



by NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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A Winston Brothers Novel

BEARD NECESSITIES

WINSTON BROTHERS BOOK #7

PENNY REID

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Made in the United States of America

eBook Edition

DEDICATION

For all the little Scarlets everywhere

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PROLOGUE

* CLETUS *

“Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city.”

— GEORGE BURNS

“Someone want to tell me what’s going on?”

I gave my youngest brother’s hand a pat where it rested on the covers of his hospital bed, checking the watch on my wrist. Jethro was late.

“All will be revealed, Roscoe. All will be revealed,” I assured, assuredly. Poor kid, they’d made him shave his beard. The youngest of us seven kids, his chronological age was twenty-six, but he looked like a ten-year-old.

He should’ve let me shave a design in his stubble, it would’ve impressed the nurses. Next time. While he’s asleep.

“It better be revealed, Cletus.” This threat came from Duane, one-half of our twin brothers and number six in our family. Beau, the other twin, had been born first, which made him number five. Duane was the grumpy one, that was his role. “I have a plane to catch. Jessica’s due date is tomorrow.”

“We’re all aware of your progeny’s ETA, Duane.” I gentled my voice despite his terse tone. “Once everyone gets here, we’ll get started.”

I shared a quick glance with Beau, who was no help. He seemed to find his twin brother’s anxiety endlessly entertaining. Beau was the only other person who knew why I’d called the meeting. I’d filled him in on the particulars last week, needing an accomplice. It might be a shock, but my family didn’t always recognize the superiority of my stratagems, and you

know something is a winner if it's made up of the words "strata" and "gems."

Plus, everyone liked Beau. He was the obvious choice for coconspirator.

That said, Duane's present surly nervousness was for good reason. His partner in travels, life, and in matrimony, Ms. Jessica James-Winston, was forty weeks pregnant with their first child. Now, if she'd been an elephant, she'd have another fifty-five weeks to go. But she was not an elephant.

She was the local sheriff's daughter and a sweet girl, although she could be a real sassy-bitches from time to time. Duane was only here with us on account of Roscoe almost dying a few weeks ago (Don't panic! He's out of the woods now.)

Meanwhile, Jessica was living out her last pregnant days in Tuscany (Italy) with her parents, waiting for the arrival of Duane Jr., or Jessica Jr., or whatever they were planning to call the baby.

Speaking of which, "Hey, Duane."

"Yeah?"

"What're you naming that baby?"

Our sister, number four and the only girl in our brood, made a soft sound; I interpreted it to be of the reprimanding kind. "Cletus Byron Winston, stop asking Duane what they're going to name the baby. Let him have his secrets."

I lifted an eyebrow at my sister's pretty face and she in turn lifted an eyebrow at me. We were close in age, Ashley and I, since she was the next to be born after I graced the world with my magnanimous presence. This made me lucky number three in the family. That's right, the number three is lucky. It's a well-established fact of the universe. Everyone knows it.

"I'm here!"

Like synchronized swimmers pivoting in unison, we all lifted our heads and attention to the door, watching as Jethro made his entrance.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, his brown beard and hair a fright. "I had to change my clothes. Andy had diarrhea, and—"

I lifted a hand, stopping our oldest brother—number one—from continuing with his tale of number two (where the "number two" is poop).

"Jethro, I think we'll all live a complete life never knowing why your son having diarrhea has any bearing on your tardiness."

Jethro sighed, crossing his arms and giving me what he probably thought was an irritated look. It was not. I suspected my oldest brother's

face wasn't actually capable of arranging itself into a frown.

"Wait. What about Billy?" Duane asked about the only Winston sibling missing from our assemblage. "Where's Billy?" The grumpy twin scratched his neatly trimmed red beard, glancing between me and Jethro.

Well, here goes nothing.

I stepped forward. Everyone turned their eyes to me. Even though I was the shortest of my brothers—at a mere six feet—I had the biggest presence when I so chose.

"I'm glad you asked, Duane. Jethro." I motioned to the door my oldest brother had just run through. "Will you shut that, please? I'll be touching on sensitive information, and I'd prefer if these earth-shattering revelations didn't leave this room."

Ashley's blue eyes narrowed, and she crossed to stand next to Roscoe, threading her fingers into the dark hair at his temples. "Hold on now. *Earth-shattering?* This isn't going to agitate Roscoe, is it?"

"No, Ash. It's not that kind of earth-shattering," I said, but then my eyes moved up and to the right. "Well, I don't think it's that kind of earth-shattering."

"Cletus," Beau said, right on cue. A small smile hovered on his lips and twinkled behind his eyes, which is to say he was looking at me with his normal expression. "Do you want me to start?"

Now everyone was splitting their attention between Beau and me, and I took a level of satisfaction in their confused visages. I've always enjoyed a good twist—both the dance and the plot variety.

"Go right ahead, Beau." I took a step back, lifting my hand in a *the floor is yours* gesture.

When we'd rehearsed earlier, we decided it would be best for Beau to cut in and for me to cede to him. Like I mentioned earlier, everyone liked Beau. Whereas, for some reason, my siblings weren't as automatically accepting of my motivations as pristine. Obviously, they all had unfounded trust issues.

Beau stepped away from the wall, his smile growing both wider and yet more thoughtful. "Cletus and I asked y'all here because of Billy. I know we touched on it last week, just before the Paytons stopped by, but I think we all need to come together and decide on a plan."

"What kind of plan?" This question came from Roscoe.

“Well, we’re mighty worried about him,” Beau said, then paused, waited, gave our family a chance to ask why we were worried about Billy. But, as I suspected, no one appeared to be confused regarding the origins of our concern.

Ashley brought her fingers to her forehead. “I can’t believe Billy is doing this. I can’t believe he’s putting himself through this. The first time was more than enough, but twice?”

The *this* to which Ashley referred was bone marrow donation. Our second oldest brother had volunteered to donate his bone marrow to our despicable father, Darrell Winston. Ever since we discovered Billy’s plan, we’d all been in various states and stages of shock and dismay. Billy had already gone through with the procedure once and was now scheduled for a second round. Our father would die without it.

“You know why Billy is doing it.” Roscoe turned his hand palm up, nudged Ashley’s leg, drawing her eyes to his.

A small laugh escaped her. “Actually, no. I don’t understand. I don’t get it. Hasn’t Billy been through enough?”

“But if Darrell is dead, he can’t testify against Razor Dennings. And if Darrell doesn’t testify against Razor Dennings, then the only charges that bastard will face are the attempted murders of Roscoe and Simone,” Jethro said, sounding nearly as frustrated as I felt about the whole situation.

“I get it.” Duane pushed himself away from the wall. “I hate it, but I get why Billy is doing it. Razor killed twenty-four people. That’s twenty-four families who won’t get justice if Darrell dies of cancer.”

Ashley rained down upon Duane and Jethro a thunderous frown that would’ve frightened birds, had there been any in Roscoe’s hospital room.

Clearly mad as hell, she crossed her arms. “When does it end, though? Hmm? When will Billy stop being the sacrificial lamb for this family? For this town? He’s not well! He’s sick, and worn down, and *dammit*, he’s given up more than any of us—time and time again. We can’t keep expecting him to shoulder every single burden.”

“I agree,” Roscoe said quietly, closing his eyes.

“Are you agitated, Roscoe?” I was quick to ask, examining him carefully. “Is this too much for you? Should we stop?”

“No. I’m fine.” He didn’t open his eyes. “I’m glad we’re talking about this, and I agree with Ash. Billy deserves better.”

“He shouldn’t have to donate bone marrow to the man who put him in the hospital when he was only twelve, who nearly killed him and beat our momma,” Ashley ranted, jabbing her finger through the air at some invisible foe; impressively, her volume never rose above hospital-appropriate yet communicated the full weight of her ire. “He kept us safe. He looked after us. Billy deserves happiness. He deserves more than this.”

“Well said, Ash.” I stepped forward, because now it was my turn. “Well said. And that’s an excellent segue to the real reason we’ve assembled y’all. It’s time we discussed Claire.”

“This isn’t about Billy?” Jethro looked to Beau.

“This is about Billy,” Beau confirmed, and then added gently, “But it’s about Claire too.”

Jethro seemed to stand straighter, his eyes widening. “What?”

“Yes. Claire.” I lifted my voice, wanting his undivided attention. “And you aren’t going to like it.”

Jethro—and everyone else for that matter save Roscoe, because his eyes were still closed—shifted their gaze to me, then to Beau, then back to me.

“And here’s where the earth-shattering part comes in, Jet.” I paused, drawing out the moment, not sure if I was stalling or savoring.

Our brothers, Billy and Jethro, hadn’t been on the best of terms for over two decades. The last few years had brought a fragile cease-fire—at first for our momma’s sake, and for the sake of Roscoe, the twins, Ashley, and me—but they’d never reached a true peace, with themselves, with each other. I didn’t know if it was possible to repair a relationship as broken as theirs, or if they’d just keep on coexisting. Time would ultimately tell.

But back to now and my half-stalling, half-savoring dramatic pause. On the one hand, I felt remorse at having to be the one to break it to Jethro that his (heroic and dead) best friend’s widow had always been in love with our brother Billy. On the other hand, I relished getting to be the one to inform Jethro that his (idiotic and dead) best friend’s widow had always been in love with our brother Billy.

Don’t get me wrong, Ben McClure had been a fine man, but he’d also been as clueless as a pirate wearing two eye patches. I don’t think the man had a purposefully mean bone in his body, but he had several ignorant, arrogant, and pretentious ones, that’s for sure.

Sitting in my fine stew of remorse and relish, I soldiered on. “Thing is, Claire—before we knew about Beau and Duane’s biological momma being

Christine and Claire being the twins' half-sister, before Claire's illustrious singing career, before Ben died, before she and Ben returned to town, before they got married, before she changed her name from Scarlet to Claire, before she fled Green Valley, before all of that—Claire and Billy were secretly in love.”

A collective shock rippled through the room. Even Roscoe gasped, his eyes flying open. That is, each inhabitant in the room save Beau and I gasped. He'd gasped last week when I'd told him the truth, but he was pleased about it now.

Jethro's shock was short-lived, however, and soon morphed into irritation. “What the—”

“Now wait, Jethro, wait. I know it'll be hard for you to accept that Ben and Claire weren't the model of matrimonial perfection, seeing as how you've placed him on that pedestal for the last ten years—and she has too—but I have proof. If you need it. It's true as I am standing here. Billy and Claire have been pining for each other for going on eighteen years now, I reckon.”

You know how I said earlier that Jethro never really frowned? Well, I'm big enough of a person to admit when I've made an error, however rarely it occurs. Jethro was most certainly frowning now.

“This is ridiculous, Cletus. I asked her about this once and she said it was nothing, nothing happened. Scarlet—I mean, Claire—she was with Ben. She was always with Ben. She was never *with* Billy.”

“You are incorrect, and like I said, I have proof. But rest assured, the-country-music-star-formerly-known-as-Scarlet was very much *with* Billy, and they are still very much in love with each other.”

Jethro's hands lifted to his waist. “Why are you doing this? Billy and I, we've gotten to a place where we don't fight every time we're in the same room. If what you're saying is true, you're telling me Claire loved Billy—wanted to be with Billy—while she was married to Ben? She wouldn't do that, and Ben never would've married her if she'd wanted someone else. Her happiness was all that mattered to him.”

I opened my mouth, prepared to lay out the truth carpet about Ben McClure, which was that the man was too dense to notice what made Claire happy and too self-absorbed to comprehend that his happiness *did not* automatically equate to her happiness.

But before I could speak, Beau stepped forward, placing his hand on Jethro's shoulder and giving our brother a kind smile. "The dead can never be viewed as they truly were, as full-fledged, thinking, three-dimensional people, Jethro. With both flaws and strengths. In retrospect, they're either saints or sinners. I get that. To you, Ben was a saint."

Jethro's throat seemed to work, and he turned back to me. "You're wrong about Claire. She loved Ben. I was there when she found out he died; she was devastated."

I slid my hands into my overall pockets, nodding somberly. "She might've loved the man, in a way, but I *am* right about Claire. She loved Billy before Ben, she loved Billy when Ben died, she loves Billy now. And you should just accept I'm right because I'm always right. But this isn't about my truth-batting percentage."

My oldest brother kept shaking his head, huffing a harsh sounding laugh.

We didn't have all the time in the world to convince Jethro, so I decided to get to the point. "Believe it or not, this isn't about Ben. Ben was an adequate human, and I know you still miss your friend, but Billy is alive and he's your brother. Billy deserves happiness, as does Claire. But these two idiots, they're too stubborn and noble to climb over the messy mountain of regret and secrets they've built between each other. So, as folks who love them both, it falls on us—*all* of us—to make the magic happen."

Jethro bit the inside of his lip, inspecting me, his gaze shuttered. Clearly, he still didn't believe me.

Without looking away from Jet, I sighed and called to Mr. Grumpypants, "Duane. Tell us about that cabin you and Billy built, on that high, flat stretch of land in the woods."

Jethro blinked, rearing back a little.

"Well, uh, only Billy and I were supposed to know about it. We built it a few summers before Momma died. It used to be a campsite of some sort, I think."

"And please enlighten the assemblage, Duane, what did Billy tell you about it?" I asked, all the while watching my oldest brother.

"Billy said it was a sacred space for him. Something about, uh, a place he went when he wanted to remember a time and a person he loved and missed."

I knew for a fact Jethro was acquainted with this particular high, flat stretch of land in the woods. I knew he'd been the one to show it to a fourteen-year-old Scarlet (aka Claire) as a safe place she could stay, away from Razor, Scarlet's father, and Christine, her neglectful and hateful mother.

But what Jethro didn't know was that Billy had found Scarlet in the woods behind our house in that very spot. Or rather, they'd found each other.

My oldest brother was no longer frowning. A crack had formed in his granite exterior, confusion sliding over his features. Jet had stepped in to help Scarlet almost twenty years ago, and in doing so he'd unintentionally been the one to bring her and Billy together.

I took advantage of him being off-kilter to drop another truth bomb. "Did you ever question the timing of Billy's injuries? That the Iron Wraiths put him in the hospital the very night Scarlet ran away with Ben? And did it ever occur to you as strange that Razor Dennings let his daughter leave Green Valley without any retribution? Even when she returned, engaged to Ben at eighteen, neither Razor nor Darrell nor any of their motorcycle club brothers came after her. Why do you think that is?"

Jethro's gaze sharpened, his lips parting. "Are you—but, wait. It wasn't because of Ben? I thought the Wraiths steered clear of Scarlet because she was with Ben, that's what he always told me. Are you saying it was—"

"Yes," I confirmed, breaking my promise to keep a secret I'd held sacred for eighteen years. I'd kept it because Billy had asked, but I was through keeping this secret. The time had come. "Billy took Scarlet's punishment. That's why the Iron Wraiths beat him senseless when he was sixteen. Ben had nothing to do with Scarlet being safe other than his aunt and uncle giving her a home. But she could've gone to California instead and been just fine. She did not need him."

Jethro seemed to sway, absorbing this information, his eyes falling to the ground.

Meanwhile, Ashley had covered her mouth, and Roscoe said, "Y'all told me Billy was in a car accident. You never told me the Wraiths beat the hell out of him."

"That's what we were told too," Duane grumbled, sending me his special brand of stink eye.

“Don’t give me that look, Duane Faulkner. They killed my dog when they took Billy; remember Lea? Momma made the decision not to tell you, Ashley, Beau, or Roscoe, and I wasn’t in a state of mind to contradict. Plus, Momma never knew why the Wraiths beat up Billy. Only Billy, Ben, and I knew—no one else.”

“Wait. Ben knew?” Jethro’s voice cracked and he took a step forward, visibly distressed. “Ben knew Billy took Scarlet’s punishment? He knew the whole time?”

I nodded but didn’t elaborate; we needed to stay on topic. “Since Sheriff James couldn’t get Billy to talk or tell him who the guilty parties were, his office neither confirmed nor denied the rumors about it being a car accident. And so here we are.”

“I’m so sorry about your dog, Cletus. Lea was such a sweet girl.” Ashley’s soft voice drew my attention. Her blue eyes shone with unshed tears. “And I knew it wasn’t a car accident, because where was the car? I figured it was our father’s motorcycle club brothers, mostly on account of how much Billy hated them after. He’d never really hated the Iron Wraiths until he came back from the rehab center, just sorta tolerated them. But I didn’t know they beat on him because of Claire.”

“Does she know?” Jethro asked, no longer looking irritated, but now enormously remorseful.

I grunted, irritated. The point of this hadn’t been to make Jethro feel guilty all over again. Jethro didn’t have anything to do with Billy landing in the hospital at sixteen, but he’d been an Iron Wraiths recruit at the time, and I’m sure he was feeling renewed shame due to past association.

I recognized how hard it had been for Jethro to turn his life around, to turn his back on the motorcycle club and our father and return to our family as the prodigal son. Being right and doing right and staying the narrow course means never knowing the fragile line between humility and humiliation, never knowing how difficult it is to ask for forgiveness, never understanding the pain of forgiveness withheld.

But admitting wrong and working every day of your life to make up for it takes bravery, persistence, and a rare strength of character. I loved Jethro, I loved Billy, and I respected the hell out of them both: Billy for always staying the narrow course; Jethro for straying but clawing and fighting to find his way back.

“Cletus?” Jethro prompted again. “Does Claire know what Billy did for her?”

“No. She doesn’t. He didn’t want her to know.”

“Why not?” Duane thundered. “What the hell is wrong with him? He should’ve told her first thing, as soon as he could. He lost his chance at playing college ball, he lost his chance to go to college, he lost everything.”

“He didn’t lose everything. He still has all his teeth, doesn’t he? Don’t underestimate the value of teeth. And never mind why he didn’t tell her, though I have my suspicions,” I said, lifting my hands to the straps of my overalls and hooking my thumbs around them. “She’s gonna know soon, ’cause I’m telling her. But first, we need to talk strategy.”

“Strategy?” Roscoe asked, drawing my attention, and I smiled at the mischievous look in my little brother’s eyes. “You want our help with strategy?”

“More like,” Beau cut in, “he wants our help putting his plan into motion.”

“I see.” Ashley lifted her chin, inspecting me but looking more interested than wary. A good sign. “Well, out with it. What’s the plan?”

“Before I tell y’all, I need to know everyone is on board.” I sent Jethro a pointed look. “I can’t do this, it’s not going to work, if everyone isn’t fully committed. You all have a part to play, your significant others do too. It’ll be a family effort.”

Jethro met my gaze squarely, showing me his palms. “Believe it or not, I just want them to be happy. Both of them. They’re the best people I know, and if being with each other means they’re happy . . .” I watched as he gathered a slow, deep breath, shrugging and saying on the exhale, “Count me in.”

“Good. That’s settled.” Duane took another step toward the center of the room. “So what’s the plan?” he asked, sounding curious instead of surly.

I smiled just slightly, unable to help myself, and said, “You know the old saying, *You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink?* Well, it’s true. You can’t force it, unless you feed it salt, or . . .” My slight smile grew. “Unless you drown the horse.”

CHAPTER ONE

CLAIRE

“You’ll never be able to find yourself if you’re lost in someone else.”

— COLLEEN HOOVER, NOVEMBER 9

The early bird is never a friend to the night owl. At present, I was both. Yawning behind my hand, I strained my ears, trying to figure out who owned the murmuring voices just outside my door. I then reached for my phone on the night table and squinted at the clock. Just shy of 5:00 a.m.

Early bird indeed.

Adjusting to the time change between Nashville and Chianti had been slow going, this being my second week in Italy. Though it could’ve been my third. I’d lost track of the days recently as I’d been up and down in the middle of the night trying to help my half-brother Duane and his wife/my good friend Jessica with their brand-new baby.

Plus, you know, I was in *Tuscany*. Who needs to sleep in Tuscany? The correct answer to this question is virtually nobody. If one finds oneself lucky enough to be in Tuscany, one ought never to waste time sleeping.

A person’s time in Tuscany should be spent largely on three pursuits: wine drinking, food eating, and appreciating all the gorgeousness—including the art, views, and Italians. Unless the person in question was a new baby. Obviously, new babies shouldn’t be wine drinking.

You might as well get up and help take care of the world’s cutest infant.

Besides, it would give me some time to work on my early bird joke. Everyone’s heard, *The early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets*

the cheese, right? Well, I felt like the word *wormhole*—associated with space travel and whatnot—was a missed opportunity for an early bird joke. Something like, *Why'd the early bird end up in Alpha Centauri? Because he took a wrong turn at the wormhole.*

. . . Blah. *Needs work, Scarlet.*

Stretching my arms over my head as I sat up, I didn't bother to remind myself that my name hadn't been Scarlet for the last sixteen years. For better or for worse, I usually still thought of myself as Scarlet, not Claire McClure. This was especially true when I was doing, or thinking, or had just said something foolish. Good thing no one could hear my internal thoughts other than me; I probably sounded like a loon.

The voices outside my door persisted, not growing louder, but not fading away either. Jess's parents were here, Sheriff and Mrs. James, but I doubted either of them was up this early. Except, actually, maybe the Sheriff?

Jessica's daddy arose early some mornings and held the baby after the 5:30 a.m. feeding. Claiming the little tyke, he'd watch the sunrise, and then made us all breakfast while holding baby Liam in a sling. Thank goodness for Sheriff and Mrs. James. They were the only ones here who had any experience with babies.

Soon, my long-time friend Jethro Winston and his awesome wife, Sienna Diaz, were scheduled to arrive in a week or so, maybe more, sometime in mid-June. In my present groggy state, I couldn't remember.

At thirty-six, Jethro was the oldest brother in the Winston family. He and Sienna had been married some years—four maybe?—and they had three adorable little boys. I was both looking forward to and dreading all the youthful energy. On the one hand, those kids were hilarious and lethal levels of cute, having inherited an insane amount of charisma and good looks from both their momma and their daddy.

On the other hand, I hadn't been sleeping much, and I didn't know if I had the energy to be jet-lagged, a night nurse for baby William Beauford Winston (but they call him Liam), *and* run around with Jethro's mischievous children all day. But truth be told? I was looking forward to finding out.

In my opinion, there was no such thing as too much family, especially when you grew up with none fit to speak of.

“He hasn’t eaten anything? Nothing at all?” Duane’s hushed questions carried into my room, palpable worry pitching his voice higher.

The worry had me ignoring the bathrobe lying on the bench at the foot of my bed and quick-walking to my door. *Baby Liam ain’t eating? Does he have a fever?* He seemed fine—absolutely perfect—when I left him at midnight with Jess.

“How about before he went to sleep? He didn’t eat anything?” Duane pressed, obviously agitated.

I’d just placed my hand on the door latch when I heard a whispered voice respond, “Not anything,” and I stopped short because I’d know that voice anywhere.

Sienna was here? Already?!

Wait, how long have I been in Italy?

I’d known Jethro and Sienna were flying over, but I could’ve sworn they weren’t due for another week. Closing my eyes, I reminded myself not to be a complete goofball around the movie star.

I don’t mean to brag, but I know the Oscar-winning movie star, writer, comedian, and brilliant woman, Sienna Diaz. We have a relationship. We tweet at each other. I’d even feel comfortable saying we’re friends. We’re also sorta family, though it’s not technically true. But that’s a long story of tangled secrets and hillbilly history. Better not get into that now.

As Duane’s adopted momma and Jethro’s biological momma, Bethany Winston, used to say, *Best to leave farts and the past behind you*. She might not have been my biggest fan when she died, but I still remembered her fondly.

Moving on. Shaking myself of pointless nerves, I squared my shoulders and opened the door. To my surprise, the hall was empty.

But then I heard Duane grumble, “He needs to eat,” his words coming from somewhere around the corner.

I marched toward his voice, though marching on the ceramic tile was silent ’cause my feet were bare. Also, I was tiptoeing more than marching. But I planned to clear my throat and alert them all to my presence just as soon as I could do so gracefully. The trio were walking slowly down the hall—Duane, Sienna, and Jethro—huddled together. My half-brother’s red head, his hair the exact color as mine, was bowed, his arms were crossed, and his shoulders were slumped. His beard unkempt and bushy, Duane had been looking exhausted for a while now.

“Yes, but he just went to sleep.” Sienna—gorgeous as always in Converse, black yoga pants, and a purple sweater with a wide neck falling off one shoulder—tossed her long, dark brown hair over her shoulder and lifted her hand toward the door at the far end of the hall.

It was one of the two huge guest suites on this level, mine being the other one. The room was already prepped and waiting for more family to arrive. So, not the nursery and not the room Jess, Duane, and baby Liam had been sharing since coming home from the hospital.

“Let him sleep first,” Sienna continued, turning as though to block the way, her brown eyes moving between Jethro and Duane as all three of them came to a stop.

Jethro shoved his hands in the back pockets of his jeans. “I agree with Duane. He needs food more than he needs sleep. He slept the whole way on the plane. Ashley said she couldn’t get him to eat before he left. He’s not well, he didn’t say two words to anyone.”

Sienna gave her husband a sympathetic smile. “Jet, my love, we can’t judge your brother’s mental or physical state based on how much or little he speaks. Billy doesn’t say two words to you on a good day.”

My feet stalled, and I stopped like I’d hit an invisible wall. A massive burst of adrenaline made everything inside me go haywire.

... *Billy?!*

I gasped, or my breath caught, or I must’ve made some sort of sound, because all three pairs of eyes swung toward me.

“Claire!” Sienna loud-whispered. “Sorry. We didn’t mean to wake you.”

“I—” I couldn’t think.

Everything was garbled. *Billy is here?* But—but he wasn’t supposed to come! I was told he wasn’t coming. He was too busy, didn’t want to leave his youngest brother still recovering in the hospital, couldn’t take the time off. I’d been told he wouldn’t be here and now he was here, and I didn’t know if I was ecstatic or terrified, and Jethro and Sienna were in front of me, pulling me into hugs.

“It’s so good to see you,” Jethro said. I registered he held me by the arms and gave me a wide smile.

“Sorry again if we woke you.” Sienna tossed her thumb over her shoulder. “The boys are downstairs already in bed. They were asleep when we arrived, so we’re going to let them rest until noon. I brought Maya, my sister—I don’t think you’ve met her? Maybe at the wedding?—well, I

brought her along to help out with watching the boys. As soon as they see you're here, they'll want to play."

I heard my friend's words, peripherally comprehended them, but my mind was stuck in the quicksand realization that Billy Winston was here.

Now.

In this house.

In fact, he was probably behind the door to which Sienna had just casually gestured. *So close.*

And I was not prepared.

I'm never prepared for Billy Winston.

The last time we'd seen each other was Christmas, and before that it had been four years of no contact at all. I hadn't been able to stop thinking about him since Christmas and—*Who am I kidding?* Since I was fourteen, Billy Winston had never been far from my mind.

Things were different. I was different. Over the last six months, I'd started working through my issues, working on myself, talking to a psychiatrist about the danger of shame and how I'd allowed it to make so many decisions for me. For the first time in ten years, I'd considered reaching out, calling Billy, talking through things.

I hadn't reached out, partly because I wasn't ready, and partly because—after leaving him standing in the snow—I wasn't sure he'd want to hear from me. And even if he did, so many years of history, hurt feelings, angry words, and secrets stood between us. I didn't know how to disarm the minefield.

But now he was here, and so was I.

"Maybe Claire can help." Duane moseyed forward and I met my brother's gaze.

"Help?" I squawked.

"With Billy?" Jethro glanced between me and Duane, his forehead wrinkling.

"That's a good idea," Sienna said around a yawn and my eyes darted to hers. If she noticed my inner turmoil, she made no sign of it. "He might eat if Claire asks. She's difficult to refuse."

"What? Help? Difficult?" I tried crossing my arms, but that felt weird. So I grabbed the hem of my white cotton nightgown at my thighs instead. "Uh, help with what?"

“Billy won’t eat,” Duane said plainly. “And he don’t look right, green and pale. And thin.”

