then.” Warm smile in place, his gaze once more traveling over my face, he took a small step to the side. “Have you seen my momma? I’m supposed to meet her for lunch.”

Ah! Of course. Ben often met his mom for lunch on Fridays since he’d graduated. He went to college in Nashville but drove home most weekends to help his parents. From my hiding place in the chorus room I refused to eavesdrop on their conversations, focusing my attention on books or whatnot. But I did hear their shared laughter—her light, musical chuckle and his deep, rolling belly laugh—from time to time. It always put me in such a good mood, and I’d catch myself smiling later when I remembered it.

Hearing other people laugh at something friendly, something good-natured, was one of my favorite sounds.

“I honestly don’t know where Mrs. McClure is. The chorus room is closed.” I pointed toward it. “Something about wet paint.”

“That’s right. She said to meet her in the courtyard.” Ben checked his watch, then glanced at me. “I think I’m late. Where’s your lunch? Isn’t it lunchtime?”

“It’s in my bag. I was going to eat in the—well, in my normal spot, but it’s not open right now, so I thought I’d eat in the bathroom.” I cringed, not meaning to confess so much, yet not terribly surprised I had. There was just something about Ben that made me always tell the truth. I couldn’t imagine lying to such a good, kind face. Or the person behind it.

“Scarlet, what are you talking about? You can’t eat in the bathroom. It’s not sanitary.” He gave me a funny look, like he was trying to scold me and not laugh at the same time. “Why not eat in the cafeteria?”

Every muscle in my body tensed at the suggestion, my eyes lowering to the floor, another UOO in my throat. “I’d prefer not.” Not only that, but it wasn’t something I wished to discuss, not with beautiful Ben.

“I’ll sit with you, if you like.”

I shook my head, not even his sweet suggestion could lessen the finality of my decision. Plus, Scarlet St. Claire eating lunch in the cafeteria with Ben McClure wouldn’t go unnoticed. I moved my weight to the left, intending to walk around him. “I need to go to the bathroom anyway.”

Ben leaned to the side, blocking my way. “Okay, you don’t want to eat in the

cafeteria. How about this, you come with me and have lunch with my momma in the courtyard. Where's your jacket?"

"In my backpack, but I'm not allowed in the—"

"It'll be fine." He slid his hand down my arm and entwined our fingers, sending racing goose bumps up my arm and in my brain.

ALERT!!!

We were touching. Oh my dear Lord, we were touching. Now I was sweating again. Something about being touched in a nice way, and apparently by anyone I had a crush on, made my glands activate and act a drama. I guess I knew what that something was, but still. The overreaction was frustrating.

"Come on, she'd love it." Ben tugged. "You know you're one of her favorite students."

Self-preservation made me drag my feet. It wasn't that I didn't want to have lunch with Ben and Mrs. McClure. Rather, going through the cafeteria in order to get to the courtyard was the problem. I didn't want to draw that kind of attention to myself.

Picture it: me, walking through the Green Valley High cafeteria, holding hands with *Ben McClure*. Yeah, that wouldn't go unnoticed, even if it didn't mean anything.

"Wait a minute, wait."

"Scarlet, time is running out. If you want to eat, we should go meet my mom. And I'm not letting you eat in the bathroom. So, it's either you and I sit together in the cafeteria, or you come with me to the courtyard."

"Okay, okay. I'll come with." I gently withdrew my fingers from his, needing him not to touch me so my brain would work. "You, uh, you go on first and I'll walk behind."

He inspected me, his eyebrows pulled together into a V, making him look both amused and confused. "You don't need to walk behind me, Scarlet. I'm not ashamed to be seen with you."

"I know that, Ben," I replied softly, my mind and my belly tripping all over themselves at his words.

Mrs. Winston was sweet to me, Mrs. McClure was too. But Ben's sweetness landed different. It felt like a light touch rather than a squeezing hug.

Reaching for my hand again, his mouth pulled to the side. I took a step back, evading him, and gripped the straps of my backpack with closed fists. "Go on. I'll follow."

He studied me again. "Hold up. Are you ashamed to be seen with me?"

I rushed forward unthinkingly, horrified that he'd even ask the question, and grabbed hold of his arm. "Oh no. Never. I'd never be embarrassed of you. You're

just the nicest, most . . .” I licked my lips, knowing I shouldn’t continue *that* sentence, and added quietly, “I know how lucky I am, that we’re friends.” I was. So lucky.

His fair treatment of me over the last few years meant that other people hadn’t been quite so harsh, and for that I was eternally grateful. Ben McClure was the reigning golden boy of Green Valley, since his birth. Everyone knew the story. His momma and daddy weren’t able to have kids for the first twenty-five years of their marriage. Folks prayed and prayed for them. Then one day, miraculously, she got pregnant after they’d given up trying.

The entire town celebrated, or so that’s the way the town gossip Karen Smith told it. Mrs. McClure’s baby shower had been a sight, with people buying silver baby rattles and engraved cups and spoons. Everything he wore until he was three had been hand-monogrammed by someone’s grandmother. Everywhere he went, people were happy to see him. Big Ben, they called him when he was little. The name persisted even now that he really was big, and he bore it all with grace and patience.

He was everyone’s favorite. Every teacher, administrator, minister, coach. He was great at everything. He was the best.

And this favorite child of Green Valley was grinning at me. At me. Scarlet St. Claire, spawn of Satan and his illiterate mistress. (No lie, my momma can’t read).

Ben reached for my hand where I held on to my backpack strap, fit our fingers together, and coaxed me toward the cafeteria. Again.

“Well, I’m glad you feel lucky. ’Cause I feel the same way about you.” His eyes conducted another sweep of my face, making my stomach warm once more. Or maybe I was just really, *really* hungry.

And yet, my steps were still slow and hesitant, the dread almost eclipsing the good feelings in my torso. If we were seen—and we were definitely going to be seen—by any of the Wraiths kids, it would get back to my father. And that would be like putting a target on Ben’s back.

“Ben—”

“Listen. Just trust me, okay? It’ll be fine. So what, high school kids will see us together.”

“But if we’re holding hands, it might look like something it isn’t, and then people will talk.”

He shrugged, giving me another of his smiles; from where I stood, I couldn’t tell if it was a shy or sly one. “Or, it might look like exactly what it is. So let them talk.” He squeezed my hand. “I’ll keep you safe.”

I tried to return his smile but couldn’t. It wasn’t my safety I was worried

about.

**** END SNEAK PEEK****

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