“He’s real thin, right?” Jethro shifted his weight back and forth, like Billy’s thinness made him restless. “I mean, thin for Billy. And he’s got dark circles under his eyes. He looks almost as bad as he did when he was in that rehab center, in high school.”

I didn’t know much about Billy’s time in the rehabilitation facility during high school, I was long gone from our hometown by then. Folks said he’d broken his legs and a few other bones in some car accident and was in the hospital for months.

Concern for Billy’s present well-being focused my mind, cut through any anxiety and stomach flutters I had about coming face-to-face with my

—
Well, my . . . It’s complicated.

“Does he have a fever? A cough? Have you called Ashley?” I asked rapid-fire. Ashley was the only Winston sister, a nurse, sweet as pie, and sharp as a whip.

“No. No fever. Nothing like that.” Sienna’s expression turned thoughtful. “Ashley was there at the airport along with Cletus, seeing us off. She was the one who told us to make sure Billy ate something on the plane.”

“Shoot.” Jethro snapped his fingers, making a sound of tired frustration, and pulled his phone out of his back pocket as he turned away. “Cletus made me promise to call when we arrived, report on Billy. I forgot. Let me call him real fast. Claire, can I use your room?”

I nodded dumbly, addressing my question to both Duane and Sienna, “I—I don’t understand. Ashley put Bil—her brother on a plane when she knew he was sick?”

Duane and Sienna shared a look, and then Duane sighed and rubbed his face. “He needed to get out of town.”

Now I was well and truly perplexed. “He needed to get out of town? Why? Is he okay? I thought he wasn’t coming, on account of—uh—” I huffed, feeling awkward talking about Billy at all “—on account of what happened to Roscoe and Simone Payton and his duties at Payton Mills and him being a congressman, er, person and—”

“Claire.” Sienna placed her hand on my upper arm, ending my word waterfall. “It’s a long story.” She held my gaze, a patient smile curving her

lips. “We’ll tell you everything we can once we all get some sleep, but the critical question here—right now—is whether or not to let Billy sleep, or wake him up and try to get him to eat something.”

I nodded. “Yes. Of course. Sorry. You’re right.”

Her smile both flattened and widened, her hand falling away as she shifted her attention back to Duane.

“Well?” he prompted. “What do you think?”

Even though Duane addressed Sienna, and she opened her mouth to respond—probably with something thoughtful and intelligent—I blurted before she could speak, “You should wake him and force food into him. And if he won’t eat, don’t let him sleep or give him peace until he does eat.”

And then I rolled my lips between my teeth as they both turned perplexed expressions in my direction. I tried to smile pleasantly, likely failing. But, goodness, if Billy wasn’t eating, I felt like the answer was obvious. Someone needed to take charge.

Duane pushed his hands into his back pockets. “Claire, you don’t know Billy real well, but no one forces my brother to do anything he doesn’t want to do.”

I twisted my lips to the side, saying nothing, because I knew Billy Winston. I knew Billy Winston *real* well. In some ways, I knew him better than his family ever would.

. . . *And he knows you.*

I fought a shiver at the incredibly true and complex nature of that thought.

“Agreed.” Sienna nodded. “He can’t be forced. Which is why I say we let him sleep. Then, tomorrow, we’ll make his favorite food.”

Duane’s gaze flickered over Sienna. “What’s his favorite food?”

She reared back. “You don’t know what your brother’s favorite food is?”

I inhaled deeply rather than revealing the answer, but I made a mental list of ingredients to pick up from Coop—the grocery store down in Figline—this morning after I dressed.

“Is it steak?” Sienna tried, shrugging. “Or maybe fish? Does he like fish?”

Duane also shrugged. “Jethro loves spicy food and donuts. Cletus’s favorite is blueberry anything and sausage pie. Ashley loves sweet pies, all

sorts, but mostly lemon meringue and pecan. Beau's favorites are strawberry milkshakes and hamburgers. Roscoe loves omelets—or anything French and fancy—but I have no clue what Billy's favorite food is."

Jethro reappeared at my elbow, a phone pressed to his ear. "Right. Right. Got it," he said, nodding, his eyes sliding to mine. "Yep. She's right here." And then he held the phone out, whispering, "Cletus wants to talk to you."

"To me?"

"Yep." Jethro grabbed my hand, placed the phone in my palm, and turned to face his wife and brother. "Cletus agrees with Sienna. Let him sleep for now. It might just be the anesthesia."

Duane released a disgruntled huff and I could tell he was going to protest, but I didn't stay for it. I turned and walked back to my room, lifting the phone to my ear.

"Hello? Cletus?"

"Scarlet," came Cletus's dry tone. His tone was always dry these days. I didn't remind him to call me Claire. My old friend seemed to have an aversion to using my legal name whenever it was just the two of us. "Your assistance is required."

"What's up, Cletus?" I asked, but the jumble of foreboding and anticipation in my belly told me I already knew what was up. *He wants me to help with—*

"Billy."

I sighed deeply, rubbing my forehead. Only six people knew anything about my history with Billy. One had disappeared eighteen years ago—so she didn't count—and two of them had passed away, which left me, Billy, and Cletus.

"I don't know if he wants to—"

"Scarlet, I wouldn't ask if it weren't serious. I am familiar with how much you enjoy your hobby of pretending Billy doesn't exist."

I bristled at that, responding through clenched teeth, "I do not like to pretend your brother doesn't exist."

First of all, it was impossible. And secondly, there'd been *reasons*. Were they all healthy and logical reasons? No. Nevertheless, hormones and grief often make folks do nutty things, and the reasons had existed and persisted.

Cletus knew some of our history. He knew the basics of what happened when Billy and I initially fell for each other as teenagers, but he didn't

know about my unhealthy choices when I'd been nineteen. Therefore, he didn't understand why I'd believed for so long that Billy Winston and Claire McClure were much better off not speaking or interacting with each other.

"Events have transpired, both recently and in the past, events you don't know about, and Billy—" Cletus heaved a sigh. It sounded so sad, fretful, and that had me pausing. I'd never known Cletus to be outwardly sad or fretful.

"What? What's happened?" I pressed the phone to my ear, my heart kicking up a beat. "Is this about Roscoe?"

Their youngest Winston brother and his girlfriend had been attacked last month and almost died. There's more to the story—more secrets involving my evil father, more twisted hillbilly history—but that's the gist of it. Roscoe and Simone were okay now, getting better every day, but it had been a close call.

"No, not Roscoe. It's our father. It's Darrell."

I stood straighter, a spike of alarm racing down my spine. "What about Darrell?"

"Darrell has cancer. It's real bad."

The alarm became vengeful relief and I said, "Good," before I could catch the word, a grim sense of righteousness settling over me.

My slip of the tongue didn't much matter, none of the Winstons cherished their father, nor should they. The man was terrible. He'd beaten their mother, knocked them around plenty, and sent Billy to the hospital when he was just twelve. After Bethany Winston, their momma, died almost six years ago—the sweetest, kindest, loveliest lady on the planet—Darrell tried to kidnap Ashley *at the funeral!*

Can you imagine? The man was a monster. As far as I was concerned, cancer was better than he deserved.

"No. Not good, Scarlet." Cletus overpronounced the "t" at the end of my name and grumbled something I couldn't hear, and then said, "Listen, it's late here and I'm tired. We're flying out in a week or two—depending on a few things—so I need you to make sure Billy eats something. Today, tomorrow, the next day, okay? Make him feel good."

"You want me to *what?*" I placed my hand on my hip, drawing myself up taller. What was Cletus asking? *Make him feel good?* What did that mean? I didn't know how to make folks feel good. I'd never made anyone

feel good, except with food and jokes. I could do food and jokes, no problem.

But I didn't think Cletus's meaning was limited to food and jokes.

"I want you—the artist formerly known as Scarlet—to feed, look after, and be sweet to my brother—the man you've been in love with for going on twenty years—William Shakespeare Winston, aka Billy Winston, aka Congressman Winston."

I exhaled loudly, ignoring the ache in my chest, and whispering, "It hasn't been twenty years."

"Fine, seventeen going on eighteen, eighteen going on nineteen, or something like that. Point is, he needs to eat good food, and lots of it, and gentleness and care. Specifically, *from you*."

I didn't have a problem making Billy good food, but I did have a problem being bullied into it by Cletus Winston. "Cletus, I'm not saying no, but there are plenty of good cooks in this gigantic villa. Jethro is here, Sienna, the Sheriff, Mrs. James, Duane. There are plenty of folks who can make Billy food other than me."

"Nope. It has to be you."

"Why?"

"Because you know all his favorites."

"What is really going on?" I threw my hand in the air. "This is ridiculous. Sienna, Duane, even Jethro are huddled together, strategizing how to get him to eat. And what does this have to do with Darrell having—having . . ." A flutter of nagging worry quickly transformed into a tornado of worst-case-scenario terror. I flinched, my eyes stinging as though I'd just been slapped. "Wait, wait a minute." Licking my lips, my mouth suddenly dry, the room tilted to one side.

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.

"Wait, are you saying—does Billy have can—" Rejecting the very thought, I firmed my voice. "Cletus Byron Winston, are you telling me Billy also has cancer?"

"What if he did? Would you do as I ask and be nice to him then? If he's dying, will you actually give him the time of day? Is that what it's going to take?"

"Stop being a bully and answer the damn question."

"No, woman. He doesn't have the cancer."

I breathed out on a whoosh.

But then Cletus, his voice low and unmistakably angry, added, “Billy donated his bone marrow to Darrell.”

The room tilted again, and my mouth fell open. I couldn’t believe my ears, and so I screeched, “He *what?!?*!”

“Shh! Don’t yell, you’ll wake baby Liam.”

Closing my eyes briefly, I attempted to gather my thoughts and feelings and temper, speaking slowly and carefully so as not to raise my voice. “You’re telling me your brother donated bone marrow to *Darrell Winston?*”

“Billy saved Darrell’s life.”

I choked on disbelief and confusion, my fingers coming to my forehead again, this time I suspected to keep my brains from falling out of my head. *What the hell? What. The. Hell.*

Why would Billy do that? What would’ve possessed him? Billy hated Darrell. Hated him. Why would he do that to himself. WHAT THE HECK WAS GOING ON?!

“It’s a long story, Claire,” Cletus said, giving me the sense he recognized the noises of squeaking nonsense tumbling from my mouth for what they were: complete lack of coherence.

Though, the fact that he’d finally called me Claire did not escape my notice.

“Cletus—”

“I solemnly promise, the very moment Jenn and I arrive, I shall divulge the unabridged version of events, start to finish. Hell, I’ll even tell you all the stuff Billy should’ve told you *years* ago but didn’t ’cause he was too busy vying for the world championship title of Most Honorable Martyr—which, given his most recent ridiculous act of selflessness, he’s earned in perpetuity, forever and ever, amen. I realize that’s a disappointment since you were also hoping for the title.”

My mouth snapped shut and I frowned. “What does that—”

“But right now? Right this minute? I am asking you, my dearest, oldest friend, to traverse the tenuous Tuscan terrain. Embrace your quest! And get thee to where them *I*-talians sell the foodstuffs and the wines and the whatnot. I need you, the pied piper of preparing meals, to make my brother the biggest plate of fettuccine alfredo ever seen in all the land. Put bacon in it, and chicken, and shrimp, and some greens, carrots, broccoli, peas. Put love into it too. *Feed him.* Feed his body and feed his soul. Make sure he

eats, gets sunshine, give him a hug or two or a hundred, tell him his eyes are pretty. I am begging you.”

Cletus’s dramatics notwithstanding, I would most definitely make all his favorite dishes, no problem. But cooking wasn’t really what Cletus was asking me to do.

“Can you do that?” he pressed. “Will you do this? Here, I’ll even say please. Please, Scarlet. Please. Please.”

I crossed my free arm over my aching heart. What Cletus wanted—which was a miraculous reconciliation between his brother and me—was impossible for so many reasons. If anything happened between us, and that was a gigantic *if*, it was going to take time, a lot of time. In the past, we’d brought out the worst in each other. I’d never do anything to lead him on, not when I was still so uncertain of my own feelings about a possible reconciliation.

However, Billy was sick. Given how worried Jethro, Sienna, and Duane seemed to be, I suspected it was more than just needing to recover physically from a bone marrow donation. I could help, so I would help. But I wasn’t giving the man hugs or telling him his eyes were pretty just because Cletus demanded it, no matter how much I craved being in Billy’s arms or how truly magnificent his eyes were.

I decided to offer a compromise. “I will tr—”

“Great. Thanks. Bye,” Cletus said.

And then he hung up.

CHAPTER TWO

*CLAIRE

"If you ask me, something sinister lurks in men who avoid wine, games, the company of lovely women, and dinnertime conversation. Such people are either gravely ill or secretly detest everyone around them."

— MIKHAIL BULGAKOV, THE MASTER AND MARGARITA

“**W**hat do I smell? Cinnamon buns?”

Turning over my shoulder, I gave my brother an affectionate smile. I wasn't so lost in my own nervousness that the bags under Duane's eyes escaped my notice. Holding his sleeping infant son in the crook of his arm, he rubbed one eye, fought a yawn, and claimed a seat around the huge, oblong table in the middle of the kitchen. The piece of furniture was seriously gigantic, but every table in this house was. It fit fourteen chairs comfortably and you could add up to another six in a pinch.

“Yes. Those are cinnamon buns. I also made dinner rolls with the dough. Those'll be coming out soon.”

“Parker House rolls, right? Like Momma made?”

“That's right. And I got chicken soup on the stove. Do you want a bun? With some butter?” I moved from stove to oven to counter, and then back to the stove, an undercurrent of frantic energy in every step.

I felt frantic, maybe I looked frantic, but thankfully I didn't sound frantic.

Wiping my hands on the towel sticking out of my jeans pocket, I returned to where I'd set the buns. No muffin tins could be found in this

huge villa, so I'd baked the buns smooshed together in several round cake pans. To my consternation, the cinnamon bun in the center of each cake pan hadn't risen, emerging from the oven sad and flat and half-baked.

"Yes, please, to both bun and butter," he said, yawning again. "I'm so hungry. I don't know why I'm so hungry. All I do is change diapers, hold Liam, try to sleep—usually unsuccessfully—and tell Jess how awesome she is."

"Lack of sleep can make you hungry," I said absentmindedly, tearing a bun off for my brother and bringing it to him along with two big pads of butter.

"Sorry we woke you up this morning." He accepted the plate, licking his lips. "Janet and the Sheriff left a little while ago to check out some ruins or a church or something." Janet was Mrs. James, Jess's momma. "I think everyone else is still asleep. Did you get a chance to go back to sleep? Or have you been cooking all morning? What time is it anyway?"

"I think it's almost one thirty. I went to the store, picked up a few things, no big deal." There was no way I would've been able to go back to sleep this morning, not when I knew there was a Billy Winston right down the hall.

My hands were shaking. I gripped the back of a chair until they stopped. "I picked up more diapers and put them in the nursery," I added.

"Ah, thanks for that." The infant in his arms stirred, drawing Duane's attention.

I watched as my brother gazed at his son, a soft smile claiming his features. He leaned down and kissed the tiny cheek while making a soft shushing sound. Goodness, even if he hadn't been my brother, it was a sight that would've melted any heart.

But I wondered if the image was more precious to me because Duane and Liam were my kin, and because none of us—not Duane, nor his twin Beau, nor I—had known we were related until just a few years ago. More precious because, if the secret of Duane and Beau's maternity had been kept indefinitely, maybe I wouldn't have been here to experience this moment.

But Billy had known about it, and he'd never said a word to anyone.

This thought dampened some of the simmering anticipation in my belly. Even now, all these years later, I still couldn't make up my mind what to think about seeing Billy Winston. He'd never told me Duane and Beau were

my brothers, though he'd had plenty of opportunity. It made me wonder what else he'd been keeping secret.

And wasn't that just shit on a shoe? Here I was still longing for a man who'd lied to me about my brothers. For years. Years!

"Why do babies smell so good?" Duane asked, pulling me from my darkening thoughts.

"Um." Coming back to myself, I sidestepped away from my brother and closer to the tray I'd placed on the table. I picked up a large bowl, moved to the stove, and ladled two generous servings of soup while I spoke. "I'm sure there's a scientific reason, probably something about hormones and the like. I don't honestly know. But I agree, babies smell like heaven."

"What's the tray for? And all that stuff you put on it. Is that for Jess? She's asleep, finally."

Another rush of nerves had me releasing the ladle into the pot with a clatter, and I internally rolled my eyes at myself.

I was not this person. I was not a nervous, jumpy person. Not anymore. Growing up, being wary and watchful had been a requirement for survival. But all that was a long time ago, a different life, a different time, a different person. I was an adult now, a working singer-songwriter, a professional musician. I was not a jumpy, sweaty, anxiety-riddled teenager. Just because Billy Winston was under this roof didn't mean I had to let him under my skin.

Determined to quit being so anxious, I turned to Duane and worked to keep my voice light. "Oh, this? This is for your brother."

"My brother?"

"Uh, the second one."

"The second one?" Duane lifted an eyebrow. "You mean Billy?"

"Yeah. When I talked to Cletus this morning on the phone, he asked that I make sure your brother eats some good food." I set the bowl back on the tray, arranging the napkin and spoon just so, and then shifting the small bud vase with two vibrant, red wild poppies back and to the side.

"Cletus asked you?"

For some reason, his question made me feel guilty, like I'd been caught in a lie even though I was telling the truth. "Yeah, well, you and Jess got enough to deal with, and Jet and Sienna just got in, plus they have the boys to look after. Janet and the Sheriff want to sightsee, and that makes sense. But I'm just here kinda in an extra capacity, if you think about it, only

having myself to look after for the most part. And so, it makes sense that I be the one to feed, uh, B-Billy . . . uh, food . . . and, uh, such . . .”

Duane’s gaze sharpened (or dulled, depending on how you look at it) and morphed into a stare. Holding still except for the twisting of my fingers, I knew I was behaving strangely, but I’d never been good at wrestling my guilt. Even if it was baseless, the guilt always won, but I was working on it. I’d been working to forgive myself.

So, you know what, Mr. Guilt? Go take a long rollercoaster ride on an unfinished track.

“Claire.”

I started. “Duane.”

“You nervous about something?”

I tore my eyes away. “No. Not at all.” My voice was so high, it was almost falsetto.

“’Cause you’re acting nervous.”

Now I forced my voice deeper, asking, “Am I?” and cringing when it came out baritone this time. *Curse my vocal range!*

The timer went off for the rolls and I lunged, flipping it off, spinning to the oven, opening the door, reaching for the dinner rolls, and then snatching my hands back when I realized I wasn’t wearing oven mitts.

“You might want to use some oven mitts,” came Duane’s flat voice from behind me.

“Yes. Obviously,” I said, frowning at my surly brother.

Loving Duane had been easy, but his grumpiness definitely took some getting used to. He didn’t mean anything by it, it was just how he was. But whenever Beau, Duane, and me were together, Beau and I shared a fair number of commiserating glances.

Seizing the oven mitts, I pulled out the rolls, pleased at the color of their browned tops. Basting them with butter before and during the baking process had made a difference, and I took note.

“Man, those smell good,” Duane said around a bite of his cinnamon bun, swallowing before asking, “Can I have one of those too? And some chicken soup?”

I nodded, whipping off the mitts and grabbing two hot rolls for the tray. “Yep. But you can either serve yourself or wait ’til I get back from taking this up to your brother. I shouldn’t be long.” *God willing.*

He pushed back in his seat, bent to give Liam another snuggly kiss, and rounded the table. “No problem, I can get it. I just wanted to make sure it was allowed.”

“Allowed?” Putting the finishing touches on Billy’s tray—a stick of butter, a linen napkin, a butter knife, blackberry jam—I gave Duane a look. “Why wouldn’t it be allowed?”

He rolled his eyes. “Cletus.”

I laughed. He didn’t have to say anything else.

I picked up the tray and walked *mindfully* out of the kitchen, refusing to think about the next ten minutes. No use speculating on a future I couldn’t see, but I did have a plan.

I’d worked it all out over the course of the morning: I’d walk up the stairs very carefully, my mind and attention on the stairs so I wouldn’t trip; then I’d place the tray on the table just outside Billy’s door; then I’d knock, pick the tray back up, and wait for him to answer. When he did answer, I’d hand him the tray—saying something like, *Here you go, Billy, or Eat this, please.*

It was a good plan, solid, normal. My mind behaved while I climbed the two flights of stone steps, and even though I was a little out of breath when I reached the top landing, I was certain it was due to exercise and not nerves. I was fine. It was fine. Everything was fine.

Setting down the tray, I wiped my hands on the towel still stuck in my pocket, lifted my fist, and knocked on the door. My heart chose that moment to jump up my esophagus. I ignored it. I was an adult and I didn’t have time for jumping hearts anymore. Jumping hearts were firmly in my past along with unfounded guilt, making excuses for folks being a-holes, trying to live my life for a dead person, and serially apologizing for things that didn’t need to be apologized for, like saying hi. Or bumping into someone. Or ordering dinner at a restaurant.

No. More. Apologizing.

I picked up the tray. I turned back to the door. I waited, bracing for the impact of his voice. I figured he’d say something like, *Yeah?* or *Who’s there?* But he didn’t. He didn’t make a sound. One full minute ticked by and my ears encountered nothing but silence.

Setting the tray down again I knocked again but this time louder and picked up the tray. I waited.

No answer.

Frowning, I stared at the door, my heart jumping with a new kind of anxiety as Cletus's words from earlier returned to me: *I wouldn't ask if it weren't serious.*

Setting the tray down a third time, I lifted my hand to knock but stopped. Duane had been right. There was no forcing Billy to do something he didn't want to do, not without offering him something in return, something he wanted.

Sensitive pinpricks of awareness were chased by a crest of heat, racing over my skin. I was breathing hard again, staring forward, the door blurring as I worked to ignore the sensations turning me hot and cold and making my insides freeze and boil.

. . . I wouldn't ask if it weren't serious.

"Dammit," I grumbled, raising my fist and pounding on the door. "Billy Winston, open this door."

Silence.

Then, a bed squeaked. It squeaked again. It squeaked a third time followed by more silence. A whole damn ocean of it.

Obviously, he was inside. Obviously, he hadn't eaten. Obviously, he knew his family was in a tizzy, worried about him. Obviously, he wasn't too sick to move around on his bed.

Not obvious? Whether he was too sick to stand or speak.

I glared at the latch, allowing myself to get worked up. I was going to need to be worked up if I was going to open the door.

You can do this. He's just a man. Just like any other man. Except, not the boogeyman. He's not the boogeyman. He's just like all ordinary, regular men. He is a normal, run of the mill, average man.

Even as I was thinking these thoughts, I knew they were nonsense. Billy Winston wasn't just a man, and he'd never been just a man to me. When we were teenagers, he'd been my enemy, and then my friend, my love, and ultimately a traitor. He'd betrayed me, he'd abandoned me.

When I returned to our hometown at eighteen, secretly married to my husband but engaged as far as anyone else was concerned, Billy had been my dream, my fantasy, my solace and comfort, and ultimately my enemy once again.

That's where we'd been for ten years. I didn't know if that's where we were now. I didn't want to be standing at two opposing sides of the battlefield, unable to resolve our differences or coexist within each other's

orbit. But Lord help me, even if we were, I still loved my enemy. The thought of Billy in there, suffering, unable to stand or speak, needing my help, was agonizing.

Similarly, the thought of him in there, not suffering but ignoring me after I'd been cooking all day for him, making rolls and buns and chicken soup and homemade pasta and picking damn poppies, was infuriating.

Gripping the latch, I tugged it, half expecting the door to be locked. The door swung open, revealing two steep stone steps and darkness. Evidently, he'd drawn the blackout curtains; a moment was required for my eyes to adjust and my heart to stop ping-ponging around my rib cage.

But when I could see, I spotted a king-size bed in the center of the large room and a figure lying on top of it. Not under the covers, on top of the covers. His back was to me, and a chill raced down my spine, a stark sensation that had me leaving the tray on the table outside the door and taking those two steep steps into the room on autopilot.

"Billy?"

He didn't move. My stomach sunk, concern choking me, and my breath came even faster.

I crossed to the bed and reached for his shoulder, but before my hand could make contact, his deep, grumbly voice said, "Leave."

I flinched, yanking my hand back. "I, uh—"

"Please. Leave," he said, quieter this time.

I stared at his back, his broad shoulders, the dark hair on the back of his head. He was wearing a long-sleeved shirt—black or dark blue or dark green, I couldn't tell which—jeans, and black boots. He hadn't even taken off his shoes. From the way he was lying, I could see he had his arms crossed over his chest and his face mostly pressed against the pillow. Caught between my confusion, worry, and irritation, I wasn't surprised when the worry won.

"Cletus told me what happened," I said softly.

"Did he," he said, sounding distant, cold, disinterested. I was familiar with this version of Billy, and as much as it saddened me, disinterest from him was—in some ways—easier to handle than interest. Billy Winston's interest was basically a stun gun to my good sense.

"I brought you food, chicken soup and—" Twisting my fingers, I frowned at his unmoving form. Jethro had been right this morning, Billy

looked smaller, thinner. The worry bloomed, filling my chest, stomach. “You need to eat, keep up your strength.”

“Leave it.”

I scrunched my face. Leaving straightaway had been my plan before I’d seen him. But now, oddly, I wasn’t ready to leave.

“I have everything on a tray just outside here,” I said, loitering, not sure why I was loitering. Instinct told me to get him talking. “I brought blackberry jam,” I said inanely, “but we also have strawberry if you’d prefer that instead. But not grape.”

Silence.

More silence.

All the silence.

I glanced around the room and spotted a dark wood rocking chair. I walked to it, keeping an eye on Billy’s back, the worry now eclipsing every other good instinct.

Uncertain what I should do—leave or stay—I asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Do—do you want—”

“No.”

“I could—”

“Claire,” he said, his tone even, emotionless, and I recoiled.

Claire.

The single word effectively drove all the air from my lungs. Like Cletus, Billy wasn’t partial to calling me Claire when we were alone. In fact, this was the first time he’d ever done it.

“I’d like to sleep,” he continued, carefully, slowly, like he hadn’t just called me Claire, like we were friendly acquaintances, like he was being *polite*. “Will you leave, please?”

Sliding my jaw to one side, my front teeth scraping together as a long dormant spark ignited within me, I said, “No.”

Then I sat my ass down in that rocking chair and I rocked. It squeaked every time it moved forward and clicked every time I rocked back. *Squeak, click, squeak, click, squeak, click.* Honestly, the noise was irritating as hell. Good.

Billy didn’t respond at first, lying perfectly still for several long seconds while I aggressively rocked in the chair, that dormant spark burning brighter

the longer I stared at his unmoving back in the dim quiet, punctuated with *squeak, click, squeak, click, squeak, click*.

Then he moved.

I gripped the curving arms of the rocker, holding my breath as Billy rolled slowly to his back—like the movement cost him, like it was painful—and then turned just his head to glare at me. I'd braced for the force of his stare and the ruthlessness of his handsome features, expecting one of Billy Winston's signature intense looks that stunned and scattered all at once.

What I got was much worse.

He wasn't happy, no surprise there, so his irritation barely registered.

Also not a surprise, Billy was still undeniably and brutally handsome. Strong, angular jaw covered in a thick, black beard, high forehead, Roman nose, glacial blue eyes. From last Christmas, I recalled he had the faintest bit of gray at his temples and the first crease of wrinkles around his eyes and on his forehead. Both only served to make him look more distinguished and unattainable.

What made my heart seize wasn't his irritated glaring or his attractiveness, but the sallowness of his skin, the sunken darkness around his eyes, and the distinct lack of brilliance behind his gaze.

Thus, I was surprised. A short puff of air escaped my lungs, and I stopped rocking as I took another moment to study him. His typically glacial irises were hollow, lifeless, hopeless, defeated. This man who had never been average was diminished in every sense of the word. Seeing him this way physically hurt, ripples of disquiet just under my skin. The sensation was not unlike listening to an out-of-tune piano or a fork scraping against a ceramic plate. He was truly ill. And yet, as I inspected him, I felt certain that the root of what ailed him was more than physical.

Something about my face must've annoyed Billy, because he clenched his jaw tight, his eyes narrowing. "Leave."

Realizing I'd been gawking—and maybe also cringing—I worked to school my expression and pushed the chair to resume forward and backward momentum. *Squeak, click, squeak, click, squeak, click*.

"No," I said.

"No." He drawled the word, like he was tasting it, or spitting it.

"No." I shook my head quickly, my pulse racing for several reasons but mostly because Cletus hadn't been exaggerating, and I didn't know how to wrestle these feelings of mine into a semblance of order. "But you can

Reminding myself that there was a lot more distance than just five feet between me and cuddling Billy Winston, I stood and walked up the steep stone steps; I grabbed the tray of food, descended the stairs, and crossed to the big bed. Setting the tray on the night table, I picked up the bowl and—in my mindlessness—was about to scoop a spoonful of soup and feed him when Billy reached for the bowl and took it out of my grip.

Startled by his gruffness and my weird instinct to literally *spoon-feed him*, I stepped back to the end of the bed, sat, and folded my hands in my lap while I watched him. Billy ate for a bit, three, four, five bites of chicken soup, his eyes half-mast and seemingly staring at nothing in particular. This, too, struck me as concerning.

Even so, I took advantage of the rare, quiet moment, sharing space with this man I so often dreamed of, studying his movements, the lines of his face.

Years ago, I hated that I dreamed about Billy with any frequency. I'd wake up feeling guilty and ashamed of my subconscious, considering the unbidden thoughts further proof of my despicable nature. I'd been married to one man and dreaming about another. Even while I slept, I'd been unfaithful.

So. Much. Guilt.

But at some point over the last ten years since Ben's death, and especially in the last six months since I'd started seeing my therapist, I looked forward to my Billy dreams. Maybe because Ben was gone and we weren't married anymore. Maybe because the dreams were always so nice and we got along so well—us singing, us talking, us walking through the woods, laughing, lying together, touching with sweetness.

Or maybe because I'd grown old and wise enough to understand the difference between thoughts and actions. I thought about Billy often. I thought about what it would be like to be with him often. But my thoughts didn't feel like a trap anymore, like an inescapable snare. I didn't have to act on my wishes and desires. They just were, and I had the power to decide if they were separate from me.

"You can go now," he said, setting the bowl back on the tray and still not looking at me.

"Hmm." I stood and peeked at it. The bowl was empty, but the plate with the rolls hadn't been touched.

Picking up the first roll, which was still warm, I split it in half and buttered both sides liberally. Then I added the blackberry jam, returned the roll to the plate, and placed it in front of his face. Billy stared forward and through the roll I held in his line of sight, the muscle at his jaw ticking.

“I know you like blackberry jam,” I said, wiggling the plate. “And I know you love these rolls. It’s still warm. I just made them this morning.”

Billy closed his eyes, his chin lowering to his chest. I withdrew the plate as he brought his hand to his forehead, shoving his fingers into his hair.

“God, Claire. Please. Please just leave me alone.”

I tensed against a distinct and sharp spike just beneath my rib cage. He’d called me Claire. *Again*.

But I wouldn’t think about that now. He was sick, in need, and whether or not Billy still cared one stitch about me was irrelevant.

“Eat the roll,” I said mulishly, tapping into the fourteen-year-old version of myself who used to give him sass and smiles in equal measure.

I watched as Billy gathered a deep inhale, his eyes eventually opening and lifting to mine, and I stiffened. *This*. This is what I’d been expecting earlier. This was the look. The heated, piercing, ferocious collision of his gaze.

For a second I lost my wits, dazzled, my neck growing hot. But then, as we stared at each other, I detected a fracture in his signature steeliness. An off-note, as though it were a mask he’d put on rather than truly him.

I tilted my head to the side, studying this face I knew so well. “Ah-ah. I know what that look means.”

“What look?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper, the tone sending a wave of goose bumps over and up my arms.

“You’re thinking you’ll intimidate me out of here, right?” I crossed my arms even while I held the plate. “Turn on the caveman charm? Maybe make me blush, something like that?”

“You have such a pretty blush.” His heated gaze traveled down to my breasts. “I’ve always wondered, do you blush everywhere?”

I did blush at that, but I also smiled and chuckled. He wasn’t shocking me or bullying me, not today. “Go on, William. Say something to embarrass me.” I snapped my fingers. “You could tell me how you bet I taste like strawberries,” I said, making sure I sounded bored.

His eyes darted back to mine, the forced heated licentiousness replaced with that disconcerting dullness. For once, I mourned the loss of that

blasted stare; I wished it back, but only if it was really him and not him pretending.

Holding out the plate, I wiggled it again. “Eat it now, please.”

Lifting his hand like the action exhausted him, he plucked the roll off the plate and ate it in two bites. Then, still chewing, he sluggishly slid lower in the bed, rolling again to his side and giving me his back. I returned the plate to the tray reluctantly and decided not to push him about eating the other roll. Not yet. Maybe later. Along with that fettuccine alfredo Cletus had suggested.

Picking up the tray, I climbed the steps and placed it on the table outside the door. And then I walked back into the room, felt around the dark closet for a spare blanket, and covered him with it. But I left his shoes uncovered so I could untie the laces, which I proceeded to do.

“What are you doing?” Billy lifted his head slightly as soon as I touched his boot, and I could hear the frown in his voice.

“I’m taking off your shoes, you’ll sleep better.”

Finished unlacing the ties, I pulled off the right boot, then the left, setting both just underneath the bed. After covering his feet with the blanket, I returned to the rocking chair—again, allowing instinct to guide my movements—and sat. This time I didn’t rock, that squeak-click noise would make a manatee go rabid.

As soon as I was settled, I glanced at Billy and found him watching me over his shoulder.

“Are you going to sleep?” I asked softly, equally at ease and on edge. “I thought you were tired.”

He gave his head a subtle shake. “Why won’t you go?”

Before I could think better of the words, I said, “Because I want to stay and make sure no monsters come while you’re sleeping.”

Crap. I’d let my hopes get ahead of me. Here he was sick, and here I was bringing up controversial moments from our past before we’d had a proper talk. But something behind his gaze shifted, a spark of interest, of recollection, and my heart gave an answering flutter.

“What will you do . . .” He frowned. It looked thoughtful, like he was remembering something. He started again, “What will you do to the monsters, if they come?”

“You don’t want to know.” I quoted his words from those controversial stolen moments, so many years ago. “Sweet dreams.”

Billy's eyes moved over me, still dull, and yet somehow not as detached as before. Eventually, he turned completely, his head falling to the pillow.

I breathed out relief and breathed in trepidation, needing to relax my hands and unbunch my shoulders. I hadn't realized I was so tense, but I supposed it made sense. Every time we were alone, we would either fight or kiss; I regretted both the fighting and the kissing for so long. I didn't want to fight anymore.

For better or for worse, his disinterest in me had disarmed my apprehension and kindled my protective instincts. I could no more stand up and leave this room than I could fly like a bird, and that was that.

A few moments passed and I settled into the rocking chair. It was comfortable enough, as far as chairs go, but nowhere near the most comfortable chair in the house.

I watched Billy's broad shoulders rise and fall in a steady rhythm, hoped that meant he was sleeping, and nearly relaxed myself when Billy's voice—rough and quiet with sleep—said, "You're confusing me, Scarlet."

Holding perfectly still, waiting, I worried he'd say more. I didn't want this to turn into one of our arguments, our epic shouting matches followed by his cold shoulder. I wanted Billy to be nice, to let me take care of him, to let things *be*. Just this once. *Please. Just let me do this.*

He didn't say anything else. He slept. I watched him sleep, determined to keep the monsters away.

CHAPTER THREE

* BILLY *

“He shrank from hearing Margaret's very name mentioned; he, while he blamed her – while he was jealous of her – while he renounced her – he loved her sorely, in spite of himself.”

— ELIZABETH GASKELL, NORTH AND SOUTH

The sun had set and risen since her visit. Now it was morning, or maybe afternoon, I wasn't certain. I couldn't read the light coming through the edges of the drapes, it was different here.

Mildly curious, I stood with effort and limped to the sliding glass door. Walking up those stairs yesterday had cost me. My body stiff and protesting, I pulled open the curtains and squinted, turning my face away from the sudden flood of brightness. Stepping back, I blinked, waiting for my sore eyes to adjust.

The repeated buzz-buzz-buzz of my phone from somewhere in the room had me turning from the blinding view and searching. Tired as I'd been yesterday, it had taken me a while to fall asleep with her in the room. When I did, I'd dreamed of nothing. And when I awoke at some point in the dark, the irritating rocking chair had been empty.

At the time, I'd worked to ignore the pang of senseless disappointment and set about a few necessary motions: using the bathroom, brushing my teeth, charging my phone to check if Roscoe had called and so I'd know the time, changing into more comfortable clothes. My hip and back had hurt so I'd taken something to dull it. I'd gone back to bed but hadn't been able to sleep.

Now I was limping around the room, trying to remember where I'd set my phone. Eventually, I found it on top of the dresser where I'd plugged it in last night. Frowning at the screen, my hovering thumb ready to reject the call, I straightened, surprised by the identity of the caller. Accepting the call, I brought the phone to my ear.

Before I could say hello, she said, "Billy."

"Dani."

"Your phone has been going to voicemail for two days."

I glanced around the room, not noticing the surroundings in my search for a seat. "My phone was off. It was, uh, dead. Sorry."

"It's okay. I called Cletus, he said you made it to Italy and were with Jethro, so I knew you were okay."

Ignoring the rocking chair, I walked to the bed, sat on the edge of it. "Were you worried about me?"

"A little."

I'd asked the question mockingly, so my initial reaction to her admission was surprise. Daniella—Dani—Payton wasn't a worrier. She was a bulldozer, and I admired the hell out of her for it. Since the initiation of our mutually beneficial engagement, she'd never reached out to express worry for me or concern about my well-being.

"You're surprised?" she asked, not sounding offended, more like curious. "I'm not trying to nag you."

"I know you're not trying to nag me." I would never accuse her of nagging. She didn't call. Ever. I was always the one reaching out to her to discuss planning and logistics, make requests for her attendance at this function or that benefit, not the other way around. "I should've called and checked in. I am sorry."

"Stop apologizing. We don't do that with each other. Hey, did you eat something?"

Oh. That's why she's calling.

"Did Cletus tell you to ask me that?" I grumbled, shaking my head. I loved my brother, but he was definitely a nag.

"Yes, he did. He wanted to make sure you are eating, because he said the day before you left you didn't eat anything, and then when you arrived, Jethro told Cletus—"

"I can't believe them."

"Who?"

“My siblings. They’ve created a phone tree to discuss my eating habits.”

“I guess they did.” Dani laughed. She had a great laugh, but it always sounded reluctant, like she didn’t really want to share that part of herself with anyone. Or maybe she didn’t want to share that part of herself with me. “But can you blame them? They’re worried.”

“They shouldn’t be,” I said, thinking, *I’ve been through worse.*

“That’s a silly thing to say. Your family loves you, of course they’re going to worry.”

“Lack of appetite is a known side effect of the anesthesia they used for the procedure. Happened the last time too.”

“So, did you eat?”

“I did.”

“What did you eat?”

I glared at nothing. “Chicken soup and, uh, Parker House rolls.”

“Oh. Your favorite.”

“Yeah. My favorite,” I responded softly.

“Why do you sound like that?”

“Like what?”

“You’re using your Scarlet voice.”

Crap. “Am I?”

“You are. She’s there, isn’t she?”

I rubbed my face with an open hand, suddenly tired of talking. Falling asleep was always difficult, even without the corporeal *her* in the room. Usually, if I wasn’t exhausted to the point of passing out, night was when memories of Scarlet were sharpest, which was why I always made sure to wear myself out during a typical day. Some folks work out, work hard, and work long hours due to ambition. My reasons were much less commendable.

“Are you still there?” Dani’s voice in my ear brought me back to the present. “Billy?”

“Yes, I’m here,” I said, working to banish thoughts of Scarlet. Again.

Life beyond this room had continued since I’d discovered the vacant rocking chair. Life had moved forward while I’d struggled to think about anything else. But I’d done it. Last night, I’d pushed her to the margins of my mind, filling the spaces she sought to invade with ordered lists and tasks. If there was one skill I’d practiced more than any other over the last

decade, it was forcing myself to concentrate on matters other than Scarlet St. Claire.

“So, she’s there. Right?”

“Did Cletus tell you that too?” I didn’t try to disguise my dislike of the subject.

“Actually, yes. He made a point of telling me you were there with Scarlet.” She sounded amused, like she found Cletus hilarious. “It was really cute.”

“Yeah, well, he knows you and I called off the engagement, but he doesn’t know it was fake.”

“Oh, I think Cletus probably knows it was fake. In fact, I’m pretty sure he knew the whole time it was fake.”

“You think so?” I didn’t know if I agreed with her, given how Cletus had loudly fretted about the engagement.

“Your brother is an evidence-based person. We never went on dates or spent any time together except to be seen in public. But it doesn’t matter now, because you called it off.”

“Are you still irritated?” I asked.

“No. Of course not. From the beginning, we agreed to do it as long as it benefited both of us. And I wasn’t irritated with you when you ended it, just the situation. I was hoping we’d have a few more months. I have a few irons in the fire, deals I need to see through that would’ve been easier if I was engaged to Congressman—soon to be Senator—Winston.”

“You should’ve said so. We can continue for a few months more, if it helps.”

“No, I don’t think that’s necessary since you’re presently in *Italy* with *Scarlet*.”

I ignored that. “Dani. It’s no big deal.”

“Billy, it’s fine. But thanks for letting me be the one to make it public. I might wait another week and then send out the official statement.”

“Take all the time you need.”

Dani paused, maybe thinking, maybe uncertain how to proceed, but eventually asking, “Are you staying off your feet?”

“I’ve done nothing but lie here since I arrived.”

“Good. The doctor made a point to call me and remind me to make sure you stay off your feet this time. You didn’t take care of yourself with the

last donation, this time you really need to stay off that hip. No walking. Take it easy.”

“Fine.”

She paused again, perhaps working through how to broach a topic. Content with silence, I stared forward unseeingly, neither enjoying nor disliking the cold void of thought and feeling within me.

I’d been in this numb limbo before. The first time when I was twelve, just after I woke up in the hospital after my father had almost killed me. The second time when I was sixteen, just after I woke up in the hospital after taking Scarlet’s punishment as my own and my father’s men had almost killed me.

This time, the numbness had descended just after discovering my little brother Roscoe in that diner with a stab wound in his back. Since then, I’d been going through the motions, doing what needed to be done. The void had only intensified when I’d decided to make the first bone marrow donation for Darrell, an act that would save the life of the man who’d almost taken mine twice.

Dani sighed—sounding impatient—and said, “Okay, real talk, Billy. How are you? And I don’t mean your hip. Have you seen her?”

A suggestion of something, of pain and frustration, throbbed once behind my eyes. I closed them, blocking it out.

“Yes,” I said.

“Well?” she asked.

“She’s the one who force-fed me,” I said.

“Really?” she asked.

“Mm-hmm,” I said.

“You should do a continuous hunger strike while you’re there.” Dani’s tone was desert dry. “Then maybe she’ll give you the time of day.”

“I’m not doing that.” I tested my jaw, moving it back and forth. I’d been grinding my teeth at night, or so my dentist had told me when I’d complained of headaches.

“Why not? Play patient for a little bit, let her play nurse, see where that goes.”

“No.” I opened my eyes. “My days of trying to manipulate Scarlet into wanting me are over, they have been for a long time.”

“You mean Claire.”

“Yeah.” Once more, my gaze lost focus and I welcomed the blank void. “I guess I do mean Claire.”

I heard Dani shift, her seat creak. “You know, from one tragic love story survivor to another, may I suggest that . . . you know what? Forget it. You two never even sealed the deal and you sound just as miserable as I do. So, I don’t have any good advice. Do what you can to protect yourself as much as possible. Have realistic expectations of her, and then set them even lower. That’s all you can do.”

I felt my lips curve. “Can’t argue with that.”

“How was it seeing her?” An uncharacteristic hint of worry entered her voice. “Did she talk to you this time? Or did she do the usual running away thing?”

“She did talk to me, actually.”

“Shocking. I am shocked. Shocked.”

I finally gave my mind permission to drift and think about Scarlet’s short visit. She’d confused me. It wasn’t the food that confused me, or her harassing me into eating by rocking in that damn chair. Both actions were very Scarlet-like, so were the hovering and stubbornness.

What confused me was why she’d stayed after I’d eaten, why she’d taken off my boots and covered me with a blanket, why she’d said what she did about the monsters. Why had she done it? I hated that she’d done it. I hated how hope flared at the memory, even though I knew—with her—hoping for anything was lunacy. So, yeah, I was confused. I didn’t understand her.

You don’t need to understand Scarlet. You need to let her go.

“Well? What did she say?” Dani pushed, again bringing me back to the present.

“Nothing of consequence.” The lie slipped out before I could catch it, but I let it be.

I want to stay and make sure no monsters come while you’re sleeping.

What will you do to the monsters, if they come?

You don’t want to know. Sweet dreams.

“If it’s nothing of consequence,” Dani kept on pushing, as she was prone to do, “then you should have no problem telling me.”

“Fine.” I decided to relate just the facts. “She wouldn’t leave until I ate.”

“Why didn’t you just ignore her?”

“Because she sat in this rocking chair in my room that makes incredibly annoying noises whenever it’s rocked, and she wouldn’t stop rocking until I ate her chicken soup.”

Dani sputtered a laugh. “Are you serious? That’s hilarious.”

I said nothing.

“Then what happened?” Dani pressed after I’d been quiet for a stretch.

“I ate, then she stayed and—” a bleak laugh tumbled out of me “—she watched me sleep.” I didn’t tell Dani the importance of this, or what Scarlet had said about monsters, that wasn’t for sharing. That was for us, Scarlet and me.

Vaguely, unbidden, I wondered if Scarlet still had nightmares. The thought penetrated enough of my present numbness to send a sharp ache through the center of my chest. I closed my eyes again.

Don’t think about it. Don’t think about her.

Dani was likewise quiet for a while, like this time she was truly shocked, saying when she finally recovered, “She stayed and watched you sleep?”

“Yeah.”

“Well then. I did not expect that. Yet you don’t sound too happy about this development. I mean, I thought you’d be elated. This is the woman you’ve been pining for basically your entire life.”

As usual, it was at this point I regretted confiding in Daniella Payton all those years ago, on the night of Jethro’s wedding. I didn’t usually regret that evening—us swapping our sad stories, drunk in the library of my family’s house—just whenever she asked too many questions or used words like *pinning*.

“Anyway,” I said. Time to change the subject for good. “How are you?”

“Oh, no. I’m not finished. Why aren’t you happier about this? When she came for Christmas last year, you had all these high hopes and plans, you were going to show her that you’d grown, you were going to let her come to you.”

“And that worked so well,” I said stonily.

“Your only mistake was—”

“Loving her.”

“*Noooo.*” I couldn’t see Dani, but I knew she was shaking her head. “Your only mistake was—and is—still *resenting* her. You were—are—still mad, that she chose Ben over—”

“She chose guilt! Not Ben.” My eyes flew open and a subdued rush of fury roughened my voice. “Her great love is *guilt*, not Ben McClure. He was just the peddler of it, the one who got her addicted, with all his bullshit ‘saintly sacrifices.’ Scarlet is addicted to her guilt and shame and fucking self-righteous—”

“Yejeeeah. You don’t sound angry at all.”

My forehead fell to my palm. Damn. *Dammit!* Dani was right. I sounded pissed. I was pissed. I was still so damn angry with her.

“I’ve been telling you for years, you need to let that shit go.”

I rubbed my eye with a fist. “If I could, don’t you think I would’ve by now?”

“Maybe if you got laid, you’d chill out. Being celibate all of your adult life is unhealthy.”

“We’re not talking about this.”

“Okay, think of it this way: Which is worse? Scarlet being addicted to her guilt or you—Billy Winston—being addicted to your bitterness?”

“You think I’m addicted to resenting her?”

“I know so. If you wanted Scarlet more than your anger, you would’ve told her what you did for her when she left at fourteen.”

This was an old, tired argument. We’d had this same conversation several times, usually after we’d drunk too much scotch and she cried about Curtis Hickson, aka Catfish, Iron Wraiths captain and criminal. The woman looked like that actress Gabrielle Union and was a financial genius. I still didn’t understand why someone like Daniella Payton—brilliant in every conceivable way, good and charismatic and gorgeous—had a weakness for an asshole like him.

“No, Dani—”

“Yes! You could’ve closed the distance between the two of you a long, long time ago by just telling Scarlet the truth. If she knew you took her punishment, you almost died, you lost your chance to play ball in college, you—”

“If she knew,” I spoke through gritted teeth, “then she’d feel obligated to me, like she did with Ben. She doesn’t need more guilt, more people making demands, and I don’t want her to choose me out of a sense of duty. That’s no choice at all. He ruined her. He wrecked her spirit.”

Dani made a sound of impatience and I reckoned she’d just rolled her eyes. “She is not ruined, she’s fabulous. Have you heard her latest album? I

don't even like country music and her voice gives me chills."

I ignored the question and the content of her statement, focusing on the real issue. "I'd rather never have Scarlet at all than be with her like that. I don't want her to repay a debt, I don't want her guilt. I just want *her*."

"Then use this opportunity! She's there, in Italy, right now, with you. Let go of being angry, stop hating her, and just love the woman, Billy. Just. Love. Her."

"I don't want to talk about this." Another stab of pain in the center of my chest pushed the words from my mouth.

"Fine. Let's talk about the bone marrow transplant."

"I don't want to talk about that either."

Dani chuckled. "Fine. Whatever. There's lots of things you don't ever want to talk about. So, let me say this one thing. On behalf of my entire family, thank you. Thank you for being there that night to help my sister. Thank you for donating the bone marrow. You're doing the right thing."

I stopped myself from hanging up on her. I definitely didn't want her gratitude for donating my marrow to Darrell. I hadn't done it for her, or her family, or even my family. I'd done it for revenge.

Dani kept on talking. "All those people that Razor killed, they and their families are going to get justice. He's going to jail for the rest of his life, or he's going to get the death penalty—one or the other—and that's because of you. Your father would've died if not for you. Yeah, Razor would've been charged in the attempted murder of your brother and my sister—a federal officer—but that's not, I mean, he could've been paroled in twenty years."

"Maybe he would've died in prison," I said quietly, "before he was paroled, now that he can't use his hands."

"Hmm. Maybe. But think about all those families who wouldn't have gotten justice."

Shrugging, I glanced out the window. "I guess that's true."

We passed the next few seconds in silence, each with our own thoughts. I watched a wasp tap itself against the sliding glass door of my room, looking for a way in. Of their own accord, my eyes focused beyond the wasp to the landscape beyond. If I'd been in a mood or mind to notice such things, I would've said the view was beautiful. Green hills, the chaos of forest patched intermittently with tidy vineyards, gray stone red-roofed villas, and—every so often—a white church steeple pointing to a cloudless blue heaven.

The Smokies were yellow and green, hot in the summer; blue and brown, cold in the winter; every shade of the rainbow during spring and fall. But my old mountains were never this dreamy combination of orange and purple and warmth. I'd been right. The light here was different.

I heard Dani's chair creak again, bringing me back to the room. I heard her breathe out, and then breathe in like she was preparing to say something. Clearly, she was teetering on uncharacteristic indecision. I sensed it through the phone and the thousands of miles between us.

So, curious, I asked, "You have something to say?"

"I do, actually." Once more, her chair creaked. I heard papers shuffle, or something like it. "I have to talk to you about something other than just checking on you. But, I don't know how to put this."

"What?"

She eventually said, "I got a visit from the FBI—oh man, it was awkward. They showed up at my office on Wall Street unannounced, a gang of them in cheap black suits and white shirts and badges. They said *FBI* so many times. *So many*, like I was going to forget in the ten seconds they last said it. Anyway, um, it was about you."

"About me?"

"Yes. They wanted to know if you'd talked to me about or discussed the events of the night Razor tried to kill your brother and Simone."

"I haven't."

"Precisely. But they wanted to know if we had because Razor is apparently claiming that after you knocked him out, you assaulted him."

"Assaulted." She couldn't see me, so she couldn't see the small, satisfied twist to my lips. "Is that what he said?"

"He's saying you knocked him out, and then you cut his hands with his own knife, sliced right through his tendons."

"If I knocked him out, how could he possibly know what I did after?" The cold, calm mantle of detachment settled firmly around me, a cocoon of soothing starkness.

"Well, that's the thing," Dani said just before I heard a door clicking shut on her end. "No one else was there except Simone and Roscoe, and they were both passed out. But that also means no one else was there to cut his hands, right?"

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps?"

“I can’t say whether anyone else was there. I was busy trying to keep Simone and Roscoe from dying.”

“True, true.” Her voice wavered, like she fought a shiver. “Anyway, I told them I didn’t know anything because I simply don’t know anything. You haven’t told me anything, so how could I know anything?”

“Right.”

“And they seemed to think that was strange, since we’re engaged and all.”

“Oh?”

“But then I told them you’d called off the engagement and that seemed to make them feel better about my lack of knowledge.”

“Ah.”

“And I asked them what difference it made whether or not you cut his hands—again, reiterating I had no idea one way or the other—because you would’ve been acting in self-defense. But the agents said it did make a difference because you wouldn’t have been acting in self-defense.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. They said since Razor was unconscious, if it’s discovered that you did, indeed, cut his hands then you could face jail time for that.”

“Hmm,” was all I said. But what I wanted to say was, *I don’t care. If that’s my punishment, so be it. It was worth it.*

“I told them I actually thought it was pretty shitty. Here you are, donating bone marrow to their number one witness, and then here they are, conducting an investigation, trying to put you in jail. That’s stupid. Again, I don’t know anything, except for how asinine it would be to put you in jail for stopping a mass murderer. Other than that, I know nothing.”

That drew a little bit of a laugh from me, one with humor. “You know nothing. That would be a first.”

“Ha-ha. Anyway, they also asked when you were planning to be back in the country. They said when you come back to the States, they need to bring you in and talk to you about it. But that they understood you are recovering from your second bone marrow donation and would leave you be until you returned. There you go, that’s what I wanted to tell you.”

“Thanks for the heads-up,” I said evenly, meaning it. I’d have to figure out what to do about this later. Maybe I’d turn myself in, maybe I’d say nothing at all, I hadn’t decided yet. But I wouldn’t lie. *If it’s not true, don’t say it.*

I did my best to live this every day. The only exception over the course of my life had been Scarlet. The woman was my only secret, the only person I'd lied about, or for, or to, and always as a means of protecting her.

"Anything you want to tell me Billy? About what happened that night?" Dani's voice dropped to a whisper.

I didn't hesitate. "Nope."

"Then I'm just going to ask, did you cut his hands?"

"Bye, Dani." I was tired of talking; I needed a shower; I needed to stretch.

She made a soft grunting sound of displeasure. "You're an interesting and complicated person, Billy Winston."

Working to stand, I kept the strain out of my voice, saying, "Coming from you, Dani Payton, I'll take that as the highest of compliments."

"You know, I think in an alternate universe, I could've fallen in love with you . . . if I hadn't fallen for Curtis first."

That pulled a small smile from me. "Same."

"You fell in love with Curtis?"

I smiled despite myself and she laughed, it still sounded reluctant. I wondered if there'd ever been a time when Daniella Payton laughed with abandon, before life and love had broken her trust.

"Why are we like this?" she asked, right on cue. Dani and I didn't talk like this often, maybe once a year, maybe twice. But whenever we did, she always ended up asking, "Why can't we just let them go?"

"I still don't have an answer." I glanced at the glass door again. A wasp—maybe even the same one as before—was tapping against it again, trying to find a way inside. "Maybe we're stupid."

"No. That's not it," she said dismissively, then added with a note of distraction, "Maybe we're too smart."

"How you figure?"

"We are atypically successful in all facets of our lives to an extreme degree, save this one. You're the youngest state congressman in Tennessee's history, and you'll be one of the youngest federal senators ever."

"If I'm elected."

"Oh, you'll get elected. You are *beloved*, not just in Tennessee, but by everyone. My grandfather has already written in support of your candidacy. Senator Parker from California has already said she'll endorse you—she'd make a great vice-presidential running mate by the way, when the time

comes. You're smart and gorgeous and way too charming when you decide to be. You have no skeletons in the closet because your closet is empty. Plus, the accepted spin on the whole Razor Dennings thing is that you single-handedly caught a serial killer and are responsible for saving the FBI's case. You. William Winston saved his brother's life and ended the June reign of terrors. The press is in love with you, Twitter is in love with you—the memes, Billy! My secretary showed me the Twitter account—what's it called? *Congressional Beard?*”

I continued to track the wasp while Dani spoke, certain now it was the same one as before, hurling itself against an invisible, impenetrable barrier with the idiocy of either an insect or a man.

“Where, I guess, they tweet about how your beard basically seduces men, women, and children with its gloriousness? Something like that. Anyway, it's epic. I laughed so hard.”

I hadn't seen the account. I'd never been on Twitter, or Facebook for that matter. Staff members wrote all my tweets. I wasn't a fan of the platform. Any website encouraging people to consume misleading headlines over facts seemed counterproductive to the survival of the human species. It was like folks had become willing, voracious consumers of propaganda. *Bizarre.*

Plus, Cletus was always asking me to live-tweet stuff, like going to the grocery store during blueberry season or getting my beard trimmed at the barber shop.

“Your point?” I asked, unable to look away from the persistent and foolish wasp. Tap-tap-tap. *Why doesn't it leave? Why doesn't it give up?*

“My *point*, Gruffy McGrufferton, is just this: if you ultimately decide to run for that senate seat next year, it's yours. And maybe that's our problem. If we want something, we work and work and work and push and push and push until it happens, and then it always happens. But with Curtis . . .”

I listened as Dani gathered a deep inhale, the sound overlaid by the tap-tap-tap of the insect. Her melancholy sigh the melody of futility; that imbecilic wasp provided the percussion; my silence was the accompaniment.

“Pushing gets me nowhere with her,” I stated stoically. “I know that already.”

“And yet,” she said with a hint of sadness, “you can't help yourself, can you? You still push.”

CHAPTER FOUR

* BILLY *

“I’d always secretly believed that a love as fierce and true as mine would be rewarded in the end, and now I was being forced to accept the bitter truth.”

— ALMA KATSU, THE TAKER

The door to my room opened as I was leaving the bathroom. Unable to see who’d opened it from where I was standing—or much of the hall either—I stopped and gripped the towel at my waist to ensure it wasn’t about to fall. I’d just taken a shower.

“When I walked by, I heard you talking to someone, so I know you’re up. If you’re awake, then you can eat.” The sound of Scarlet’s voice hit me right below the ribs mere seconds before she—in profile—came into view. Wearing a pale pink summer dress that ended above the knee, held together at her shoulders by mere strings, she walked down the two stairs into my room, carrying another of her food laden trays.

Her eyes were affixed to the steps and the tray, not the room. Torn, I took a hasty step backward but then stopped. My clothes were in my suitcase, several feet beyond where Scarlet now stood.

What could I do? Turn around and hide in the bathroom until she left? No.

... *Maybe.*

“I didn’t wake you up for dinner last night, you were sleeping so peacefully, but you do need to eat more than once a day. So here I am, and I’ll be back with lunch in a few hours.” She set the tray on the corner of the

bed. Her back to me, her hands lifted to her hips as she finally looked up. I braced as she turned at the waist, searching the room. “Where are you hid—oh my God!”

Well, she saw me.

Scarlet faced me, her hand flying to her chest. Eyes wide, her stare grew distracted, then hazy, then mesmerized, and it never lifted higher than my neck even though her cheeks were turning pinker with every passing second. I didn’t move other than grind my teeth, just let her look. I was certain at some point she’d realize she was gaping at my body and probably run out of here embarrassed.

With any luck, her thoughtless behavior might mortify her enough to send someone else with the tray from now on.

So, I waited. As predicted, Scarlet flinched again, apparently coming to herself. She squeezed her eyes shut, and then covered them with her hands.

“I—um, I just—you’re—I brought you—you have—” Huffing harshly, her hands fell from her face, which was now bright red. She pointed at the tray behind her, opened her eyes, anchored them to the ceiling, and yelled, “FOOD! Okay? I brought *food!*”

I said nothing, nor did I make a move, too busy trying not to notice how cute she was, flustered and aggrieved by the sight of my bare chest. I reckoned I had only a second or two to look my fill before she stormed from the room and slammed the door. Or maybe she’d rush out without closing the door, darting down the stairs and fleeing to parts unknown in this gigantic villa, beyond my sinister reach.

These days, my sinister reach was limited due to the limp, but that made no difference. She didn’t know it yet, but she needn’t run. I wasn’t chasing her anymore.

So, again, I waited, scratching my jaw, watching Scarlet wrestle her humiliation, and unintentionally taking note of her burning cheeks and ears and neck, how nice her legs looked in that dress, how her feet were bare, and that her toenails were painted red.

Moments passed, perhaps a full minute, and she didn’t leave. Meanwhile, my skin had also heated. Memories of holding her overlaid with the image of her now—in her pink summer dress and bare feet and loose hair—made me tense, and then harden with a decidedly awkward, uncomfortable, and useless result.

Dammit.

Now? Really? Right now I'm getting wood? What the *fucking hell* kind of special torture was this?

"Are you going to participate willingly today?" she asked the ceiling, cutting through my particular thoughts, her voice high and strained, her hands settling back on her hips. "Or do I need to give you the rocking chair torture?"

Rocking chair torture? She had no idea.

Now I was the one caught, begrudgingly taking notice of how the thin fabric highlighted every inch it was supposed to cover, ravenously devouring the sweet curves of her form. My chest expanded and tightened—everything tightened—with want.

God. Damn. It.

Not for the first time—or tenth time, or hundredth time—I wondered, had I done it to myself? After she'd left Green Valley the first time and I'd been stuck in the hospital, using her name as a prayer, had I unintentionally damaged myself? Broken myself? Imprinted Scarlet on my heart and mind and body, impairing my ability to notice or want anyone but her? *The soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts*, and my soul was still Scarlet.

At my continued staring and silence, she cleared her throat. And that's when I ripped my attention from the delectably rosy patches heating her soft, pale skin. Glancing around the room, I shook myself, searching for my suitcase. Evidently, I'd forgotten where it was located at some point in the last three minutes.

"Leave it there, please. Thank you." The request was gruff, but there wasn't much I could do about the tenor of my voice right now. Her mere presence fractured my concentration, invaded the comfortably numb spaces I required to go through the motions, to make it through the day.

Towel held firmly just under my belly button, I ignored the renewed weight of her gaze and walked to my suitcase, grabbed the first set of clothes I found, and returned to the bathroom. Once inside with the door closed, I tossed the T-shirt, boxers, and jeans on the counter and leaned my palms against it, taking a deep, bracing breath and clearing my mind of her. Or trying to.

But I couldn't, not with her so close.

Lifting my chin, I stared at my reflection in the mirror, endeavoring to see myself the way she saw me—someone she didn't love but desired despite her best efforts and intentions and *guilt*. All I saw was a fool.

Perhaps that's what she saw too. Perhaps that's why she'd never wanted me badly enough to do anything about it.

A sour taste singed the back of my throat and I swallowed the rising resentment. But then Dani's words from earlier came back to me: *Which is worse? Scarlet being addicted to her guilt, or you being addicted to your bitterness?*

Dani was right. As much as I loved Scarlet, part of me also hated her. I hated that I'd been the source of her guilt, that she considered me a weakness, something to overcome rather than someone to cherish, like I wanted to cherish her. Even now, her cheeks had caught fire and she hadn't known where to settle her eyes; her agitation had been cute, but the root of it had not.

I'd never wanted to be a source of weakness for Scarlet. I'd wanted to be a source of strength.

Leaning away from the counter, I tugged on my clothes. This wasn't going to work. Roscoe almost dying, donating the marrow to Darrell, the constant pain in my hip and back, being limited to where I could go and what I could do, the senate race, the mill, people counting on me—I had enough to deal with. Her being here made everything worse, chaotic. She divided my attention: it was Scarlet, and then everything and everyone else. *Let it go. Let her go.*

Something for me to work on.

Certain she'd be gone by now, I turned for the door, ignoring the unkempt appearance of my beard. I didn't have the patience or steady hand needed to shave and trim. It would have to wait. First, I'd drown myself with emails, work, government business, proposal writing, spreadsheets, and labor statistics. Then, my family, their troubles, worries, triumphs—*just as long as no one asks me if I've eaten anything.*

Leaving the bathroom a second time, I belatedly realized I hadn't seen my namesake yet. Only Duane had been awake when I arrived, and he'd looked as tired as I felt. Maybe, if I could manage, I'd head down one flight of stairs and see if I could—

"I think I'll stay."

My head whipped up and I stopped mid-stride, shocked confusion rooting me to the spot.

"I want to make sure the appropriate amount of food makes it into your stomach." Scarlet, who hadn't left, was standing next to the desk where I'd

set my laptop bag, now no longer in sight. She'd replaced it with plates full of food and, I noticed, a small bud vase containing three red poppies. One hand on her hip, she gestured to the top of the desk with the other, Vanna White style.

"Biscuits and gravy and bacon and eggs. Come on, sit down." She motioned me forward, her tone sweet and melodic. Tilting her head to the side, her long, red hair spilled over the bare skin of her shoulder, framing her exquisite face. It was like something out of a dream, but the reality of it was a nightmare.

I didn't know what Cletus had told her, but it was clear he'd done some serious over-exaggerating. When he got here, my brother and I were going to have words.

"You don't need to stay," I said, my voice low. *Please. Leave. Now.*

As though reading my thoughts, she responded softly, "How about this? The sooner you eat, the sooner I'll leave."

I debated my options, eventually conceding with a stiff nod. Eating would be the quickest way to be rid of her; I could eat everything in less than five minutes, but arguing with Scarlet was a gift that lasted a lifetime. Crossing to the desk, I pulled out the chair for myself and she stepped back. In my peripheral vision I saw her claim the rocking chair. She'd moved it closer, sitting on the edge of it just four or so feet away.

"It's your momma's biscuit recipe. Ashley gave it to me."

Absentmindedly, I nodded again, my stomach cold and sour despite the delicious looking meal before me. I still had no appetite, my tongue tasted like sawdust, the smell of the food made me sick. But I'd eat it, every single bite.

I'd just placed the napkin on my lap and picked up my fork when she said, "Hey, Billy."

"Yeah?"

"Why'd the early bird end up in Alpha Centauri?"

It was like being sideswiped, the blow coming out of nowhere. A booming, jarring shock of pain radiated from my heart to my limbs, debilitating me for a second. I closed my eyes, grimacing in the wake of it.

"Are you okay?" Her concerned voice was suddenly closer, I felt her hand press against my forehead, touching me. She *touched* me. "You don't have a fever. Is it your hip? Can I—"

I pushed back from the table, standing, limping and stumbling *away* from wherever she was.

Without a doubt, I believed Scarlet had no idea what she did to me. She'd never sought to hurt me on purpose, I truly believed that. But in the end, it didn't matter. It hadn't mattered when we were teenagers and she left with Ben McClure; it hadn't mattered during our short, tortuous months together or the years since; it definitely didn't matter now.

In the end, it hurt badly, and I couldn't handle any more hurt right now, especially not her brand of it. And given everything going on, I didn't have the energy to lie—or hide, or pretend I wasn't affected by her presence—in order to protect her feelings.

So I struggled to calm my racing pulse and the painful aftershocks squeezing my heart with every beat.

“Billy—”

I lifted a hand to stay her, closed my eyes briefly. When I opened them, I kept my attention affixed to the floor at her feet.

“Claire,” I began, hoping my use of her legal name would place more than just distance between us as I picked through my words carefully, “Please leave.”

“You're in pain,” she both accused and pleaded. “I know the doctors gave you something for it, why won't you take it?”

I winced. “It doesn't—”

“Don't tell me it doesn't hurt. I know what I saw, it nearly doubled you over just now.”

“It's not my hip.”

“Like hell it isn't. Take a Tylenol, or anything! Something over the counter. I know sometimes pain meds can make people feel funny, out of it, and you don't want the loss of control. I get that.”

She moved closer, and so I stepped back. “You don't get it. You don't understand.”

“Then tell me so I can help you—”

“It's you,” I blurted, part of me regretting the words as soon as I said them.

But there was no taking back the truth now. As tired as I was of being rejected by this woman, I was equally tired of trying to hurt her with false indifference and simmering resentment. She'd never sought to injure, but—

to my shame—the same couldn't be said for me. I'd wanted to matter to her and in my desperation to matter, I'd been hostile and harsh, unkind.

But I didn't want to try to force her to care about me anymore. She didn't want me, I got it, message finally fucking received. I didn't want to be that idiotic wasp, a modern-day Man of La Mancha, mindlessly hurling itself against an invisible, impenetrable barrier, or chasing windmills. I wanted peace. Quiet. Numbness. *Silence*. I wanted her to leave me alone.

I was done.

Rubbing my forehead with my fingertips, I committed to the truth. "It's you, being here. It's not my hip or my back. It's you. I don't want to see you, I don't want to talk to you, and I don't want you to tell me any goddamn jokes. I'll eat whatever y'all bring up, but I'm asking you to leave and not come back."

Steadying myself, I lifted my gaze to her wide, watchful one, hoping she'd understand the goal of my intentions was honesty. But my next words stalled as I looked at her, taking in her glassy eyes and ashen skin.

"Are you—are you okay?" The question launched out of me, propelled by concern. Truly, she did not look well.

Her mouth opened and closed with no sound and she stared at me, like I'd just slapped her.

And then, her chin wobbled. *Damn*.

"Scarlet. I'm . . ." I wanted to say I was sorry, but everything I'd said was true. So instead, I said, "I'm so tired of the hurt. Aren't you tired of it?"

She nodded, pressing her lips together, her eyes filling with tears. God, I wanted to go to her, hold her, comfort her, but that would lead to me being frustrated—and resenting her—and her feeling guilty, always guilty.

"I told you last Christmas that nothing had changed for me," I said. "That was true then, but it's not true now. I give up."

Her face contorted like it might crumple, but at the last minute she regained her composure and lifted her chin, her stained-glass eyes shining brightly. Dani was right, Scarlet wasn't ruined, and I was glad to see her spirit. It helped me focus my thoughts.

"I understand you're doing my brother a favor, bringing me food and whatnot. I appreciate it. I'll eat the food. Thank you. But you've been right all along."

"I'm right?" she choked out, like she didn't know whether to scream or laugh. "What am I right about?"

I gave myself a second to take a mental snapshot of her as she was now. And then I hardened my resolve. “We aren’t good for each other,” I said quietly.

She cleared her expression completely, the emotion leeching out of her, leaving just grim determination. “I see.”

“We never have been,” I went on, endeavoring to remove myself from this room, this woman, these final words. This was how it ended between us, I was certain of it, I surrendered to it. I was so tired. “I can see that now. I’ve been a fool—and unkind, I reckon—pushing for something that’s never going to happen.”

Scarlet’s throat worked but she said nothing, just glared at me.

“I’m sorry for ignoring you when you came back to town, withholding myself and my friendship. I’m sorry for pushing you to leave Ben and I’m sorry for being hateful and spiteful when you wouldn’t. I’m sorry for showing up the night before your wedding, my mind set on seducing you—we both know that’s why I was there, no denying it—and I’m sorry for all the fights since, all the angry words. I’m sorry for all of it. You deserve so much more than my resentment.”

She lowered her hands to her thighs, pressed them there, holding perfectly still.

“Like you said years ago, we bring out the worst in each other. That’s not your fault, it’s just how we—we don’t work.” The words suffocated me even though they needed saying. I was so damn tired of chasing windmills. “But being around you, near you, it’s difficult for me. I don’t know how to stop wanting something from you that you’ll never give.”

Her lips pressed in a line that looked stubborn, and she blinked several times. “You don’t think it’s difficult for me?”

I glared at her, resentment threatening like a thundercloud, flaring, and I barely stopped myself from saying something like, *If looking at me still makes you feel so guilty, there’s the door.*

She wasn’t finished. “Don’t you think, if I could’ve, I would’ve given you what you want? It wasn’t you. It’s never been you.” She pointed to her chest with both hands. “I was the problem, Billy. I was the one who made selfish decisions, kept secrets, hurt you, hurt Ben—”

I looked away, clenching my jaw. I swore to God, I was so fucking tired of hearing about Ben McClure’s hurt when all he did from day one was take advantage of her being fourteen and homeless, scared, alone. As far as I

was concerned, what he did to her made him a predator. Worst of all, he believed all his own bullshit, which made it easy for other folks to believe it too.

“No, wait. Let me finish, please.” Her voice firmed, beseeching, and she darted forward, coming to stop about three feet away. “Let me say this, because I don’t know if I’ll ever have the bravery to say it again.”

I looked everywhere but at her. “No. No, I don’t care. I don’t want to know. I’m tired. I’m so tired of this.”

“Billy—”

“It’s over. I’m done. I don’t want to fight anymore.” I said this slowly, carefully, not looking at her. I couldn’t say it and look at her. I needed to tell her the truth, but I wanted my words to be as gentle as possible. “I’d appreciate it if, while I’m limited in my mobility, someone else brought up whatever food y’all want me to eat.”

I sensed her move away a step, maybe more. “If that’s what you want,” she said, her voice remote, like she was speaking from the other side of the room.

“It is.” I swallowed against the knot in my throat, my eyes pointed at the ground. “While we’re both here, I’ll keep my distance. And I’d appreciate it if you kept yours.”

CHAPTER FIVE

CLAIRE

“In a weird way I must have loved my little collection of hurts and wounds. They provided me with some real nice sympathy, with the feeling I was exceptional...What a special case I was.”

— SUE MONK KIDD, *THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES*

It was official, I’d had too much wine.

My eyes had trouble fixing on the stars. The bottle was empty—I’d been the only one drinking it—and I was feeling sorry for myself. When I was drunk, I always felt sorry for myself like a drunk, idiotic, dumb, foolish, drunk person.

Also, I wasn’t at all eloquent. I was anti-eloquent. Words were like lightning bugs, or hints, or peace, or a break, or anything else that’s hard to catch but we keep on chasing. Ah, well. If I was going to drink an entire bottle of wine, I supposed a Chianti from a winery just down the road wasn’t a bad way to go about it.

“Claire? Are you out here?” Sienna’s voice called from somewhere behind me, probably the stone porch behind the house.

I’d taken a blanket down the hill—not far, just about twenty feet—and spread it on the grass. I’d watched the sun set over the Tuscan hills, thinking about Billy Winston’s breathtaking torso, angry eyes, and the goat tattoo on his left shoulder I’d had no idea existed, and, apparently, drank an entire bottle of wine all by myself. I only drank like this when I was celebrating or wallowing. However, I could’ve sworn I’d only had two glasses. . .

“Claire?”

“Here,” I called back, not turning. Instead, I reclined on the blanket and closed my eyes. Bad idea. I felt the rotation of the earth flinging through space and I was half afraid I’d be thrown from the planet. Everything was spinning, including my eyeballs.

I opened my eyes again. *Better.*

“Where? Down the hill?” Sienna’s footsteps on the stone porch soon became footsteps on the stone stairs, and then no sound I could hear, which meant she’d made it to the grass. “I see you,” she said, her voice now a normal volume. “What are you doing out here in the dark? We missed you at dinner.”

“Sorry, sorry—”

“Don’t apologize. This is your vacation, you can spend it however you like. I just wanted to let you know you were missed.” Sienna fussed about at the edge of the blanket, maybe taking her shoes off, and then in my peripheral vision I sorta saw her lie down next to me. “Holy crap, it’s gorgeous here. It’s gorgeous during the day, it’s gorgeous at night. Just look at those stars.”

“I wish I could.” I tried closing my eyes again, more spinning.

I sensed her turn her face toward me. “Why can’t you?”

I pointed to myself with both thumbs. “Drunk.”

Silence for a beat, and then she laughed.

I laughed.

We both laughed.

“No you’re not.” She gently smacked my shoulder.

“Yep.” I smacked the air since all the Siennas wouldn’t hold still.

After a while, she asked, “Are you really drunk?” and seemed to turn her face back to the stars.

“Yep.”

“You don’t sound drunk.”

“How do I sound?”

“All put together, like you always do.”

“Not all put together, not ever, not even close.” I laughed again. Put together? I was about as put together as one of those Jenga puzzle game things toward the end, when it was about to fall over if you removed any number of pieces.

She didn't laugh with me. "What's going on, old buddy, old pal? Why are you out here, drunk, all by your lonesome? The boys are already asleep, as unbelievable as that is. Jet and I would've—what does Cletus call it?—*imbibed adjacent* if we'd known you were in a drinking mood. You never drink."

"Imbibed adjacent," I quoted, laughing again. "Cletus was always an awesome weirdo. Even when we were kids, he had a funny way of putting things."

I heard her shift next to me. "You knew Cletus when you were kids?"

"Yep."

"I did not know that, did I? I swear, pregnancy wiped my memory each time. I thought you and Jethro knew each other because of your husband, Ben."

I felt none of the usual tension in my stomach or the oppressive fear whenever I thought about my childhood. *Maybe because I'm drunk?* "Nope. I knew Jethro before Ben. Our fathers were MC brothers in the Iron Wraiths." Talking in complete sentences was taking a toll, my mouth felt full of used chewing gum.

"That's right." She snapped her fingers, or made a sound like it. "I did know that. But your father is Razor Dennings and is Darrell's boss? I mean, *was* his boss. I keep forgetting that Razor Dennings is your father, even though it's literally all over the news."

"I'll take that as a compliment," I said, ignoring the wave of melancholy pushing at the periphery of my mood, deciding a joke was in order. "Especially seeing as how he's currently-currently-currently—" Closing my eyes, I worked to catch the tail of my thought. "He's on trial! For what he did to Simone and Roscoe, and all those other people. I'd be happy for everyone to forget we're related."

That wasn't a good joke. That wasn't a joke at all. Just shut your drunk face.

A moment later, I felt Sienna's hand close over mine and squeeze. "I am so sorry, Claire."

"Why? You murder someone?" *Still not a good joke.*

She squeezed my hand harder. "I can't imagine what you're dealing with right now. I made the mistake of picking up a newspaper for the flight, and the things the press is saying about you, it makes me so angry."

I shrugged, pulling my hand out of her grip, placing it behind my head, and sending a quick prayer of thanks upward for the numbing qualities of a good bottle of Italian wine. “I don’t think about it. Growing up with Razor Dennings as your daddy, thinking about him . . . and his evilness . . . that don’t do no good.” The world was moving back and forth, but then I realized it was me shaking my head. And so I stopped. “Folks wanna believe thinking about something does some good. Pshaw! Talking, ranting, bitching and moaning ain’t gonna make no difference.”

“Claire, is your accent thicker? I can barely understand you.”

“Sorry.” I cleared my throat, swallowed, and endeavored to make my mouth move normally. “Is this better?”

“Yes. I can understand you better. You were saying something about talking not helping?”

“Cor-rect! All talkin’ does is make you miserable. Like-like digging a hole. And then, wondering how you got to the bottom of it. That’s stupid. I don’t wanna be a miserable person. I want to be a . . . a—one of those—you know, a *content* person.”

“You want to be content?”

“Content and good. Imma be a content and good person, and so I will be.” I snapped at this for some reason, or tried to.

Sienna made a small sound. “You sound like Jethro, when he quotes his mother, except drunk.”

An image of Bethany Winston materialized in my mind’s eye, smiling at me, telling me I was going to be her forest fairy. But then that image was obscured by another, her face marred with extreme distress, her eyes flashing with disappointment. I swallowed around the sharp emotion, working to distance myself from the echo of shame.

“Claire? Are you okay?” Sienna’s concerned voice dispelled the unpleasant memory.

“His momma had some great sayings, that’s for sure.” I sniffed, working to arrange my mouth into a smile. “Gosh, I wish I hadn’t drunk all that wine.”

“I imagine if my father turned out to be a serial killer, I’d get drunk on a hill in Tuscany too.” I heard her shift on the blanket. “In fact, I think I’ll get drunk on a hill in Tuscany even though my father only kills with dad jokes.”

I grimaced, turning my head toward her as she turned toward me.

“Give me a break.” All the Siennas shrugged. “It’s hard to make murder funny.”

“We should probably stop trying.”

“You’re right. It’s just, I’d like to cheer you up and I can’t think of anything hilarious to say when the reason you’re sad is so freaking depressing.”

“My father ain’t the reason I’m sad,” I said, because: wine + wine + wine + wine = honesty. “I mean, I’ve known who he is my whole life. He’s the scariest person on this earth! If I never saw him again, I’d be grateful. Just thinking about him, it’s hard.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. We don’t have to—”

“No, no. If we’re going to have this conversation, we should do it now.” I smacked the ground with my hand way too hard. That was going to hurt later. “I’m drunk! And that helps *a lot*. Point is, I’m not surprised by what my daddy did. I don’t mourn for him. I’m so sad—so sad—for the families. I was scared for Simone and Roscoe when I heard what happened to them. Thank God they’re both out of the woods now. But Razor Dennings has nothing to do with my mood. If I let that bastard impact my mood, I’d be hiding half the time.” The world moved up and down, so I stopped nodding. “Maybe the whole time.”

“Really?” she asked, her tone telling me she didn’t believe me. “He doesn’t impact your mood?”

“Cor-rect.”

“Then why are you out here in the dark?”

“You said yourself, it’s pretty out here.” I threw my hand at the sky, it then came back and hit me in the stomach.

“Then why are you drunk?”

“This wine is good, and a surprising goat tattoo caught me unawares. I’d say you should have some, but I already drank it all.”

“Goat tattoo?” She chuckled, but said, “And yet, you are sad, Claire.”

My chest ached, cutting through the inebriation fog. My chest hadn’t stopped with the aching since I found out Billy had arrived. Our interaction in his room had only intensified the ache, which was why I was presently drunk. I just wanted it to stop.

After he’d told me to keep my distance—which I understood, and accepted, and would 100 percent do—the ache had become alternately

spiky and hot and then dull and painful. It was over. I'd waited too long. I'd been an idiot for too damn long and Billy had finally, *finally* moved on.

Well then. Good for him. He deserved all the happiness. He'd deserved all the happiness years ago and he'd always deserved better than me. So I'd toasted to his happiness four times, and now I was as drunk as Flo McClure had been the Christmas she'd told all of us she was a lesbian.

"I guess I am sad." My chin wobbled. *Dammit*. I was happy for Billy, but that didn't mean I was happy for myself.

"Why are you sad?" She turned, lying on her side to face me. "Talk to Sienna. Tell me everything. Maybe I can help. Is it about the news?"

"No." I waved my hand through the air. "Don't care what they call me. 'Devil's Daughter.'" I huffed a weak laugh. "Been called worse."

"I know what it's like when they all gang up, it can be exhausting."

"Not the newspapers, don't care."

"If anyone can help you not care about what the media is saying, it's me. I'm a pro."

"Sienna. It's not the media. It's—" I stopped myself, my face crumpling, so I covered it with my hand.

She was quiet for a few seconds and I felt her attention on me. "I know you think talking about things won't help, but sometimes it does. Sometimes, you just need a person who you can trust to listen, who you can be open with and not have to worry about their feelings, or whether they're judging you."

I nodded, pressing my lips together. Talking to someone like that actually sounded nice. It sounded so nice, it seemed like a fairy tale. Pretend. Make believe.

"I worry about you," she went on. "Jethro worries about you. He said Ben used to be that person for you, but now he's—"

"Ben was never that person for me," I blurted, and then drew in a deep breath, feeling . . . fine.

Eh, let me clarify that. By *fine*, I mean, *not worse*.

Sienna was quiet again, but this time the silence felt different. "Claire —"

"It's the truth. Ben loved me, took care of me, kept me safe. I owed him a debt I could never repay. But I was never honest with him about how I felt, what I wanted, or who I was. And when I tried to be honest, I just hurt

him. I hurt him so bad. He didn't want honesty, he wanted me to love him, and I couldn't. I couldn't. I couldn't."

Aaaaaand, now I was crying.

Damn tears. Stupid sobbing, messy, waterworks. Man, I hated crying. I hated it, and if there'd been a way to surgically modify my tear ducts from activating when sad, I would've had that surgery.

I sensed Sienna's hesitation—probably due to astonishment—before she reached out, turned me toward her, and pulled me into her arms. Curling into her warm body, I cried.

"Oh, Claire. Honey. Are you okay? What can I do?"

I shrugged. "Just trying to sort through things, things from my past, things I'm not proud of."

"You're an angel."

I swiped at my dumb tears. "No. I'm no angel," I said, and then I hiccupped.

She ignored the hiccup. "It's complicated when people die, it's easy to feel guilty for imaginary transgressions. I'm sure—"

"I cheated on him," I blurted, and then felt like a dummy, because cheating wasn't precisely what Billy and I had done.

Her hand rubbing circles on my back paused. "Uh, say what?"

"In my heart, I cheated," I tried to clarify.

"Did you say . . . you cheated at hearts? Like the card game?"

"No, not cards. I mean—" No longer feeling the need to cry, I skootched back. I was slurring my words, and having my face pressed against her neck likely made me hard to hear. "Here's what happened, okay? I was in love with this man the whoooooole time"—I flung my arm through the air—"I was married to Ben. But it's complicated because Ben married me at fifteen, saying it was—"

"Fifteen?!"

"Wait, lemme finish. He did it to help keep me safe from my father, okay? And we weren't *married* married. Whatever, it's a long story. But the important part, while I was secretly married to Ben, but everyone thought we were just engaged, this man I loved—let's call him B—Barney—and I met at a hotel and talked, and kissed, and—just the one time, but that wasn't at the hotel—we made out."

"Holy macaroni!"

“I know! And so Barney wanted me to leave Ben. But then I wouldn’t—I was scared, my father is one scary sonofabitch and if I didn’t have the protection of Ben’s family, well, badness. And I owed Ben. I owed him, I owed him, I owed him and I was going to what? And plus, in a way, did I love Ben? So stable, saying I could be better despite him also just doing *whatever* he wanted without regard to *my* feelings”—I flung my hand in the air again—“just assuming and feeling entitled all the time. What an ass, right? I was confused and dumb and nineteen. Nineteen!”

“Uh—”

“And Barney, the man I met in secret, he got really angry and gave me the cold shoulder treatment and now it turns out he had a goat on that shoulder. And did I blame him? I wasn’t angry at him. I knew I was to blame. I was the problem. I’m always the problem!”

“Claire, are you sure you want to talk about this? This seems very personal. Are you sure you don’t want to wait until you’re sober?”

“If I wait until I’m sober, then I’ll be too chickenshit—not wanting to be a *burden*—to say anything, and now you know, so please ask me about it when I’m sober so I’ll be forced to tell a coherent version of the story.”

“I’m having trouble following the story.”

I barely heard her. “Plus, I haven’t even gotten to the worst parts yet, which is his momma found out and asked me to stay away, and she was right. She was so right. I’d made her sad, disappointed her. I stayed away. And then Billy—wait, I mean *Barney*—shows up at my house the night before my ‘official’ wedding to Ben and—after kissing the hell outta me—demands I leave with him, totally caveman style, which caused our first big blowout, rip-roaring fight, which we’ve been having basically every single time we see each other since. The end.”

“Uh, I—”

“Wait, no. That’s not the end. I forgot to say, Ben died and I felt so guilty and ashamed—like, legit hated myself, deep, unhealthy, illogical, brainwashed BS—that I avoided Billy for years.” I pointed at the sky and had no idea why I pointed at the sky. “But then he got engaged and I avoided him because of that too. And then it turns out he’s not really engaged, but he is, or he sorta is, but it’s fake—or is it? And he still wants to be with me as of Christmas, except he lied to me about Duane and Beau being my brothers—he knew the whole damn time!—and I don’t know if I can trust him. And the only person I’ve slept with in my entire life is my

husband who I have very conflicted feelings about because I wasn't ready to have sex but I felt obligated, and that's a giant mess. Now, this is the end. The end."

The Siennas were quiet, seemingly requiring several seconds to process this landfill of information. Or maybe my words had been so garbled she thought I was having a seizure. Or maybe I was dreaming all this and I was still back at home in Nashville, asleep.

But then I sensed and sorta saw her gather a deep breath before saying, "Please tell me you're in therapy."

"Yes."

"Thank God."

* * *

"Claire?"

I blinked around the table, shaking myself, discovering several sets of eyes on me. "I'm sorry, what?"

"The chicken." Jethro motioned to the vicinity of my arm and I glanced down, the platter of chicken at my elbow.

"Uncle Duane wants you to please pass the chicken, Miss Claire," little Benjamin said, stitching everything together for me.

"Oh, yes, sorry." I grabbed the platter and lifted, setting it in Jethro's outstretched hands. "Here you go."

He frowned-smiled, this was the face Jethro made when he was concerned, and passed the chicken down the table to Duane. My attention shifted to Jess and Duane; they were both giving me soft looks. I doubted Sienna had told Jethro, Duane, or Jess about my drunken confession session. Yet clearly, my introspective mood had been noticed.

At the far end of the table, Jess's parents and Maya paid me no mind, concentrating on Andrew—Sienna and Jet's second son, who was sitting on Maya's lap—and Liam, who Janet James held in her arms.

Sensing someone's lingering attention, I glanced at Sienna. She pointed her warm, compassionate smile at me, and so I dropped my eyes to my plate, sinking a smidge lower in my seat.

Drunk on a hill in Tuscany, I'd spilled my guts to my shero (she + hero) last night. I was pretty sure I remembered her saying something about me

spouting *brainwashed BS*. Or maybe I'd said that? Thank goodness I hadn't told her the man I'd cheated with was none other than Billy Winston. That would've made dinner—when he was finally able to come downstairs—super awkward.

I hadn't talked to her since the confession session. It's not that I'd been lazing about, avoiding her. More like I'd been incredibly busy cooking and holding my nephew *and* avoiding her.

Most folks considered me an especially easygoing person, and this was true. I had trouble taking myself too seriously. When you believe your own opinion is suspect, there's not much point in putting a lot of time or energy into it. As such, after leaving Billy's room yesterday morning and having a good cry in the wine cellar, I told myself to get over it.

I'd made my house of guilt, I'd built it, if I didn't like the termites and rats and crumbling foundation, then that was what therapy was for. I was working on dismantling my house of guilt and that's all I could do.

But yesterday, my options were staying in the wine cellar and weeping or baking something yummy, like cookies. Baking cookies would contribute to the happiness and well-being of everyone in the household, whereas I was fairly certain no one wanted to taste my tears.

Thus, I'd baked. I'd cooked. I'd basted and marinated and frosted a cake and, today, I'd spatchcocked three chickens.

"This chicken is so good, Miss Claire, it doesn't even need ketchup," Benjamin said, and I lifted my eyes just in time to catch his flash of a smile. He had his daddy's smile, that was for sure.

"Glad you like it, sweetheart," I said.

"You sure are a good cook, almost as good as Mom," he continued, shoving a bite into his mouth that would've been too big for me. But he chewed like a champ, eventually swallowing before saying, "Too bad you don't live with us."

Sienna chuckled and I gave her my eyes; we shared a quick, amused look.

"I had similar thoughts before your father and I got married, mijo. Between you and me, I almost married Claire instead."

"Really?" Benjamin seemed to seriously consider this, weigh the pros and cons, his big brown eyes moving between us.

"Did you now?" Jethro asked, sending his wife a twinkly grin. "Now here, I had no idea you had a taste for clams."

Someone down at the far end of the table choked on something, drawing all eyes. It was Sheriff James having trouble with his water.

Jethro glanced at the Sheriff, explaining, "Claire has a great clam recipe."

"Sure," the older man rasped.

Sienna ignored the commotion, saying to her husband while winking at me, "I usually don't like clams, just hot ginger clams like Claire's."

Despite my meditative, melancholy mood, I felt my lips tug to the side.

"You'll have to give me that recipe," Jess chimed in, brushing her blonde bangs to one side, her face and tone as straight as a line. "I do love the taste of ginger."

Now Mrs. James coughed, but I wasn't looking at her, I was sharing a wide-eyed stare with Duane.

His seemed to say: *She keeps doing this to me in front of her folks.*

So I tried to communicate: *You know what she was like before you married her.*

To which he said: *I know, but I feel bad for the Sheriff and Mrs. James.*

To which I responded: *Don't. They gained you as a son.*

At that sentiment, Duane's mouth curved into one of his rarely bestowed small smiles and it warmed my heart, easing some of the rawness.

But our silent exchange was interrupted by Jethro. "Holy cow! Are you two doing that thing? Where you read each other's thoughts? I thought that was just a twin thing."

My brother pulled a face, sneering at Jethro. "What are you talking about? That's not real. That's just Beau and me trying to piss off Cletus. We can't actually read each other's thoughts."

Jethro squinted at Duane, then at me, then at Duane, like he was suspicious. "You only do it to piss off Cletus?"

"Of course." Duane rolled his eyes, stabbing a piece of chicken with his fork, and then glancing at me real quick as though to say, *Keep up the ruse!*

Jethro hit the table with his palm. "There. Right there. You just did it again."

Sienna was laughing behind her napkin while I fought my own grin, rolling my lips between my teeth.

"What did I do?" Tone surly, Duane ate his third helping of chicken and gave his brother a shrug, like he was confused. "I didn't do anything. You're crazy."

“Uncle Billy!”

A new commotion erupted and so did my insides. Movement and exclamations at the far end of the table had all eyes turning that way, even mine. *Especially mine.* I could barely manage a swallow as I leaned forward, searching for Billy. And when I saw him, my heart grew confused about whether to beat or play dead.

He looked better, stronger. *Thank God.*

But that meant he was now mobile. *Well, crap.*

Devouring the sight of him, I noted his beard was a mess. This didn't at all detract from his attractiveness, instead lending him an air of casually haphazard handsomeness that also felt oddly foreboding. He wore jeans, a white undershirt, and that's all I could see from this far away.

Greeting Sheriff and Mrs. James first, his eyes seemed to warm as they settled on the infant in her arms.

“What do you think?” Mrs. James asked, lifting up the babe, grinning like a woman in the throes of grandmotherly bliss. “Isn't your namesake handsome?”

“He's gorgeous, looks like his grandmother,” he said smoothly, fitting his big index finger into the fist of little Liam's hand. My heart squeezed painfully.

The woman giggled—*giggled!* Like a teenager! “Oh stop,” she chided, tutting at him but looking pleased. “He does not. He looks just like his daddy. Look at those red curls.”

“Can I hold him?” He directed this question to Janet James first, and then Jess, both of whom were staring at him with dreamy-looking smiles.

“Of course!”

“Absolutely. Go for it.”

He accepted the child as Duane rushed over as though to supervise. Billy fit the tiny human in the crook of his elbow and placed a kiss on Liam's forehead. That's when I tore my eyes away, leaning back in my chair, needing to focus through whatever insurrection my organs were staging. I couldn't stand it, the sight of it. Billy Winston fussing over a baby did weird things to my insides, sent pangs of longing from one corner of my torso to the other.

I was officially ridiculous.

Sensing the weight of someone's gaze again, I hazarded a glance at Sienna. She wasn't looking at me. Like Jess and Janet, her smiling eyes

were on the action at the end of the table, the breathtakingly handsome man holding the cutest baby in the world. Shifting my attention one seat over, I met Jethro's gaze.

He was studying me. Carefully. Like he was looking for something. Maybe he found it, I had no idea, because upon discovering his inspection, an alarm bell rang between my ears.

I stood. I grabbed my plate. "I'll start the dishes," I muttered, and I darted to the kitchen.

For the record, I didn't mind darting to the kitchen, I loved this kitchen, it had definitely become my safe space. Big but not too big, the style fit the structure. Solid olive wood cabinets, gray granite from an ancient quarry somewhere in Italy, hand painted blue, green, and yellow ceramic tile backsplash, a farmhouse style porcelain sink big enough to wash a toddler. Jess had called it *modern rustic* and that was an apt description.

Setting my plate on the counter, I realized I'd barely touched my dinner, so I stuffed a piece of chicken in my mouth and dumped the rest of the food into the compost. I then pulled all the dirty prep dishes out of the sink, clearing space for me to skip the dishwasher and clean everything by hand. Why not? I had the time and my hands wanted to be busy.

"Claire?"

I tensed at the sound of my name, relieved I hadn't been holding a breakable dish.

"Jethro," I said brightly, keeping my back to him. "You can just leave that right there with the rest of it. I got all this."

"You wash, I'll dry." In my peripheral vision, I saw he'd placed his plate next to mine on the counter and was hovering at my shoulder, looking at me. "I don't mind. It'll give us a chance to catch up. How are you? How's work?"

"Work is fine." I faced him, giving him a tight-lipped smile, prepared to behave as though everything was just fine and dandy, because everything was fine. And dandy. "They booked me a studio in Rome, so I can finish the new album for a fall release. That's good."

"They're releasing in the fall? I thought you said they were delaying things on account of the bad press." Jethro pulled a towel out of the third drawer, slinging it over his shoulder.

"Oh, well, you know. Some big executive overruled that idea." I shrugged, flipping on the faucet and reaching for his plate, ignoring the

twinge of unidentified emotion making my chest feel too tight. “All press is good press, or something like that. They already try to pass me off as the bad girl of country, and I guess my new nickname, ‘Devil’s Daughter,’ doesn’t change that any, so . . .” Truth was, I hated the nickname. I hated it.

“Yeah, why’d they do that? Why dress you in all that black leather and such?” He accepted the wet plate I handed over, leaning his hip against the counter.

“I don’t know. Sex sells, maybe? When I signed with the label, I didn’t realize an image revamp was required. But I shouldn’t care. And it kind of makes it easier, you know?”

“What do you mean?”

I felt myself settle, relieved at the benign direction of the conversation. This felt comfortable, like old times, back when I was teaching music and drama at the high school and Jethro would come over on Sundays. I’d make him dinner, he’d fix up the house, and then I’d help him study, first for his GED and then later for his AA.

“Well, if I can wear a costume, play a part up there on stage—this vixen role they’ve defined for me, something so hugely different from the real me—it should make it easier to separate my real life from my stage life. Make sense?”

“I guess so.”

I handed over the big pan I’d just scraped clean and picked up the frying pan I’d used to make the squash flowers. “Anyway, letting them dictate the brand part means they let me dictate the music part. Every single one of the songs I wrote for this album was greenlit on the first pass, and that’s no small accomplishment with these people.”

“It also helps that you’re an amazing musician, Claire. Don’t forget about that.”

I suppressed the instinct to deny or deflect his statement, instead forcing myself to say, “Thank you, Jet. I appreciate that.” *Look at me, I’ve matured.*

“Oh my!” Jet reared back, his hand coming to his chest in a movement that could only be described as dainty. “Did you just accept a compliment? Did Claire McClure just accept a compliment? Did that just happen?”

I made a face at my friend while scrubbing the cast iron skillet, careful not to use soap. “Well, not if you’re going to give me shit about it, I won’t.”

He laughed, likely at my exasperated expression; exasperated expressions on other people were his favorite.

“Then I shall not give you shit. But I do want to mark this day down on my calendar as momentous. All it took was a big record contract, one platinum album, and a fancy trip to Italy for you to start putting on airs.”

I laughed too, flicking water at his face with my fingernails. “Shut your dumb face.”

He caught my wrist before I could flick any more water and pulled it down, lowering his voice to say, “Claire. That ain’t lady-like.”

I laughed harder. This was something Jethro and I used to chuckle over. Every so often, Ben would tell me I wasn’t behaving in a lady-like way. This used to irritate the heck out of Jethro, and so he’d make fun of Ben, and that would make Ben laugh, and then we’d all be laughing.

“Did I ever tell you, I loved it when you did that?”

“What?” He dried my hand and then released it, grinning at me.

“I loved how you diffused those situations with humor, intervened with Ben when I didn’t have the right words. Thank you for doing that, it meant a lot.”

Jethro’s grin waned, his gaze turning inward, introspective. “Is it weird that sometimes I felt like Ben and I were different species? I loved him, Lord knows I did, but he did things that made no sense to me.” Jethro seemed to pull himself from a memory, the side of his mouth curving good-naturedly. “Like when he’d say that shit to you, as though he was your father or drill sergeant instead of your fiancé. Used to piss me off, honestly.”

“No, not weird. I get it.” I flipped off the water, taking the towel out of Jethro’s hands to dry my own. “His disappointment often caught me off guard too. Like, one time, I was painting my toenails in the living room and it made him mad.”

“Exactly. I remember once he threw a fit because I ordered him a hamburger with cheddar cheese instead of Swiss. But then, I’d fuck up in a big way—like *huge*—and he’d forgive me right on the spot, wouldn’t even get mad. Like he’d expected it and had just been waiting there, ready to extend grace.”

I bit the inside of my lip, studying the laugh lines around Jet’s eyes, feeling like we’d both been abruptly caught in a rising tide of melancholy. But at least we were together . . . Except, were we? Really?

Jethro missed Ben. He still missed Ben *a lot*. Whereas, I didn’t. I didn’t feel the grief of a wife losing her husband, and what did that say about me?

I'd struggled for so long to miss him. I'd talk about him wistfully to folks, trying to force it, saying all the right things. But ultimately, I felt like a traitor for not missing him more, guilty about not being devastated, which—in the end—devastated me.

Currently inspecting me just as he'd done at the dining room table, like he was looking for something, Jethro had his mouth as though a thought sat on the tip of his tongue. I stood still, meeting his gaze, no longer panicked by whatever it was he was looking for.

Now that I was no longer flustered by Billy's sudden appearance, my earlier alarm seemed silly. This was Jethro. I'd known Jethro my whole life. We'd been through *a lot*, and not once—not *once*—had he ever made me feel like less, like a burden, like a source of disappointment or unhappiness. Not once.

He'd been my family before I knew I had any remaining family worth knowing, visiting me in Nashville when Ben was deployed, and then—after Ben's death, when I'd moved back to Green Valley to be close to the McClures—he'd taken care of me and let me take care of him.

Eventually, he inhaled deeply and said, “You know, it's okay to love someone else, other than Ben. Right?”

In my ancestry there must've been a deer, because I froze. Jethro's statements were high beams and I was caught. *What the heck?*

He inspected me for a moment more, must've noticed the shift in me, my alarm, because then, using the voice he reserved for occasions where the utmost care and consideration were required, he said, “As you know, I only became a ranger at the park because it was what I thought Ben wanted to do, and I wanted to be the person he saw in me. I wanted to live up to his hope for me, after he died.”

I managed a small nod.

“Well, turns out I liked it. I liked staying at home with my momma in the evenings, learning how to knit. I liked getting my GED, studying, earning my AA. I liked getting to know my brothers—well, the ones who wanted to know me—wearing the uniform of a ranger, working with Drew and the other ladies and fellas, even that Griffin. I liked it, and I was content doing it. For a while. But something was missing.”

“What?” I asked breathlessly, still alarmed. *Had Sienna told him about my drunken confession session?*

“I liked being a ranger all right, but I wasn’t happy. I wasn’t happy living a life as a monument to someone else, someone I loved, still miss, but who’s gone. It wasn’t fair to me, but it also wasn’t fair to Ben either.”

That got my attention, broke through the dread trance. “What—what do you mean? Not fair to Ben?”

“I didn’t realize this until my momma died, but the living change, the dead don’t. Who a person was at the time of their death is who we tend to assume they always were, and who they’d always be, if they were still here. But that’s not true, is it?”

I frowned, frantically trying to follow, but not quite understanding his point.

Thankfully, he must’ve discerned my confusion, because he said, “Take me, for instance. If I’d died while I was still with the Wraiths, well then folks would’ve just assumed that’s who I was and who I would always be. But that’s not the truth of me, of my life. I changed, I grew, I worked to make something of myself, to earn my family’s trust.”

“Yes, you did,” I agreed quietly, pride pushing aside anxiety. I was so proud of him.

“Now, take Ben. He was my best friend, I loved him something fierce. I’d screw up, do something monumentally stupid, and he’d forgive me, over and over. He’d offer a hand instead of judgment. For so long, I was grateful for him, for his categorical absolution of my shitty choices. That’s who he was when he died. But do you think, if he’d lived, he would’ve continued putting up with a friend who was an asshole?”

Surprised laughter fell from my lips as I leaned my hip against the counter and crossed my arms. “You weren’t an asshole, Jet. You were—”

“An asshole.”

I laughed again.

“I was, and you know it. And if Ben had lived, I hope he would’ve changed, called me on it, stopped enabling me and started calling me an asshole. Loving someone means wanting the best for that person, not indulging selfishness. I love my children, and that means I don’t spoil them or let them play with knives, right? Love sometimes means calling another person on their bullshit, even if doing so requires an awkward, uncomfortable conversation, like this one we’re having right now.”

Covering the lower half of my face with my hand to hide my rueful smile, I peered up at my friend, impressed with how he’d circled this

conversation back around to me, to us.

“Claire, Scarlet, whatever your name is, I love you. Not like a sister, I got one of those already and she’s the best. And definitely not like a wife, I got one of those too and she’s the best ever.”

My smile grew and I dropped my hand.

“I love you like a best friend,” he said, his twinkly eyes beaming down at me. “I love you unconditionally, but you’re being an asshole.”

My mouth fell open and, unthinkingly, I smacked his arm with the back of my fingers. “Hey!”

“To yourself!” He gripped the spot I’d hit and angled away, not trying to hide his laughter. “You’re being an asshole to yourself—and don’t you deny it. Your smiles are forced, they have been for years. Not all of them, but most. You put everyone else’s needs first. You haven’t gone on a single date since Ben died, not a single one. I’m not saying you need a man, but you’ve closed yourself off to all possibilities.”

Glaring at him, I tried to read him like I’d done with Duane at the dinner table.

“Fact is, Red, you’ve been living someone else’s idea of a life.” Jethro stared back at me, guilelessly, yet giving none of his thoughts away as he added, “And I suspect I know whose.”

CHAPTER SIX

CLAIRE

“You wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down.”

— TONI MORRISON, SONG OF SOLOMON

“**H**ey, Claire!” Jethro’s voice hollered, scaring the bejeezus out of me and sending a spoonful of cookie dough into the air.

“What the heck?” I glanced around, searching for and not finding him. “Jethro?”

After our unsettling conversation, Jethro and I had chatted until the dishes were done and then he’d joined everyone else to watch a movie in the family room while I’d gone to my room. To hide. That had been yesterday.

Presently, I was back in the basement—which might also be considered the first floor, depending on who you ask—stress-baking in the middle of the night, not yet ready to go to bed after a long day of staying out of Billy Winston’s way.

“Can you go get Duane?” Jethro’s voice asked from somewhere unseen.

I frowned, looking left and right. Wiping my hands on the towel sticking out of my pocket, I walked to the dining room, searching for Jethro. He wasn’t there either.

“Where are you?” I asked the air around me.

“I’m in the crawl space. You can’t see me, but I can see you. Will you go get Duane?”

“In the crawl space? It’s midnight.”

“I know what time it is, Red. You gave me a watch last Christmas. Will you get Duane?”

“Uh. Sure.”

“Thank you.”

I made a face, narrowing my eyes. “This is weird. Like talking to a ghost.”

“WoooOOOOOooooOOOO!” Jethro made his voice vibrate. “It is I! The ghost of this here Italian villa. I command you to remove all bananas from the premises.”

Chuckling at my friend’s persistent dislike for bananas, I made for the stairs. “I’ll be right back, ghost.”

This place was huge, each floor was like its own house, except there was just the one kitchen. But the kitchen had two sets of French doors, opening onto the big stone porch—or, I guess they called it a terrace around here—overlooking the Tuscan hills.

The kitchen level, aka the bottom floor, had three bedrooms, all opening onto the terrace. It also had a dining room and a big family room with a projector for showing movies. Jethro, Sienna, and their boys had claimed two of the three bedrooms, with Maya, Sienna’s sister, taking the third.

On the main level, where the official front door resided, seven bedrooms were spread over two wings. The south wing had a sitting room, a library, and three bedrooms. Jess, Duane, Liam, and Jess’s parents were in the south wing. Now, the north wing also had a sitting room, but it had a music room instead of a library, and four bedrooms. Currently, the north wing was empty, but Cletus and his wife Jenn, Ashley, Drew, and their daughter Bethany, and Beau and his lady friend Shelly were all due to arrive in the next few days.

On the last floor, the top floor, were only two bedrooms—mine and Billy’s—but they were gigantic. The largest rooms in the house, they each had their own balcony, sitting area, desk, bed, and bathroom. I’d tried to insinuate myself into one of the north wing rooms, but Jess asked me to take a large suite on the top floor, explaining that she’d like to share it with me, use it as a place to take a break when she needed one.

I thought that was kind of silly. They were the ones renting the house after all. The big suite should’ve been hers in the first place. Grumbling tiredly, she’d said it all made sense, told me to “just go with it and don’t argue,” and then asked me to hand her the lanolin for her sore nipple.

I didn't know this, but when women breastfeed, their nipples can get sore and chapped. They use some sort of sheep by-product called lanolin as a moisturizer; it's safe for the baby.

But enough about sore nipples.

Tiptoeing down the south wing hall, I crept to baby Liam's room first, cracking the door to see if Duane was in there. He wasn't, but Jessica and Sienna were, whispering animatedly about something that must've been intensely interesting while Sienna held Liam on her shoulder, patting his bottom. Checking his sweet face from my place at the door, I saw he was passed out like a drunk sailor, and I smiled.

That baby was the cutest, I swear. The absolute cutest.

Tearing my eyes from my little love, I glanced between Sienna and Jess. They both seemed entirely absorbed by whatever they were gossiping about, and so I took a step back, not wanting to interrupt and not quite ready to face Sienna yet.

After the last few days, I was still feeling raw.

"Claire?"

I turned at the sound of my name, finding Duane walking toward me.

"Hey, Duane," I whispered, stepping away from the nursery door. "Jethro is asking for you. He's in the kitchen crawl space. You know where that is?"

"Ah, okay. Thanks." Duane glanced between me and the door to the nursery, frowning. "Is something wrong with Liam?"

"Oh. No. Not at all. I was just seeing if you were in there. Jess is inside and Sienna's rocking Liam. All seems to be well."

One of his red eyebrows inched up. "Then why do you look so sad?"

"Do I?" I asked, smiling cheerfully.

"You do." His gaze flickered down, then back up, as though scanning me for a sign of injury. "Is Billy being nice to you? When you bring him his food?"

"Oh, I'm not doing that anymore. Jethro is taking it up." I paired this with an emphatic nod.

My brother's gaze narrowed and he crossed his arms, continuing to inspect me. "If he's not being gentlemanly, you need to let me know. He can be a real grumpy asshole sometimes, and I only agreed to all this 'cause Cletus said y'all were in l—"

“Duane!” The door to the nursery opened suddenly, revealing a manically grinning Jessica. “Duane. What are you doing?” She glanced between us.

My brother shifted his glare to his wife. Though it softened, just a little, the unhappy turn to his mouth didn’t budge. “Jess, someone has to look out for Claire in all this. And you know how Billy can be, taciturn and such. Plus, I’m not sure Cletus is right about—”

Jessica wrapped her hands around my arm and tugged me inside the nursery. “Shut your big, gossipy mouth, Duane Faulkner,” she ordered, releasing me and then stepping back to her husband to wrap her arms around his neck, “or I’ll shut it for you.”

The side of his mouth hitched up and his hands came to her bottom in what looked like an automatic movement. “Go ahead, princess,” he taunted quietly. “Shut me up.”

I saw Jess’s grin in profile, her brown eyes on her husband’s mouth. “Do me a favor, Claire. Close this door.”

I nodded, swiftly shutting the door just as the married couple’s lips met, but was careful to do so silently; I didn’t want to wake the baby. Turning, I faced a smiling Sienna, her eyes dancing as she inspected the door, and then me.

“They’re too cute,” she said, patting the arm of the chair next to her. “Come. Sit with me. Enjoy baby cuddles and my sparkling personality.”

Laughing a nervous laugh, I did as instructed. But I didn’t know what to do with my hands so I tucked them under my legs.

Sienna watched me as I settled myself. I felt her gaze tracking my movements the whole time, and as soon as I lifted my attention to hers, she said, “So, you and Billy, huh?”

I flinched, a lightning bolt of something—amazement? Shock?—making me sit straighter, my mouth dropping open stupidly. “I—I—I—”

“Billy is the guy? The one you were in love with?”

“How—how—”

“So, tell me about that. He was in love with you too, right?”

“How did you find out?” I blurted, finally saying the thing my brain needed me to say.

Sienna shrugged, a small smile on her lips. “You let it slip while you were drunk.”

Before I quite knew what was happening, I said, “It wasn’t his fault. I lied to him, he didn’t know I was married.”

She made a face, her lips flattening. “Come on. He thought you were engaged, right? He knew you were with someone else. If it’s about fault, you’re both equally to blame. Unless you’re some secret mastermind, manipulating people and pulling their strings from behind the scenes, you can’t take credit for everything. Start from the beginning.”

“The beginning?”

“Yeah. When you came back to Green Valley.”

“Uh, okay.”

Wait. Am I doing this?

I tucked my hair behind my ears, staring forward, my brain stuttering. *Am I really doing this? Am I telling Sienna the whole story?*

“Claire,” she said, drawing my attention and ensnaring my likely terrified gaze with her compassionate one. “This is a judgment-free zone. I think you’re fabulous, even after everything you told me while drunk. I just want to know you better. Maybe talking about it will help.”

“Did you tell Jethro? What I told you?”

“No, not a word. I told him that you and I talked about some deeply personal topics, but I wasn’t at liberty to share. He seemed relieved that you were finally talking to someone. Claire, Jethro cares about you. Let us help. Okay?”

I nodded, my worry easing the longer I gazed into her kind eyes, and decided to commit. I would tell her. *I will tell her everything.*

“Okay, so—um—I guess we’ll start with the night of my engagement party—that was May 2007.” Starting there made the most sense. Then I could ignore all the drama surrounding Billy impregnating his high school girlfriend before I left, which was more or less why we hadn’t been in contact after I ran away at fourteen.

Besides, that was Billy’s business—how Samantha Cooper had told him the night before I’d left town, how he’d decided to marry her and cut off all communication with me, and how she’d lost the baby before the truth of it was widely known—none of which was my secret to share.

“May 2007, got it.” Sienna nodded once. “What happened?”

“After the party was over, Ben took me to the jam session at the community center. The jam session hadn’t been a thing when I was growing up, it was new, and Ben wanted me to see it.” I swallowed, surprised at how

easy this was to talk about; now that I'd started, I couldn't seem to stop myself. "We arrived at the community center, Ben greeted old friends, introducing me as his fiancée. Most folks just thought I was some girl, not the runaway Scarlet St. Claire. They didn't even remember her."

"How odd."

"Ben was talking to his old football friends and I was standing there, not having anything to contribute, and then I heard Billy's voice."

"You heard his voice? What? Talking to someone?"

"Singing."

"Singing? I didn't know he could sing."

"Didn't you?" My eyes moved over Sienna. I couldn't see her well. Lit only by a single lamp in the corner, the nursery was dim, decorated in soft greens and quiet blues, giving it an aura of coziness and intimacy. "He can sing, and he has the most amazing voice. I would've recognized it anywhere."

He'd been on my mind that night even before I heard his voice. Well, he'd always been on my mind, but it had been more than usual. Thoughts of him were front and center. It was at the engagement party I'd discovered Samantha Cooper and Billy Winston had never married.

"I excused myself from Ben and his friends and walked to the bluegrass room—that's where Billy's voice was coming from—and stood at the door, watching him sing."

"Huh. That was the first time you saw him? Since leaving Green Valley at fourteen?"

I nodded, seeing Billy's face as clearly now as it was then, his bright eyes on his brother Cletus who'd been playing the banjo next to him. Billy's tenor had been rich, deep, and strong, and it seemed to reach the buried parts of me, grabbing on with hooks.

And he'd looked so different yet so much the same, older, his features more mature, and so incredibly handsome—*brutally handsome*—his beard no longer fuzzy and patchy, but dark and thick and neatly shaped.

"He'd found someone to trim his beard," I said unthinkingly.

"What's that?" Sienna leaned toward me, breaking the spell cast by the memory. "His beard what?"

"Oh, nothing." I felt oddly at ease. Maybe it was the sleeping baby, maybe it was the lighting and the quiet, maybe it was the stillness of midnight, but for some reason I felt completely relaxed. "Anyway, that was

the first time I saw him since leaving town three—or four, I guess three and a half—years prior.”

“And he saw you?”

“He did.” My stomach gave a gentle flutter. “He saw me.”

“And?”

“Well, they’d just finished a set, and people were clapping, and so he looked up and our eyes met and he . . .” That night my words had caught in my throat, my stomach and heart had pitched a riot. But now, remembering, it was like the events had happened to someone else.

“What? What did he do?” Sienna seemed to be sitting on the edge of her seat. “Tell me.”

I exhaled a chuckle. “Short story, he chased me out of the room, pulled me backstage behind the cafeteria curtain, and kissed the hell outta me.”

“Holy shit!”

“Yeah, well, that’s what I thought. I was so stunned.”

“Then what happened?”

“Uh, again, short story, we talked just a little, I immediately told him I was there with Ben, but I lied and said Ben and I were engaged, just like we’d told everyone else. Billy wasn’t very happy and he kinda stormed off. I tried to see him a few times after, so we could talk. We’d been, uh, very *close* before I ran away, but he refused to see me.”

“You didn’t see him at all?”

“No, I saw him.” A subtle warmth ignited behind my sternum, that persistent ache. I rubbed the spot. “We’d run into each other at various events, one time at the store when I was out with Mrs. McClure, one time at Daisy’s Nut House when I was there with Ben, but he never talked to me.”

“Silent treatment, eh?”

I chuckled again, but knew it sounded sad. “I just—I just wanted him to talk to me, you know? I missed him—so much, for so long—and I wanted to talk to him, but he wouldn’t even look at me.”

“He’s an asshole. We hates him, nasty hobitses.”

“No.” I laughed at Sienna’s Gollum impression, relieved to have something to laugh about. “He was hurt on account of me being engaged to someone else. I understood why he was upset.”

“But if he’d just talked to you, then maybe—” Sienna huffed unhappily. “He’s so stubborn. I see it with Jethro and him all the time, drives me crazy. I’ve never seen anyone hold a grudge like Billy Winston.”

I sent her a small smile. “Their story is a messy one. Billy—”

“Oh, I know. Jethro messed up, God how I know it. But people change, right? They try and work and struggle to make amends.”

“And Jethro has,” I assured her. “He’s a different person now, but you know what? He’s also the same. Jethro was always sweet, even when he was making bad choices.”

Sienna grinned, wagging her eyebrows. “Don’t spoil my fantasy of my husband. Just between the two of us, a part of me loves that he’s a reformed bad boy.”

“And so he is.”

Baby Liam made a little sound, stretching on Sienna’s shoulder. She glanced at him, shifting him to her other side, rocking and patting his bottom.

Once he was settled again, she whispered, “Okay, so, what happened? When did he finally talk to you?”

“Uh, in late September I think, over a year later. We were at the jam session at the same time again and we sang together, in front of folks, Cletus on banjo.”

“Cletus and his magic banjo.” Sienna’s lips twisted to the side thoughtfully.

“About a week after that is when Billy showed up on campus, surprised me outside the music building. He asked me to come with him to grab a coffee.” I frowned at the memory, at my faulty, naïve thought process. “I was so excited, I would’ve gone anywhere with him. But instead of taking me to coffee, he took me to a hotel.” What a silly fool I’d been.

“Wait.” She stopped rocking. “I thought you said you guys didn’t have sex?”

“We didn’t. We went to the room and talked, and then he held me, and then he drove me home.”

Sienna’s eyebrows lifted up at the same rate her jaw dropped. “Seriously?”

I nodded again, my lips curved in a smile. “Yes. I’m serious. That’s it. He told me he missed me and he just wanted to know me again, that he’d tried to stay away but couldn’t. We agreed to meet at the same hotel, every week.”

Her pretty brown eyes were wide as quarters. “Whoa.”

“I know. I’d been constantly thinking about being with Billy, I’d fantasized about it, all the time. And then like magic, there he was.”

“This was while you were married-slash-engaged to Ben?”

“Yes,” I said, feeling the cold shadow of shame creeping into the oasis of the quiet nursery. Mentally, I shoved it away, pushing it back. I was so tired of feeling ashamed.

“And you loved him.”

“Yes. I did,” I said, feeling calm, which was so unusual for these memories. “When we were teenagers, before I left, I was in love with him then, as much as a fourteen-year-old kid can be in love with anyone. I missed him after I left—so much—I never stopped thinking about him.”

“Even when you and Ben were married-slash-engaged? Before you came back to Green Valley, you were still thinking about Billy?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Wait, can I ask this? What stopped you two from going all the way? Having sex, I mean. If you thought about him all the time, fantasized about being with him, didn’t you already cheat? Why not take the final step?”

“Honestly? It was me. I *wanted* to be with him, but I wasn’t ready. My experience with sex was . . . well, let’s just say, it wasn’t great.”

“Jeez. I’m sorry.”

“It is what it is. Plus, looking back over the lessons I’ve learned in my life, I now know there’s a universe between wanting and doing. They are not the same. Wanting something doesn’t mean you’re ready for it.”

“When you two met up, at the hotel, did he push you? Did Billy pressure you to do things?”

“No. Never. He didn’t push me. I told him I couldn’t do that. All those times we met at the hotel, we rarely kissed on the lips. Sometimes, I’d kiss his cheek, or—when he’d hold me—he’d kiss my neck. That’s all we did. It was—it was—I don’t know how to describe it. It was so—”

“Innocent?”

Wrinkling my nose, I still felt like I was relating someone else’s story. “No. I was going to say, *charged*.”

Sienna exhaled a short laugh, and then another laugh followed. “Yeah, I’ll bet.”

She and I shared a small smile, which was strange. I’d never recounted the events—even to myself—without a heavy dose of shame. It was strange

to think about my younger self without the layer of loathing attached to it. Maybe, if I'd been a little kinder to myself, things might've been different.

"So what happened? Why'd you stop seeing him?"

Ugh.

I gathered a deep inhale and then let it go. "Billy had been withdrawing more and more, each time we were together. He'd talk less and less. And then, he stopped coming. He wanted me to leave Ben."

"And you wouldn't."

"I was . . . afraid. Mostly of my father, but also of hurting Ben. He was so sweet to me, mostly. And I thought I owed him so much. But then I made a plan. I decided I'd tell Ben the truth as soon as he got home. So, he got home, and I did."

"You told him the truth?" She stopped rocking.

"Yes. Ben told me to choose, him or Billy. But, either way, he said he would forgive us both, pray for our souls, and told me I always had a safe home with him if I came back to him."

"Blah," she said. "I can't decide if that was kind or incredibly patronizing."

"I called Billy right away. I asked him to meet me at the hotel even though he swore he wouldn't anymore, not until I left Ben." A rush of emotion stung my nose and eyes. "He walked in and wouldn't look at me. And I—" My voice broke.

"Claire," Sienna reached for my fingers like she didn't want me to go too far, her hand sliding down and holding mine.

"I told him I wanted to talk to him, about something important. And he asked me why, what was the point. I asked him if he loved me, and he said nothing. So I asked if he hated me."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'If I do hate you, would you blame me?'" God, it still hurt, but not just because of Billy's cold answer.

Bethany Winston, his momma, had been there. She'd followed him, concerned for her son, and after he'd left, she'd confronted me. I'd never told anyone but my therapist about it. Even now, I couldn't seem to force my mouth to form the words. Her disappointment in me still felt like breathing in needles and shattered glass.

"Oh, honey." Sienna squeezed my hand tighter.

“How could I choose Billy?” I appealed to Sienna quietly. “My mother hated my father and I think he hated her too. I grew up like that, around bitterness. There was no choosing between Billy’s hate and Ben’s love. Plus, I had my father to consider. Being with Ben had kept me out of his reach. If I left the McClures, I didn’t know if I’d still be safe. And then . . .” I paused, having oddly mixed feelings about everything now that I’d removed guilt from the narrative.

“What?” Sienna whisper-asked.

“So.” I twisted my lips, sending her a look. “The night before my ‘official’ marriage to Ben, Billy showed up at my window. Ben was at his parents’ house for the night, and I was alone.”

“What happened?”

“He tried to seduce me.”

“Well.” She reared back, her eyes wide but blinking, like she needed a moment to process this information. “How about that, from the pillar of absolute honor, Billy Winston. Did it work?”

“No.” I tilted my head back and forth, giving her a sideways glance, finally admitting, “Actually, almost. He made a few suggestive remarks, which flustered the tar outta me, and he kissed me, and we made out to the point that my brain stopped caring about right and wrong, and . . .”

“And?”

“And then he pulled away and demanded in no uncertain terms that I leave Ben and run away with him.” I frowned, fighting a sudden headache as I recalled his caveman mandates, how angry he’d been, and how ashamed I’d felt after realizing how close I’d come to breaking my promise to his mother. But when he’d kissed me, when he’d touched me, I couldn’t think.

That night had been our first huge fight. We’d had a few more over the years, more shouting matches, more angry words, but that had been our first where words had been knives and looks had been arrows and I’d needed every weapon at my disposal to push him away.

“And?” Sienna skootched to the edge of the rocking chair, bringing my attention back to her.

“And nothing. I walked out of the room.” I shrugged, suddenly tired, so tired. I didn’t want to tell any more stories tonight. I was done. “When I came back, he’d left, and the next time we spoke was after Ben died. The end.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

* BILLY *

“It hurts to breathe. It hurts to live. I hate her, yet I do not think I can exist without her.”

— CHARLOTTE FEATHERSTONE, ADDICTED

“**T**hanks for taking the time today, Congressman. We appreciate it.”
“Not a problem.” I frowned at the clock on my laptop screen, double-checking the time on my phone. This time difference was a killer. I had six more hours of back-to-back calls in the States before I’d get a chance to check on Roscoe, and it was almost dinnertime in Italy. “I don’t have much longer, so is there anything else?”

“Just campaign prep. Karl? You want to fill the congressman in about campaign prep?”

“We can have a separate call,” Karl said. “We’ll schedule it later.”

“No, Karl. It’s now or never,” I said, clicking through my calendar for tomorrow and the day after, seeing more of the same. Wednesday was blocked off, though, the entire day. I didn’t remember doing that, but then there’d been a lot to remember and focus on.

Karl hemmed and hawed before finally saying, “It’s somewhat personal in nature.”

“Are you quitting?” I asked, opening the all-day appointment on Wednesday to see who’d added it. “If you’re not quitting, then there’s nothing you need to say that the team can’t hear.”

Becca Mason, my chief of staff, cut in, “The congressman knows there’s no such thing as a private life for a politician. Go on.”

“Fine,” Karl said on a sigh that sounded like he didn’t believe it was actually fine. “So, there’s a rumor going around that you and Judge Payton’s granddaughter are no longer engaged. Is this true?”

Answering immediately and with no emotion, I said, “It’s true. She’ll be sending out a statement in the next few weeks, but yes. We broke the engagement.”

“This is a problem,” he said.

It wasn’t a problem; nevertheless, I asked, “And what do you see as a potential solution?”

“Hell if I know.” He sounded despondent, like someone who enjoys being upset.

I’d have to reevaluate Karl’s position with us if I ultimately decided to run for the senate seat. I hadn’t made my mind up yet. He was new, sent from party headquarters, and everything was always a problem. My contact at the party had called Karl savvy. But on my team, people who see nothing but problems while offering no solutions are called fired.

“The thing is, Billy,” he said, using my first name as though he knew me, paused as though giving the matter great thought, and then starting again, “Older voters don’t trust candidates who aren’t married, just like they don’t trust candidates with beards, or candidates who smile too much, or candidates who smile too little. I know this might all sound silly, but—”

“It sounds irrelevant.”

He chuckled. “It’s not. I promise you, it’s not. We have so much polling data on voting trends and it’s perception over substance that sways the vote, time and time again. Your job is the substance, I get that. But my job is the perception, and perception gets people elected. I’ll do my best. But this kind of thing, a single man with no family, no fiancée, right before the race really starts to ramp up, it’s a problem.”

Glaring at the Wednesday appointment details, unable to figure out who added it to my calendar, I leaned back in my chair, scratching my beard. “Okay. Ms. Mason, anything else?”

“That’s all we have, Congressman.”

“Fine. ’Til next week. Bye.” I hung up just as Karl said something, some kind of protest.

I reread the title on the Wednesday all-day appointment, *Block for Buonarroti Simoni tour—no calls*.

“Buonarroti Simoni.” I tried sounding it out, checking to see if I’d recognize what it was by hearing it, and then it clicked. “Michelangelo?” I asked my screen, picking up my cell phone to type out a quick text to Becca.

Billy: Who blocked off Wednesday on my calendar? And what is Buonarroti Simoni?

She messaged back almost instantly.

Becca: Your brother asked us to block off a few days on your calendar for sightseeing while you’re over there. I thought you’d approved, should I change?

I stared at the text, debating. Sightseeing wasn’t something I’d planned on, but I wasn’t opposed to it. Session was out for the summer, the volume of state business was at a minimum, and I was getting most of my calls out of the way today and tomorrow. Usually I’d be at the mill right now, working full days, but Dolly Payton had come out of semiretirement to take over while I ‘recuperated.’ This had been decided without my blessing and, as she put it, *for your own stubborn good*. Therefore, mill business was in excellent hands. *And I’ve always wanted to go to Rome . . .*

However, something about the calendar entry, that no one had seen fit to consult me on, struck me as suspicious.

I sent Becca a new message.

Billy: Which of my brothers asked you to block off my schedule?

Becca: The email was from Duane Winston with a list of dates. I can forward it.

I relaxed at this news, relieved it hadn’t been Cletus. If Cletus had made the request, then I knew something was up. Furthermore, Duane wasn’t a great communicator, especially about stuff like this. He probably figured he was doing a nice thing, setting up tours and whatnot while I was here.

Still, he had time to set all this up while taking care of a newborn?

My phone buzzed again; a calendar reminder that I was already late for my next call lit up the screen. Putting away thoughts of Duane and tours and Rome, I dialed in, sitting back after I announced I was on the line and waited for the rest of the labor committee to join. Most of this call was spent on mute. Mostly, I was there to make sure the Modesto lobbyist didn’t try to sneak any line-item measures into our fair compensation bill.

About halfway through the hour-long conference call, Jethro came in with a tray of food, placing it on the bed next to the empty tray from lunch.

I lifted my chin in greeting, muting the line to say, “You didn’t have to do that. I’ll come down between calls.” My family was still sending up trays every time I missed a meal. Since I’d managed to walk down the stairs last week, I figured they would’ve stopped. No such luck.

He shrugged, picking up a pair of my pants I’d left on the bed, folding them as he looked around and whispered, “We know you’re busy, but you still need to eat.”

I waved to the phone. “I have them on mute, no need to whisper.”

Jethro placed my newly folded pants on the dresser, yawning and crossing to me. “You want me to wait?”

Examining my oldest brother, I bit back the impulse to say something dismissive or mean. In my experience, the only undertaking more difficult than forming new habits is breaking old ones.

Being around Jethro wasn’t easy, I still hadn’t grown accustomed to the cease-fire between us. Looking at him, I saw a man who’d chosen loyalty to others over his own family. Why had Ben McClure ever been more important—his death more meaningful to Jethro, more of a reason to repent and change his ways—than us? Family first. *Always. Always.*

Not sometimes. *Always.*

“Nah, I can take it downstairs when I’m done,” I finally said, trying on a small smile that felt too tight. “You look tired. Go to bed.”

Nodding, he scanned the top of the desk where I was sitting. “Let me get this stuff out of the way.” Reaching over my laptop, he picked up my plate from lunch, my napkin, my fork, the vase—

“Wait. Leave that.” I covered his hand, guiding it and the vase back to the top of the desk, earning me a squinty look from my brother.

“I can bring up some fresh flowers if you want.” He pointed to the vase. “Those are all dead.”

I placed the little bud vase with the three wilted poppies next to my laptop. “Just—just leave it.”

He wrinkled his nose at the vase, at me, and then turned. “You are so weird sometimes,” I heard him mumble, taking the dirty dishes back to the lunch tray and picking up the whole load. “By the way,” he said on his way to the door, “that’s fettuccine alfredo in the bowl under the plate. Claire put a lid on it to keep it warm, said it won’t taste as good if you don’t eat it soon. Thought I’d pass that along.”

“Claire made it?” I stood and walked slowly over to the tray. My limp was almost gone if I walked slowly.

“Yeah. She also made the chicken and squash flowers last week, the salmon with capers, the flatbread, the melon and meat thing, the steak and parmesan that smelled so good, the meatloaf two days ago, the lamb yesterday, and all those cookies last Tuesday.”

My stomach rumbled at the mention of the cookies and I searched the tray for them. They’d been the first thing that tasted any good since . . . well, since before Roscoe got stabbed. It was like the cookies had unlocked my taste buds; everything had been fantastic after.

“There’s no cookies today?” I lifted the lid covering the bowl, steam and the mouthwatering smell of alfredo sauce done right rising out of it. I had to swallow.

“There should be. There’s no cookies on there?” Jethro set the lunch tray on the floor just outside the door and walked back over, checking out my dinner. “Like I said, there should be. She just made some again two nights ago. Or was it last night?” He scratched his neck, chuckling. “Claire keeps baking in the middle of the night. We wake up to all these desserts. It’s the best.”

“Middle of the night?” I frowned, inspecting him. “I know she’s the one making the breakfast tray too. When does she sleep?”

Jethro pressed his lips together like he either thought my question was amusing or he was fighting a grin. “She said she was having trouble with the jet lag. Maybe she hasn’t adjusted to the time change yet.”

“Huh,” was all I said, because Jethro’s assumption seemed unlikely. She’d been here for weeks.

My mind assembled a picture, taking note of the potentially relevant puzzle pieces within. Since our discussion last week, every time I entered a room, she left it. Having her so close and leaving whenever she saw me grated on my nerves. I couldn’t figure out why it continued to bother me so much, left me with a lingering sense of restlessness and irritation. I’d been the one to ask her to keep her distance, she was just doing what I wanted. And Scarlet avoiding me had been our *modus operandi* for years. One would think I’d be used to it by now.

Point was, the only time I’d gotten a good look at her was when she’d come to my room that second day. When she’d stopped blushing, her skin had been too pale, her eyes glassy. I’d wondered before if she still had

nightmares. I wondered if she was having them now. I wondered if she was baking so much to avoid sleep.

“She shouldn’t be baking in the middle of the night,” I muttered. “Someone should make sure she’s getting enough sleep.”

“Oh really?”

Jet’s question reminded me he was still present. I frowned, stuffing my hands in my pockets. “Well, if she’s cooking for everyone, which she seems to be doing, then—”

“She ain’t cooking for everyone, Billy. I mean, she made that chicken dinner for everyone last week, and the cakes and pies and cookies are for everybody. But mostly—” my brother held my eyes, an uncharacteristically intense look in his “—she just cooks for you.”

* * *

After finishing my call with Roscoe, my intention had been to return the empty dinner tray and see if I could find some of those cookies. My intention had not been to lose my sense of direction just outside the kitchen door and listen with paralyzing anticipation as Scarlet sang.

But here I was.

Holding the tray and facing the open doorway, I stared at nothing. Her quiet rendition of The Beatles’ “Blackbird” carried to me and I was sixteen again, my heart in my throat, caught in the snare of her heavenly voice. She kept her volume low, likely so as not to wake anyone. That also meant I hadn’t heard her until I’d almost reached the kitchen.

She switched from “Blackbird” to “Let it Be,” humming the intro before reciting the words, and then humming the refrain too. My feet moved, carrying me closer to the threshold, and I peeked around the doorframe.

Her eyes were closed. She was dancing with abandon and joy, hopping around, her hands in the air, her hips and head rocking out like she was at a concert, not holding a one-woman show in a basement kitchen. A dirty apron covered what looked like a pink tank top and shorts. Thick, long hair gathered on top of her head in a careless bun, a smudge of something brown on her cheek. Maybe chocolate?

This. This was the Scarlet I loved beyond sense and reason. Her irrepressible spirit, funny and sweet, smart and so incredibly strong. An

urgent wish invaded my head and heart, a longing with fangs and claws, teeth and talons: *I want to dance with her.*

When my mother was alive, she'd make us dance with her, all us boys, mostly when we were just littles. I'd escaped early because I could play the guitar. Cletus was excused when he taught himself the banjo. Beau and Duane, Jethro and Roscoe never admitted it, but they loved it. Duane probably most of all; out of all of us, he was the best dancer, Jethro a close second. I'd never wanted to dance. It made me feel foolish, being taught, having to follow until I could lead.

But in this moment, more than anything, more than taking my next breath or seeing another sunrise, I wanted to dance with Scarlet. *Just once.* I wanted to hold her while she moved, I wanted my hands on her body and her beaming smile in my face and her joyful eyes on mine. I wanted her to teach me how to dance.

And then she caught me.

She yelped, jumping back against the counter and gripping it, her eyes round and startled.

"Oh goodness." She chuckled nervously after a prolonged second. "You scared the pickles outta me."

I dropped my eyes and clamped my jaw shut, feeling just how much of a creeper I was when the heat of embarrassment scrambled up my neck to my temples. It was the first time I'd blushed since I was a teenager, I reckon. Good thing I had the beard to hide the worst of it.

"Sorry I scared you." Even though I'd cleared my throat, the words came out gruff as I strolled into the kitchen.

Taking the tray to the sink, I noted how she backed up at my approach to give me a wide berth, and then she backed up further, as though looking for the nearest exit. A humorless laugh escaped me. The level of Scarlet's commitment to keeping her distance was as absurd as it was infuriating.

Twisting over my shoulder, not meaning to glare at her, though that's likely what I did, I snapped, "You don't need to leave. I'll be done in just a minute."

Her lips in a thin, straight line, all signs of her earlier joyful abandon locked up tight, she said, "Fine." Her lashes flickered, her eyes falling like she found it difficult to look at me.

Turning back to the sink, I flipped on the faucet and pointed out the obvious, "You don't have to leave every time I walk into a room."

The press of her eyes on my back, I sensed her drift closer. “I’m just trying to obey your wishes.”

I felt my lips curve into a grimacing smile. “Obey.” No. Scarlet had never *obeyed* me. Not once.

“That’s right, Your Royal Highness,” she said sweetly, moving into my peripheral vision where several ingredients had been spread out on the counter. “I exist only to respond to your commands, didn’t you know?”

What I knew was, even though her words were meant to be sarcastic, they had an arousing effect. And that, too, struck me as absurd and infuriating.

Which was probably why I growled, “Oh yeah? Then jump.”

She smacked her palm on the counter. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her turn and face me. “How high?” she asked flatly.

I stilled, giving her a quick glance. Scarlet was scowling at me with all the intensity of an inferno. I blinked. I turned off the faucet, setting the plate I’d been washing to the side, and wiped my hands dry on the towel by the sink. Leaning my hip—my good hip—against the counter, I crossed my arms and studied this gorgeous and angry woman.

The problem with Scarlet was, no matter how she was looking at me, I found her endearing. Disdain, anger, sadness, joy, shyness, apprehension, frustration—made no difference. Just her looking made me want to draw her closer.

“Something on your mind, Scarlet?” Since I was already looking at her, I indulged in a moment to study the woman. Her skin was too pale, had no color, especially given it was summer in Italy, and she had faint smudges of gray under her eyes. *She’s not getting enough sleep.*

“You . . .” She lifted her chin, crossing her arms too, like she was locking a shield into place, and began again, “I am not a carpet. Folks don’t get to just wipe their feet on me, not anymore. I’m done with that.”

What? “Carpet?”

“You’re irritating is all.”

“Oh? Is that all?” I asked quietly.

This, her anger, was so much safer than her softness; I could be near her without losing anything but my temper. I could talk to her without hoping for more later. It would be a simple exchange of furious words, and then it would be over, and I wouldn’t have to dream about or wish for something impossible.

“Yes. I mean, you tell me to keep my distance, so I do.” She flung her hands in the air. “Then you come down here and try to make me feel foolish for keeping my distance.”

“I made you feel foolish?”

She dropped her voice and her accent, and said, “Stay away from me, Scarlet. Oh, wait. *Obviously*, I didn’t mean leave.”

I smiled at her impression of me, just a small one, a slight curve of the lips. I didn’t smile to make her angry, I swear. It was just so funny, and she was so frickin’ cute.

But given how her eyelids lowered and her eyes glittered, she didn’t find my smile amusing.

“You know what I think?” Her tone dripped with venom. “I think you like playing with people, making them dance to your tune and then changing it. You’re engaged, but it’s fake. You’ll always want me, until you don’t. You want to talk, but only about subjects that *you* want to talk about. You’ll always be there for me, until I don’t do *exactly* what you want *exactly* when you want it, or until a damsel in distress comes along who needs Billy Winston’s white horse. You’re in love with whatever or whoever you can’t have, but as soon as—”

Enough.

Without thinking, I advanced on her. She backed up, her eyes widening, but she scrambled just two steps before seeming to remember herself. Balling her hands into fists, Scarlet set her arms straight at her sides and angled her chin as I invaded her space.

“Honey,” I rough-whispered so I wouldn’t shout, my arms falling so I could get closer to her, “if I thought you would ever actually give yourself to me, if I could have you, really and truly *have* you, I’d take you. Right now. Right here.”

Scarlet seemed to swallow around something thick, her eyes darting between mine and then to my mouth, her lips parting.

God in heaven, I wanted to kiss her. As close as I was, I could feel the heat of her skin, the restless energy of her body, and I wanted that bossy mouth of hers, I wanted those full lips, I *wanted*.

“But no one can ever have you,” I continued, the truth a bucket of ice water to the fire in my veins. Grit in my voice, I spoke what I knew was the truth. “Because you’re in love with hating yourself.”

She flinched, her eyes flashed, and I knew I'd hurt her as she volleyed in a suspiciously unsteady whisper, "Oh yeah? Well you're in love with hating me."

Her blow met its target, a stab right to the heart as regret coated my tongue sour. What was I doing?

Stop this.

I needed to stop trying to hurt her as a way to make myself matter to her, which was exactly how my father operated, and which was exactly what I'd just done. The only difference was, Darrell did it with ease, with no discomfort to himself. Whereas every time I lashed out at Scarlet, it was like cutting off one of my own limbs so I could witness her distress.

I was not this person. It was sick and it was wrong, and it needed to stop.

But before I could absorb the blow fully, before I could put distance between us, apologize for being despicable and leave her in peace once and for all, Scarlet's face crumpled and she choked out, "I just want you to stop hating me."

And then, from somewhere behind me, my brother Cletus's voice said, "Am I interrupting something?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

* BILLY *

“After a good dinner one can forgive anybody, even one's own relations.”

— OSCAR WILDE, A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE

“**D**id it ever occur to you, one way or another, you and Scarlet are going to have to get along?”

I gave my brother a patient look, he hated that. “It’s past one in the morning, Cletus. Go to bed.”

Cletus and his wife Jenn, Beau and his lady Shelly, Ashley, her husband Drew, and their daughter Bethany had arrived, the plane touching down just two hours ago. I’d been told they were coming tomorrow, but apparently, I’d been told wrong.

Scarlet had seized upon Cletus’s sudden arrival, running past me, to him, into his arms for a big hug. Meanwhile, he’d glared at me over her shoulder. He’d taken his index and middle finger of one hand, pointed to his own eyes, and then pointed to me, mouthing, “I’m watching you.”

The next several moments were a flurry of activity, during which Scarlet evaded me by offering to show folks where they were sleeping and helping with bags. Jenn bustled in as Scarlet left and before I knew it, I had an apron on and was helping her finish the recipe Scarlet had started for some sort of dark chocolate cookies.

Then, with the deft grace and charm of a professional Cletus-handler, the exceptionally short woman escorted me to my bedroom, smiled at me patiently with her blinding smile and bluish-purplish eyes, and left me with

a glass of milk and a plate of cookies. But before she left, she'd placed a kiss on my forehead like I was a twelve-year-old.

And then, perplexed by what precisely had just happened, I'd turned and found my brother. Cletus. Lying on top of my bed with his hands behind his head. Which brings us to now.

Sitting up, Cletus skootched to the edge of my mattress and leaned forward, staring—but not glaring—at me, setting his elbows on his knees. “Here’s how it is: Duane and Beau are her brothers through her momma. Jethro is her best friend, Sienna and Scarlet are two boxes of wine away from forming a sister-wife commune. Jessica and Scarlet have been friends for going on seven or so years and Scarlet is one of the few people who can actually make Shelly laugh. Plus, according to Shelly, Scarlet naturally speaks in odd-numbered sentences, whatever that means. Point is, they’re close. It’s just a matter of time before Scarlet charms the pants off Simone like she’s done with Jenn and Ashley and Drew. Are you following the trail I’m leaving?”

Strolling to the desk, I set down the milk and cookies, crossed my arms and turned to face my brother. “You’re pointing out that Scarlet and I will see each other during various family functions.”

“Correct.”

“And, therefore,” I continued reasonably, “I need to be nice to her.” I knew that already, and tonight—after watching her face crumple and feeling a part of my soul shrivel at the sight—I’d finally accepted it. I would be nice. I would be so damn nice. I’d be a saint.

But then Cletus said, “No, Billy. Not *nice*. Nice is for tea parties and doctor’s visits. You need to woo her.”

I blinked once. “Woo her.”

“That’s right. You need to woo the pants off her, hopefully literally, and then make that woman yours. Permanently. Once and for all. Put a ring on it. Woo is where it’s at. Jenn still has the centerpieces from our wedding if you’d like to borrow them.” During this enlightening monologue, he’d moseyed over and picked up the glass of milk and a cookie, dunked the cookie into the milk, and then took a bite just as he’d finished his listings of delusions.

“That’s never going to happen.”

“Why not? Those centerpieces are lovely. You don’t know your color scheme yet. Ask Scarlet before you decide.”

I ground my teeth. “Scarlet and I are never going to happen, Cletus.”

He shook his head firmly. “I’m disappointed in your lack of ambition, Billy. I thought we’d be on the same page. But I see now, I’m going to have to take a tough love approach.”

“Cletus—”

“I’m going to give you one chance,” he said, then pushed the rest of the cookie in his mouth and spoke around it as he continued, “One more chance is all you get. I’ve waited long enough for this and you know my feelings on delayed gratification.”

“Pardon?”

“It’s overrated.” He took a gulp of milk and picked up another cookie.

“No, Cletus. One chance on what?”

“I’m giving you one chance. One.” He pointed the cookie at me. “Tomorrow, you’re going to go find her, apologize to her for whatever *that* kerfufflefuck was I walked in on. Tell her you were suffering from temporary insanity, hopped up on illicit drugs, abducted by asshole probing aliens, whatever. I’m giving you one chance to make this right, and if you don’t take it, you are not going to like what happens next.”

“Are you threatening me?” I asked steadily. I would’ve been amused if the subject matter had been different.

But Cletus knew. He knew my history with Scarlet. He knew what happened when she left the first time and how I’d struggled when she returned. He’d been the one to send her away when she came visiting, looking for me, wanting to be my friend.

But, then again, he didn’t know. He didn’t know I’d tracked her down on her college campus, hoping to convince her to leave Ben. He didn’t know how I’d met her week after week, pushing her to leave her fiancé—who I’d found out later was already her husband—pushing her to change her major from education to music, pushing her to grow wings and fly instead of willingly living her whole life in a cage built by Ben McClure. Cletus didn’t know how I’d fallen in love with her all over again, but grew to deeply resent her too.

He did, however, know that I’d tried to seduce her the night before her wedding. He’d driven me to her house and dropped me off, and he’d found me drunk on our family’s roof the next morning with a tattoo of a goat on my shoulder after she’d told me she’d rather sleep with a goat than with me.

“That’s right, I’m threatening you. I’m threatening you with your own happiness, so don’t give me your brown note stare-down face,” he said calmly, like I was the crazy one in this room and his words were meant to soothe.

“Cletus.” Equally as calm—outwardly—I leaned against the desk, half sitting, and gave him a tight smile. “Let it go. How many times do you have to learn the same lesson? You can’t control everybody. You can’t control every single situation. Scarlet and I are never going to happen. I’m finally starting to let it go, really and truly, and Lord knows Scarlet has been pushing me away for years. Let us both move on.”

Cletus narrowed his eyes on me. Watching me the whole time, he dunked the second cookie into the milk, took a bite, chewed, and then said, “Twenty-four hours. And if you don’t make matters right in twenty-four hours, then it’s on. It’s on like a hippy bong.”

“Pardon?”

“It’s on like a twelve-year-old mowing the lawn.”

“Are you—”

“It’s on like a prawn who yawns at dawn.”

Saying nothing, since he was in a mood to interrupt, I scowled at my brother. He scowled back. I opened my mouth, intending to ask if he was finished.

He held up a finger. “I got one more. It’s on like a Shaun White wearing a thong in the Yukon. Okay, go ahead.”

Despite myself, despite how deeply and thoroughly irritated I was, I fought a smile. “You’re not going to like what happens if you make another *it’s on* statement.”

“And you’re not going to like what happens if you force my hand. Yet, I reckon you’re also *really* going to like what happens if you force my hand. I figure it might cause a rift between us for a while, but that’s okay because in the end Scarlet’s happiness is what matters and your happiness is what matters. And with that, I bid thee a good night.”

He shoved the rest of the cookie in his mouth and picked up the plate with the remainder. Turning on his heel, he strolled to the door. I watched him go, knowing there was no talking him out of mischief once he set his mind to it. I’d just have to do my best to avoid the traps he sets. That’s all I could do.

“I hope you brought your knee pads,” he said, glancing over his shoulder once he reached the top of the steps. “You’re gunna need them for all that groveling.”

* * *

Dinner the next evening took place on the big stone terrace behind the house. Big planters with red flowers that bees liked were set along the porch, and white jasmine grew up lattice set against the stone exterior of the villa. Every door to the house was open as the heat of the day had yielded to a mild evening and slight breeze. Between the food, night air, and the flowers, it smelled close to heaven.

Like all the tables in this place—in the kitchen, dining room, and this one here on the terrace—the massive piece of furniture accommodated all of us with three seats left to spare.

“For Jess’s brother, Roscoe, and Simone,” Ashley said, lifting her chin to the empty spots. “Next time.”

“Next time.” I held the bowl of pasta while she served herself a helping, looking beyond Drew—who sat across from me—engrossed by the sunset.

The sun hadn’t settled beyond the horizon, but almost. Those of us facing west weren’t bad off, the terrace had a retractable cloth awning, keeping the sun out of our faces for the most part. Plus, we had the view. An olive orchard sloping down to the valley, barley fields, vineyards, the Tuscan hills beyond, a dusk sky streaked with orange and pink.

“What’re you looking at?” Drew twisted in his seat to look over his shoulder, the sunset behind him had made a halo out of his longish blond hair. After pausing for a moment to inspect the view, he turned back to me, a slight smile behind his gray eyes. “Oh. That.”

“You want to sit here?” my sister asked her husband, taking the pasta and holding it so I could serve myself. “You folks along that side with your back to the sun are missing out. You have no view.”

“I have a view,” he said, splitting his attention between Ashley and cutting up the steak on his plate into tiny pieces for their daughter, Bethany. She’d insisted on sitting in her own seat and not on her daddy’s lap.

“Oh pshaw!” Handing the pasta to Beau on her other side, Ashley gestured to the sky behind Drew. “Look at that, just look at all that

gorgeousness.”

“I told you, I am.” He continued to look at her.

Ashley’s lips pressed into a line that was one part exasperation and ten parts happiness. “I love you,” she said to him, her voice all soft, “but you are crazy if you think I’m more beautiful than that view.”

“Then I guess you married a crazy man.” He shrugged.

My sister and her husband shared a look and a smile, warmth and sweetness passing between them. I felt my mouth curve and studied my plate, letting them have their moment free of spectators. But then, my eyes lifted before I could check the impulse, sought Scarlet like they’d done so many times today, and I understood exactly what Drew meant.

Tonight, she was in a long summer dress the color of wine grapes, her lips painted red, her hair loose around bare shoulders. She was smiling at Jenn and nodding her head, and then she laughed, and the sight eclipsed the view and sunset and summer sky, leaving my chest tight, my limbs restless, and everything else adrift.

I’d tried to apologize to her throughout the day. Several times I’d sought her out. Every room I entered she continued to leave, not that I blamed her. The only exception had been tonight’s dinner. But with her three seats down and on the other side of the table, we weren’t close enough to talk let alone have a private conversation.

I was determined to catch her after dinner, but I wouldn’t go to her room. I didn’t want her to feel cornered. I planned to apologize and propose a new truce: we didn’t have to interact or speak to each other, but we didn’t have to go out of our way to avoid each other either. We could just . . . be. Give that a try, see if we could make it work.

“We need to discuss tomorrow.” Cletus—who’d positioned himself at the head of the table so he could see everyone—lifted his voice over the general murmur of conversation and presently swirled the wine in his glass, slanting it to the side as though inspecting its color.

“What happens tomorrow?” Shelly asked, much to my surprise. She wasn’t one for talking, especially not in a group.

The sound of her voice apparently surprised everyone. Conversation mellowed and folks seemed to turn toward her and Cletus in unison.

“I know some of y’all are still suffering from jet lag, but we have tickets to Michelangelo’s *David* first thing in the morning and we need to sort who’s going and who’s staying.”

Jess lifted her hand. “Duane is going to make sure y’all find your way. My parents and I are staying with Liam and making dinner for when you get back.”

“Maya wants to go, but Sienna, the boys, and I are staying.” Jethro spoke for his family.

“What? Why?” Cletus glanced between Sienna and Jet, setting down his wine glass.

“The last time we were in Florence, Sienna was recognized,” Jethro replied, shrugging. “I had to get her through a crowd fifty folks deep.”

“He had a black eye after and his back was covered in bruises,” Sienna tutted, placing her hand in his on the tabletop.

“Okay, well then, I hope the rest of y’all are going because otherwise we’re going to lose our group tour discount, and then I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“Shelly and I are going,” Beau said, slinging his arm on the back of the chair behind Shelly and playing with her long brownish-blond braid. “And I know Ash and Drew are coming with Beth.”

“That’s right,” Drew confirmed. “We’re looking forward to it.”

My attention drifted to the two-year-old across the table. She was drinking from a big cup, holding it with two hands and peering at me over the rim, her gaze steady and *intense*. Her eyes were a mix of her daddy’s silver and her momma’s blue. I suspected she’d wield that stare like a sword one day.

One might say Bethany and I had an understanding. Every time she brought me a book, I read it. Didn’t matter where we were or what I was doing. If I was on the phone, I hung up. If I was in the middle of a conversation, I excused myself. If I was cooking, I turned off the stove. Every. Time.

Basically, I was her favorite uncle.

“Are you coming, Claire?” Shelly asked, like it was an interrogation, her dark blue stare piercing, as was her way.

Scarlet smiled warmly at the woman, shrugging. “Oh, I don’t know. I actually have some work to do before heading to Rome in a few weeks.”

Cletus threw his hands in the air. “Well, that’s it. Groupon ain’t gonna give me a refund.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said, chuckling at Cletus’s dramatics. “I’ve always wanted to see, uh—” her eyes flickered to mine and then away “—

I've always wanted to see that statue."

"Claire is coming. What about you, Billy?" Shelly turned her interrogating glare and tone on me.

"He's going," Duane cut in before I had a chance to answer. "I cleared his schedule with his secretary. He has the whole day free."

"Actually, I don't know." I scratched my beard, wondering if me staying meant Claire would feel more comfortable going. I didn't want to be the reason she missed out. "I have a call with the mill. Dolly said she wants to run some numbers with me."

That wasn't a lie, technically. Dolly Payton did want to run some numbers with me, but the call we'd scheduled was for 3:00 a.m. Italian time.

Cletus squinted and he gave his head a subtle shake, likely an action he hoped I'd interpret as a warning. I ignored it and him and sipped from my wine glass.

Leaning back in his seat, Cletus steepled his fingers and dropped his gaze to his plate, a tight expression on his face. I couldn't imagine what was going on in his head, what kind of punishment he had in store for me. It could be anything. Well, almost anything. I doubted he would—

"Hey, Billy." Ashley tapped my arm lightly, drawing my attention to her. Giving me a sweet smile, she said, "I know this is completely random, but Drew and I were talking about that new rehab facility in Green Valley the other day and I always wondered, what happened to that car?"

"Car?"

"Yeah. In high school, the one that hit you, and then you ended up in the hospital for all those weeks, losing your scholarship and such."

I stared at my sister, confused as to why she'd be asking this now or at all. The more I stared, the less sweet her smile looked. The hairs on the back of my neck lifted, strained, like I was being watched by a predator. Or several.

Glancing around the table, I found only Sheriff and Mrs. James, Maya, Scarlet, Jethro and Sienna and their boys not staring in my direction. Otherwise, all sets of eyes were watching our exchange and they each wore a similar expression. *Determined.*

My stomach dropped.

They know.

Clearing my throat, I wrestled to keep my racing pulse under control. “Can’t say I recall,” I managed to choke out, returning my gaze to my plate and dabbing at my mouth with my napkin, trying to think.

He’d told them.

“That was right about the time that Scarlet left town, right?” Beau asked, and my eyes cut to his.

I sat stock-still, staring at my lovable brother and his affable smile and the unholy light of mischief in his eyes. And then what followed would have been comical if my heart hadn’t been beating out of my chest.

I looked to Jethro. Besides Cletus, he was the only other person at the table who knew it had been the Wraiths, not a car accident, that had left me with so many broken bones. If he figured it out, he’d tell Scarlet the truth straightaway, that’s for sure. Time and time again, he’d shown how little loyalty he had for me.

Jethro glanced at me. Then Jethro glanced at Scarlet, who was frowning at her plate. My gaze cut to Cletus and I glowered, because my industrious brother was smirking. At me. His wine glass lifted in my direction.

“So, you’re coming to Florence tomorrow? To see *David*?” Beau asked, his eyebrows raised meaningfully.

“I guess I am,” I responded, my words carefully calm, my eyes never leaving Cletus’s.

Meanwhile, he’d lifted a wrist and pointed to the watch there with his index finger, mouthing, *Time’s up*.

CHAPTER NINE

CLAIRE

“Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”

— THOMAS MERTON , NO MAN IS AN ISLAND

At 8:00 a.m., the streets of Florence smelled like leather and fresh bread. Cafés were still setting up, placing chairs, small circular tables, and folding signs—advertising both espresso and gelato—on the narrow cobble streets.

“Why does it smell so much like leather?” I asked Duane, who currently held my hand tucked in the crook of his elbow.

Duane led the way, guiding us through the back streets, from the train station at Piazza di Santa Maria Novella to the Accademia Gallery, where the huge fourteen-foot statue was kept. Everyone else was behind us, including Billy. I’d glanced over my shoulder a few times, hopefully stealthily enough not to be noticed. He brought up the rear, walking with Sienna’s sister Maya who—I hated that I noticed—was looking at him like he was an ice cream cone.

Not that I blamed her.

“They got these open-air markets here where vendors sell all manner of things, used to be fine linen table clothes, Italian marble chessboards, and such. But now, it seems to be more touristy kind of stuff, knickknacks and whatnot, bobbleheads of the pope, hot priest calendars.”

“Hot priest calendars?” I both frowned and smiled.

His eyes slid to mine and he smirked. “Anyway, a lot of the stuff is made in Taiwan and China, not so much in Italy anymore. Makes sense, global economy and whatnot. But they still have the leather market, where most everything is made here by local crafts people. That’s why it smells like leather.”

He motioned to a row of stalls with canvas coverings lining both sides of a street. “That’s Via dell’Ariente. This’ll be busy in about two hours, packed with people.”

At a few of the stalls, men, women, and some children were moving about, taking goods out of wooden crates and pulling the canvas forward to create a kind of cloth roof in front of the stall.

“Beyond that is the San Lorenzo food market.”

“A food market? Sign me up.” My brother’s smirk became a small grin. “We like the Sant’Ambrogio market a little better, on the other side of town, but it’s a walk. Though, I don’t know if Jess likes Sant’Ambrogio better ’cause we take the long way, crossing the Ponte Vecchio and walking along the other side of the river. She says it’s quieter on that side, cooler in the summer.”

I nodded, deciding to ask Jess for some suggestions on places I could go on my own inside the city. I’d never traveled, wasn’t certain I would make it through a day without getting lost, but what the heck? I was in Italy. No time like the present to learn new skills.

A storefront display caught my notice, and then another, and another. An antiques store, a book shop, a stationery shop with colorful papers and note cards. I tried to make a mental map of where each shop was, the market, the stalls. Yeah, I’d come back one day next week. When I returned—because now I was determined to return—I’d check them out.

But by the time we made it to the Gallery, I’d lost count of the shops to visit, feeling a little overwhelmed by all the spots of interest. Too many to track. Our tour guide seemed to be expecting us and stepped forward from a small square gathering space as we arrived. Soon we were all handed earbuds and a device to wear around our neck for plugging them in. Our guide wore a little microphone that transmitted her voice to our device. We could listen to her through the earbuds, if we so chose, as we walked through the various rooms of interest.

Earbuds draped around my neck along with the listening device, I waited until Billy and Maya passed before following the crowd of Winstons

into the Accademia Gallery. He was limping, just a little, but I noticed. Chasing a twinge of worry away—because it was not my job to worry over Billy Winston—I did my best to absorb the general splendor of my surroundings.

The general splendor was certainly splendid, and empty.

“Where is everyone?” I touched Shelly’s arm to get her attention. “I can’t believe we’re the only ones here.”

Eerily quiet, we passed several huge paintings. I mean, they were *huge*. The size of a whole wall. And then in front of us rose a giant statue of a man lifting a woman. Upon closer inspection, I realized he wasn’t lifting her up. She was struggling against his hold while he attempted to wrestle her into submission.

Though I could appreciate the craftsmanship and artistry, it was kinda disturbing.

“Sienna pulled some strings,” she explained. “This isn’t the usual tour; at the end we’ll get a chance to see some of Michelangelo’s lost sketches.”

I felt my forehead wrinkle, tearing my gaze from the statue. “This is part of the Groupon?”

Shelly pressed her lips together, her eyes smiling. “Claire. There’s no Groupon for seeing *David*. The tours are usually sold out months in advance, especially over the summer.”

“Oh.” I gave her a tight smile of mild embarrassment. “I guess I should’ve known Cletus was just being Cletus. Sorry.”

“It is okay. You are very cute sometimes. I forget that you’ve never left Tennessee before. That statue—” she lifted her chin toward the one in front of us, where everyone had paused “—is by Giambologna. It’s a plaster cast model for *The Rape of the Sabines*. The marble sculpture, carved from one solid piece, is in the Piazza della Signoria under the Loggia dei Lanzi.”

I stepped closer to her as I studied the sculpture again, looping our arms together, and wondering why anyone would want a piece of art depicting a rape.

You’d never know it by Shelly’s outwardly stoic demeanor, but Shelly was an extremely affectionate person. As soon as I touched her, she latched on to me and that was exactly what I needed at present. My stomach fluttered, and for once it didn’t have anything to do with Billy Winston.

“What is wrong?” she whispered, holding my hand tightly. “Are you okay?”

“It’s just silly.”

“What?”

“I guess I’m nervous.” I glanced at her and found her watching me intently as our footsteps echoed on the stone floor, moving away from the statue. “I’ve never traveled like this, been to a museum before, definitely nothing like this.”

“You’ve performed in front of thousands of people.”

“More like hundreds. A thousand people, tops.” I’d been given an open invitation to the Nashville Music Festival in a few weeks, and that would have thousands of people. I’d given them a tentative yes, but then I’d talked myself out of accepting several times. The festival was scheduled for the week I’d be in Rome, and though I could definitely make it work with my schedule, the idea of performing in front of that many people had me breaking out in cold sweats. “So far, I’ve only agreed to smaller events. I’ve never done one of the big stadium shows or festivals, but my label keeps threatening to send me on tour.”

“But you went to college, right? Your major was music? Didn’t you go to any museums then?”

“Ultimately, my major was music education. But I wasn’t one for going out. I went to class and then home. Aunt Mary and Uncle Peter—uh, Ben’s aunt and uncle, they’re who I lived with—were older and needed help. So when I wasn’t in class, I was at home with them.”

“Did you like being there? Or did you wish you could socialize more?”

“Oh, I liked it. They were so nice. We’d play cards at night or I’d sing and play the piano for them. And she taught me how to cook.” I whispered a bit quieter since we’d just entered a sorta hallway and something about it felt extremely sacred, like a church but on sanctity steroids. On either side were half-finished marble carvings of men.

Our guide murmured something from the front of our group. “Should I put the earbuds in? Is she already talking?”

“You are nervous. I can tell.” Shelly’s eyes moved between mine and, totally serious, she said, “I’ll protect you.”

A surge of warmth and affection for this woman had me sending her a big smile. “Thank you, Shelly. I appreciate you. But I’ll get over being a dummy in just a minute, I think.”

“Let me tell you a story to distract you.” Arm in arm, she marched us forward, past Jenn and Cletus, past Drew and Ash and Bethany, past Billy

and Maya, Duane and Beau. She even strolled right on past the guide and—

“Holy crap!” My feet stumbled and my mouth dropped wide open because there he was. *David*. Right in front of us, like he was real. I mean, *holy crap*. Just like that, all my silly nerves were forgotten.

“That’s David, and he’s beautiful,” she said, her voice definitely not a whisper. “You can’t see his face very well from this angle.” She led me forward, bringing us to a stop adjacent to his giant left foot. “But he is frowning, he looks stern, focused, a little angry. And yet, his posture is so relaxed, don’t you think?”

I nodded dumbly, mesmerized by . . . well, by the whole dang thing.

Billy had once told me the Bible story when we were teenagers and I’d looked it up since. I tried to imagine this beautiful boy—brave and noble and undeterred by fear—with only a sling and rocks, facing the gruesome giant Goliath.

But this? Beautiful wasn’t the right word for what David was, the description felt paltry given the reality of him. It. The statue, I mean.

Shelly tugged on my arm and walked me slowly around the barrier so we could see his backside. And, my goodness, he had a glorious backside, *glorious*, and an inkling of a suspicion occurred to me. This statue wasn’t a depiction of a Bible story, not really. This was a celebration of the male form, of its rough beauty, hard shape, severe angles, and graceful lines, and—for so much of history—its purpose.

“When I was in school, at the University of Chicago, we were told a story about Michelangelo, more of a legend with two endings.” Shelly stopped us right at the center of his back and we both took a moment to gaze upon the amazing details of his torso, legs, and right hand.

“A legend?” I asked, my eyes fastened to the white marble, only tangentially aware that we’d just been joined by Cletus and Beau as well as Billy and Maya.

“When Michelangelo was carving the sculpture of David, he’d been warned the piece of marble chosen was flawed.”

“Flawed?” Billy asked, his deep voice echoing in the cavernous space made the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. “How so?”

“In 1464, the marble had been given to an artist by the name of Agostino to carve a statue of David, but he gave up, saying he couldn’t work with it. Then, in 1501, Michelangelo took the assignment and the marble. As you can see, it’s a stunning, priceless, pure white marble,

shipped from a quarry in Carrara, a town in the Apuan Alps in northern Tuscany. A huge, single piece of stone, and even though everyone said it was flawed, Michelangelo wanted it anyway.”

“Was it flawed?” Beau asked, drawing Shelly’s eyes to his.

“Maybe. According to the story I was told, Michelangelo knocked off a knot that had been on David’s chest, and afterward he’d had no trouble carving the block.”

“Huh. Interesting.” Duane peered up at the statue, squinting. “I’d never heard that before.”

“And here is where the legends diverge,” she continued. “In one version of the story, the knot, they say, was David’s heart.”

“Oh.” Maya’s dark brown eyes widened, like she found this distressing, an expression I’m sure was mirrored in my own eyes.

“And when Michelangelo removed the heart of the stone, it was easy to manipulate and shape into whomever or whatever he desired.”

“That’s . . . sad.” Maya looked to me, as though to confirm her feelings on the subject were valid. “What did the other legend say?”

“The other legend claimed that the knot had blocked David’s heart. And once it was removed, the true form beneath the marble was revealed.”

“I like that story better,” Beau said, grinning at Shelly.

“I can see why,” Billy muttered, sounding distracted, his attention affixed to David’s calf and foot.

“Which story do you prefer?” I asked. Shelly always had an unexpected take on things.

“I like the duality of both, to be honest.”

“What do you mean?” Beau lifted his chin, his gaze fastened to her like she was the most fascinating and wonderful person in the world. But then, he always looked at her like this.

“Just that, two people, witnessing or experiencing the same event, can have two entirely different interpretations of the truth. To one person, the knot was a heart, and removing it devastated the stone such that it succumbed to the artist’s vision. To another, the knot was an obstruction to the stone, preventing it from being what or who it was meant to be.”

I felt the weight of Billy’s attention move to me, sure as a touch or a word softly spoken. I swallowed. I told myself not to look. But then I did.

Our gazes locked, held, and the impact raced through my body, to my fingertips and toes. He wasn’t smiling or frowning, just looking. But that

was always enough to send me off-kilter. I only had myself to blame, but I'm a glutton for punishment and Billy Winston.

"The truth is in the eye of the beholder?" his deep voice asked. The question was directed to Shelly, but his eyes never left mine.

"Of course it is. Truth is always more relative than fiction. And the idea that two factual truths can exist at once, so diametrically opposed to each other, is completely fascinating. Don't you think?"

* * *

Lined up, two by two, we waited for the elevator to take us down to the basement. According to Shelly, a hidden room had been discovered some forty years ago beneath the Florence cathedral which housed several sketches attributed to Michelangelo and his students. Parts of the walls had been carefully removed from the original, long-hidden room and placed in this underground space beneath the Academia Gallery, but the elevator down only held two people at a time.

Billy and Maya were first, Beau and Shelly next, Cletus and Jenn, and then Duane and I at the rear. Ash and Drew had moved on to the gift shop as Bethany had grown restless, asking several times and very loudly why David didn't have any clothes on and whether he was cold.

"Um, Duane?" Maya flipped her dark hair over her shoulder and called back to us, her face apologetic. Maya looked a lot like her sister, except her skin was just a shade or two lighter than Sienna's golden hue. "I'm sorry, I have to go to the bathroom. Will you show me where it is?"

"Sure." Duane stepped forward, bringing me with him by placing a hand on my back. "Here, Claire. You go down with Billy. I'll take Maya."

"I—"

Ding.

"It's arrived, time to get on," Cletus announced.

Duane pushed—and I mean *pushed*—me onto the elevator and I turned, my wide eyes connecting with Billy's. He hadn't boarded yet and seemed just as perplexed as me by the sudden people shuffle. But then, Jennifer stepped forward and took his arm, guiding him into the tiny lift.

"There you go, sweetheart," she said, punching the close-door button and leaning back, like she'd just helped a little old lady cross the street.

“See y’all in a bit.”

I’d stepped back as far as I could go, but Billy’s body still crowded my space. It wasn’t until the doors shut behind us that recognition sharpened his eyes, as though he’d just realized what happened, where he was, and who he was with.

“Oh,” he said softly, edging away. “I’m—I . . .” His eyes were visibly and uncharacteristically unsettled. “It’s a small elevator.”

“It is,” I whispered tightly, not knowing where to set my gaze, my heart rate doubling.

He filled every inch of my vision, and he was just so dang big. I’d never felt the truth of his size before, not like this, not where it was just the two of us in a tiny space and his shoulders seemed to span the width of it, towering over me. Just before it became overwhelming, the doors slid open. I darted out and then stopped, discovering there wasn’t very far to go.

The room was just that, a room, maybe twenty feet square. A narrow wooden plank extended down the center of it and on either side the floor fell away, a drop of at least four feet. Along the walls and at a distance, tucked beneath arches and bathed in flood lighting, were wall sections, charcoal sketches on white plaster. And that’s it.

I turned. Billy still hovered near the closed doors of the elevator, his hands in his pockets, his wary eyes on me.

“This is very interesting,” I said—but mostly squeaked—gesturing to the space, feeling like I needed to defend the simple room for some reason.

Biting the inside of his lip, Billy nodded, his wariness persisting.

Clearing my throat, I walked down the plank, my hands clasped behind my back, pretending to be fully engrossed in the sketches. The truth was, I barely noticed them. What I did notice? The sluggish passage of time. One minute became two, maybe ten, maybe a hundred. I continued to stare unseeingly at the cut-out walls while he continued to hover by the elevator.

I wondered what his plan was. Maybe he wanted to leave as soon as the next party of two arrived? That made sense. It certainly would explain why he hadn’t taken more than a step away from the only escape route.

Well, that was just fine. Just. Fine. And maybe once he left, I’d be able to relax and actually look at the sketches, which should be any minute now. Surely, Beau and Shelly were on their way. Surely.

I had no idea what time it was. He continued to loiter, turning toward the doors, fussing with the button. The small room began to feel just as

cramped as the elevator and I was having a little trouble regulating my breathing. *How long have we been down here? Days?!*

“Scarlet.”

I tensed, my gaze cutting to his. His wary expression had been replaced with a frustrated one, and in the next second he moved, walking toward me. Oh God. *Please. Please, just be nice.*

Searching for some topic, any topic that might distract him from whatever was on his mind, I blurted, “Shelly said these were done by Michelangelo and his students.”

He stopped about four feet away, his mouth set in an unhappy line, and I braced myself for the impact of angry words as he said, “The call button doesn’t seem to be working,” which was not what I’d expected him to say.

I stared at the man for a beat, and then I leaned to the side and peered at the doors. “It’s not?”

“No. And it’s been fifteen minutes.”

“What? It has?”

He nodded, looking less irritated and more . . . *apologetic?*

“I’m sorry,” he said, his typically frosty gaze now curiously moderate, yet still reserved. “I think this is Cletus’s idea of trying to help.”

CHAPTER TEN

CLAIRE

“The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”

— SUN TZU, THE ART OF WAR

“**H**elp?” I parroted, confused.

Billy’s tongue darted out to lick his lips. “Cletus seems to think, if you and I are trapped together, we’ll—uh—work through our differences.”

My stomach dropped and my mouth formed an O as I finally understood. We were trapped. Cletus had somehow figured out how to trap us down here. *Great.*

“I didn’t have anything to do with this,” Billy said, quite unnecessarily. Obviously, he didn’t have anything to do with it.

“I know.” I twisted at the waist, looking for a place to sit. “I didn’t think you did,” I muttered. Then, because I could be petty sometimes, I mumbled, “I’m not the one trying to avoid you.”

Billy rocked back on his heels, like he was absorbing my words, speaking as though to himself, “That statement doesn’t have any basis in reality.”

Finding no chair or bench on which to sit, I lowered myself to the plank. “I’m just giving you the space you requested.” I allowed my legs to dangle over the side, figuring if I was going to be trapped here for God knows how long with a man who despised the sight of me, I might as well sit. I was tired of standing and fighting.

“And before that?”

“And before that, what?”

“And before I requested distance last week? Where were you then?”

“And before that”—I waved my hand through the air—“I was in Nashville for four years and you were in the Capital, and you’re engaged. So . . .” I shrugged, because that just said it all.

“No.” He sat too, assuming the same position as me, just three feet away now. His movements were slow, like his hip was giving him problems. “I told you over Christmas, that’s not a real engagement. If you’re not avoiding me, where have you been for the last six months?”

“You’re still engaged. All engagements are real until they’re over,” I said flatly. Staring forward, I twisted my lips to the side, feeling none of my usual heart palpitations and whatnot. I just felt . . . tired. *Here we go again. I am so tired of this.*

“Well, this engagement is over. I broke it off a few weeks ago.”

A spark of irritation had my lips curving into a rueful smile. “Well, there you go. And now you want me to keep my distance. Funny how that timing works.”

“You know what? Maybe we should just wait in silence,” he ground out. “We’ll wait here quietly until Cletus decides to let us out.”

“Fine with me.” I brought my knees up and hugged my legs to me, setting my cheek on top of them, my face turned away.

Encouraging my mind to take me away from here, I reflected on how dumb all these arguments were. The same ones over and over, and yet they still hurt. Billy was right. Being around him was difficult. It used to be so easy, which just made it hurt even more.

Eventually, my thoughts drifted, but they didn’t stray too far from the man at my side. Seeing him curled up on the bed last week, obviously in pain and so determined to reject any kindness I offered. Well, I guess I didn’t blame him for pushing me away, everything considered, but why he’d put himself in that position to begin with made no sense to me.

Which is probably why, before I could catch the impulse, I said, “Actually, no. Not fine with me. I have a question.”

“What’s that?”

“Why’d you donate your bone marrow to Darrell?” Lifting my head, I looked at him. He had one knee drawn up, his forearm resting on top of it, and he returned my inspection with one of his own.

“Ah. So that’s what you meant when you said Cletus told you what happened.”

“Yes. Why would you do that?”

Billy seemed to hesitate, like he was debating between two paths and wasn’t at all sure which way to go. “How much do you know about what happened back in May? At the diner, when Roscoe and Simone were hurt?”

Spotting a glimmer of vulnerability behind his gaze at the mention of his little brother, I turned my body to face him fully, sitting cross-legged. “Just what’s been in the papers.”

“Which is?”

“My, uh—” I lifted my eyes to the ceiling as I recited the facts as I knew them. “Razor attacked Roscoe and then that bad cop shot into the diner, hitting Simone. But then she was able to shoot Razor before passing out. You came in, found him about to harm her, so you knocked him out and covered Roscoe and Simone with ice while you waited for the ambulance.”

“That’s a fair summary. But what the papers aren’t focusing so much on is that Darrell agreed to testify against Razor, but only if someone donated bone marrow to him.”

My spine straightened. “He did?”

“Yeah. At first, that was going to be Roscoe, and they think that’s why Razor went after him. Obviously, now Roscoe is much too sick to do anything but heal. So I offered to—” Billy’s mouth abruptly snapped shut, his eyes dropping. He gave his head a little shake and his eyebrows pulled together, giving me the sense he was thinking over weighty matters and parsing through what he wished to share.

“You know what?” he finally said, drawing in a deep breath. “The truth is, I’m doing it for revenge.” Billy chuckled lightly, like he found his own motivations bizarre. “That’s the answer. Revenge.”

What? “You’re saving Darrell’s life to get revenge? How does that work? You’re saving him to spite him?”

“No. I don’t care about that.” He waved away that possibility. “He’s not going to live much longer anyway. Doctors say he’ll be dead within the year, two tops, no matter what. I want to prolong his life long enough to put Razor in jail.”

“So . . . it’s revenge against Razor?”

He lifted his eyes and they tangled with mine. “And Darrell too. I like the fact that one of the last things he’ll do is betray the people who mattered

so much to him during his life. I find that satisfying.”

“I can see that.” I studied the grim line of his mouth, the way his jaw ticked at his temple, and suddenly felt moved to say, “Thank you.”

Some of the intensity behind his gaze gave way to confusion. “For what?”

“For doing it, for making it so Darrell testifies. It helps me to know Razor will be in jail for the rest of his life.”

Billy’s stare flicked over me, sharpened. “You still having those nightmares?”

I stilled. Even my heart seemed to slow as we watched each other. It was an odd moment, having this conversation with him. He knew so much about me, my past, my hopes and fears. He even knew my dreams. And yet, he hated me. *So why are you talking to him?*

“I was always afraid,” I said slowly, not sure whether I should continue to speak or shut down. History told me this calm between us was a ticking time bomb; eventually one of us would explode.

However . . . *I miss this*. I missed talking to him. I missed hearing what he thought and what he wished. I missed his voice. I missed his laugh and subtle sweetness and wry humor. I missed him.

In the end—again, because I’m a glutton for punishment and Billy Winston—I decided there wasn’t any harm confirming something he probably already suspected. “I was always afraid that one day he’d come after me again. That he’d come and get me and take me back there. That’s why I asked Jethro to put those panic rooms in my house.”

This news seemed to make him restless. “Why did you come back to Green Valley? Why’d you come back at all?”

I studied him and his questions. “You mean to live? After Ben died?”

I was surprised by the question.

In all the months we’d spent together sneaking around, Billy had never asked and didn’t want to know. Back then, he only wanted to talk about the future, about my hopes and dreams, and his hopes and dreams, and current events, and my school, and what I thought about such and such. It was as though he wanted to pretend we were just two normal people with no baggage, with no concerns or obligations outside of each other.

That’s not to say he was completely ignorant of everything. Billy knew little details, like how I’d been living with Ben’s aunt and uncle in Nashville for several years, and why I’d never reached out to him while I

was gone—I'd thought he and his high school girlfriend had gotten married. We also talked about my music and his job at the mill.

But the moment I told him how Ben had slept with me on my eighteenth birthday, all discussion of the past stopped. He couldn't stand hearing anything else. Every time I brought up Ben or tried to explain, Billy would shut down and leave.

"Okay. Sure. Why'd you come back after Ben died? Or even before that? Why not stay gone? Stay safe?" He sounded interested rather than angry, which—again—surprised me.

Therefore, I told him the truth. "Well, after Ben died, I felt like I needed to be close to the McClures. They—they were so good to me, and they'd lost their only child, a son they considered a miracle. I wanted to be a help to them in their time of mourning, give them a focus, some hope."

Billy's brow drew together, his gaze softening, seeming to lose some of its earlier aloofness. "That was good of you."

"Thank you," I said, meaning it, my stomach thinking now was a good time to flutter. Doing my best to ignore that development, I added, "Before Ben died, when we came back for the engagement party but I was still living in Nashville for school, Ben told me it was safe."

Billy's eyes moved between mine, his eyebrows pulling together, like maybe he thought he'd misheard me. "He did? He told you it was safe?"

"Yeah. He said that since I was under his family's protection and we were married, the Wraiths would leave me alone."

In a flash, all traces of warmth and softness in Billy's expression were replaced with barely restrained fury. "He told you . . ." he started, stopped, his breathing now different, shallower. Abruptly, he stood and paced away, limping. He paced back and I wasn't sure if the grimace on his face was because of his hip or my words. "Ben told you the reason Razor left you alone was because of the McClures? You were under his family's protection?"

Before I nodded to confirm, I mentally repeated his question, ensuring I wasn't missing anything. "Yes. I mean, if you think about it, it makes sense, right? Everyone in East Tennessee knows the McClures. If something had happened to me, it wasn't going to be easily swept under the rug, like when I was just MC trash, living at the compound."

Billy clamped his jaw shut, staring at me, giving me the sense he wanted to say something but was holding himself back by the smallest

sliver of a thread. “That makes *no* sense,” he finally spoke, his eyes blazing down at me. “You know your father better than anyone, what he’s capable of. Do you really think Razor would’ve given a second thought to cutting down Ben McClure if the mood struck him?”

Standing, I dusted off my backside with my palms, wracking my brain for what I might’ve said that caused Billy’s sudden mood shift. “What other explanation could there be?”

“I can’t believe you trusted him.” He turned away again, pushing the fingers of both hands into his hair. “This is your *life*.”

“I—yes. But why wouldn’t I? He never gave me a reason not to trust him.”

“Oh. Really?” Billy turned, giving me his profile. Not looking at me, clearly still very pissed off, he seemed to be doing his best to keep his voice steady. “Ben never gave you a reason not to trust him? What about sneaking into your bedroom on your eighteenth birthday and—”

I recoiled, a chill settling over my shoulders. His words felt like a slap. Folding my arms over my stomach, I turned and faced the other wall, needing to clear my throat before saying, “You know, maybe we should be quiet and just wait.”

I heard his footsteps move closer. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I know I shouldn’t bring this up. But, Scarlet, what he did wasn’t right. He never asked. He just took what he wanted without—”

“Please stop.” I held myself tighter.

Billy exhaled an anguished sounding sigh. “Honey, maybe you never said no, but he never asked. Why don’t you hate him? You should hate him, not yourself. He tricked you into marrying him at fifteen.” The way Billy said this sent shivers down my spine, like it was torn from him and he mourned for me, for the child I was.

“I’ve already explained why I married him at fifteen, you just don’t want to—”

“Yes. Actually, yes. Okay. That makes sense to me now.”

My head whipped around and I peered at him. Agog. *WHAT?* “It does?”

“Yes.” He nodded, no longer looking angry, only restless. “When I thought about it after, when I calmed down, I understood. Getting married to change your name, to be emancipated, that makes total sense. But what never made sense to me is that you stayed married to him, when you so obviously weren’t in love with him and he treated you like garbage.” Billy

lifted his hands, as though he was 100 percent certain he knew what I was thinking. “I know you hate it when I say that, but it’s the truth.”

“Well, he—” I struggled to find the right words. “I was nineteen, okay? I owed his family *everything*.”

Billy clamped his jaw shut, glaring at me silently.

I huffed, scratching the hot, prickly patch on the back of my neck, glancing over Billy’s shoulder to the elevator doors. “I was nineteen and—and Ben was selfish.”

A moment passed. And then another. The word *selfish* seemed to bounce off the walls and between us. Now I was breathing funny again, shallow, but not because I was trapped in a room with Billy Winston. It was because I’d finally spoken a notion I’d had for years but felt like a traitor every time I’d thought it.

“What?” Billy’s tone demonstrated the tremendous nature of his incredulity. “What did you just say?”

“Ben was selfish,” I repeated, finding it easier to say the second time. “And spoiled. And arrogantly entitled.”

“What?” He took a step back, like my words crowded him. “What are you—what?”

“I’ve been doing some self-reflection.” Waving my hands through the air in wild circles, feeling oddly harassed, my voice was louder than I’d intended. “I’m working through some things, okay? Trying to be a healthier version of myself.”

“You—you—self-reflection?” He sounded so confused.

“I’ve been going to therapy, if you want to know the whole truth.” Realizing I’d been flapping my arms like a bird, I placed my hands on my hips. “And that’s what I was going to tell you the other day before you told me to ‘keep my distance.’” Because I felt uncomfortable and exposed and therefore salty, I used air quotes.

He reared back, blinking at me like I was something new. But he still seemed to be at a loss for words.

“I see now,” I added conversationally, “that as far as childhoods go, mine wasn’t a good one. My foundation for what constitutes a healthy relationship was skewed.”

“You’re just seeing that *now*?” Billy blurted, seeming to choke on a stunned laugh, shaking his head and still looking at me like I was something new, and maybe something wonderful.

“No. I mean, I always knew.” I tutted, my cheeks heating with embarrassment, and I found myself laughing too since his laughter sounded like the friendly kind. “Shut up.” I rolled my eyes. “When it’s your own, it’s your normal. My childhood was *my* normal. And I was so grateful to Ben and his family for saving me from that, and they did. I have to give credit where credit is due. Sleeping inside, in a bed, without fear. Knowing every day that I’d have food, clean clothes, warmth, shelter. They did that, they saved me from my father. And Ben didn’t trick me into marrying him at fifteen.”

Billy’s brow furrowed, and he opened his mouth—probably to say something nasty about Ben—so I added, “HOWEVER! I shouldn’t have felt indebted to him so much that I felt like I had no choice but to marry him later on, or sleep with him when he wanted. And that *is* how I felt. I felt like I owed him, like his happiness mattered more than mine, like maybe I could love him like he wanted if only I tried hard enough and gave him more. I’d convinced myself I was broken and wrong, and if I could just love him, I’d be whole. It was stubborn and stupid of me, but I have to forgive myself for that. And I have to forgive myself for never loving him the way he wanted me to. So . . .” I straightened to my full height, looking everywhere but at Billy. “There you go.”

After a long moment, during which I sensed his eyes continue to examine me and I tried to own the words I’d just spoken rather than hide my face, he asked, “That’s what you were going to tell me last week? When I cut you off and told you to keep your distance?”

“Yes.” I deflated, sneaking a quick peek at him as my mouth curved in a partially sad, partially embarrassed smile. “But I get it. I do. We’ve been on this merry-go-round for a long time, you and I. And I understand your desire to step off. In fact, I encourage it. You should’ve moved on from my broken, pathetic ass a long, long time ago.” I chuckled.

He did not.

Again, another long moment passed, and with it the air of open conversation shifted, became something else. Something less simple. Something charged.

“Scarlet,” he said, my name more breath than voice. “What are you saying? You want me to move on?”

“I’m saying . . .” I crossed my arms, affixing my stare to the ground but determined to speak loud and clear. “I’m saying that I wanted to see if there

was a way we could—we could get to know each other again. After Christmas, and you were so lovely to me, and I was so pitiful, I just got so tired of hating myself. Feeling terrible about myself all the time. I'd become numb to it, it was—was a habit. So I sought professional advice.”

“Therapy.”

“Yes. Therapy. And my therapist is helping me see that there was nothing I could do about the fact that I didn't love Ben like *he* wanted. I was young, vulnerable—and I'm not excusing what you and I did, I'm not excusing it. Meeting in secret behind his back, I should never have done that. I was the one who was married, that was on me. But I had no road map and I was doing the best I could. And to beat myself up for the rest of my life about something I did, for decisions I made when I was running away from my abusive father, decisions made in fear, well, I'm not going to do that anymore.”

Like before, my words seemed to bounce off the walls and between us, but this time I felt my neck and cheeks flare red and hot. I'd revealed more than I'd intended, and now I didn't feel at all safe.

Needing to say something, since he was saying nothing, instinct and self-preservation had me backpedaling. “But, if you've moved on, then—goodness—keep on walking. You deserve so much happiness. You've always deserved so much better than me. I'm still trying to figure things out for myself, I'm still a mess, so it's probably best if we just stuck to your original plan of—of—”

He was moving. I looked up, tensing at his severe and determined stare. Not trusting myself to back away without taking a wrong step off the plank, I held still, waiting for him to come. My brain unable to detangle his intentions, his long fingers and coarse palms slid against my cheeks, his thumbs tilted my chin up, and his mouth lowered to just inches from mine.

His eyes held mine hostage. “I mean this with all my heart,” he said, the words gravelly and fierce.

And then he kissed me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

* BILLY *

"Now look, your grace," said Sancho, "what you see over there aren't giants, but windmills, and what seems to be arms are just their sails, that go around in the wind and turn the millstone."

"Obviously," replied Don Quijote, "you don't know much about adventures."

— MIGUEL DE CERVANTES, DON QUIXOTE

Her eyes closed and her body immediately relaxed, pressing forward, seeking mine, surrendering.

I remember this. Chasing windmills.

It was always this way with Scarlet, this easy. As though my touch erased the tension in her body and she couldn't hold on to both the fear and to me. The temptation had always been there, to kiss her, make her mindless, and then make her mine. But then after she wouldn't truly be mine, not in a real, lasting way.

Scarlet gripped my shirt at my sides and tugged, her lips parting, welcoming, inviting. I battled the desire to devour and demand, knowing she needed my gentleness, not my greed. Slow, deep kisses punctuated by her soft moans and hitching breaths.

Where she touched, I touched. That had been my promise so many years ago and I'd broken it only once. As much as my body screamed and begged to move faster, take more, slide my hands down her curves, untuck her clothes and touch her bare skin how I craved, I would not make that mistake again. Definitely not now.

She'd opened a window. Come hell or high water or famine or the end of days, I was climbing through that damn window. But I was moving slow. I wasn't giving her any reason to shut it, not ever again. I swore to God, I was going to be a fucking *saint*.

Which was why, after one more savoring slide of my tongue and sucking bite of her lip, I pressed my forehead to hers and tucked my chin to my chest, striving to cool my mind and the building urgency in my body. My palms hadn't moved from her face. I was touching her, she was touching me, she wanted me, I wanted her, and that was enough. *For now*.

We stood like that—close, our hands on each other—for a time. I got the sense she was afraid to move or speak, and I knew how she felt. But I wanted her to know this was real and, God willing, it was just the beginning.

Lifting my head, I pushed my fingers into her hair, encouraging her to give me her eyes. She did. Hazy and trusting, hopeful, they traveled over my features.

Inclined to let her look, I pressed her open palm against my heart and kept my voice low as I said, "Scarlet—"

Ding!

She tensed. A second later, the unmistakable sound of those elevator doors opening tore through this new beautiful reality we'd just created, and I muttered a curse.

But before I could separate us completely, she grabbed the front of my shirt and pulled me forward, stealing one more kiss just as my brother Duane said, "Oh, uh. Damn. We can leave."

Leaning away, her gorgeous gaze hooked into mine, a little giddy, a little desperate, and she smiled. "No. It's all right. We were just, um, just—"

"Y'all were kissing," Cletus announced, and I closed my eyes for a few seconds, wanting to strangle him. "That's what y'all were doing. We have eyeballs and brains and they both work just fine."

Scarlet rolled her lips between her teeth and covered her face with her hands. Unable to stay the instinct, I gathered her in my arms, wanting her to tuck her head under my chin and against my chest. A surging satisfaction rumbled through me as she accepted my embrace, a sense of searing rightness.

"Can you give us another minute?" I turned my head in profile.

“Actually, we can’t. They’ve opened the museum for normal tours.” Duane sounded truly remorseful. “And we got tickets for the Uffizi next. They’ll expire if we don’t get over there in time.”

I threaded my fingers through the fine silk of her copper hair. “Fine. Go on. We’ll come up right after, assuming the button works this time.”

“Roger that. Come on, Duane.” I heard the shuffle of footsteps, another *ding*, and I tightened my arms around her, placing a kiss on top of her head. Then Cletus added, “For the record, I take credit for this,” just before the doors slid shut.

Scarlet’s shoulders were shaking, she was laughing, and the sound eased a restive part of me, anxious for a sign of her happiness.

It took me a few seconds to realize I was laughing too.

“Now he’s never going to stop.” Her words were muffled.

“No. I reckon he won’t stop.” I couldn’t help but think, *good*. I didn’t always want or appreciate my brother’s brand of assistance, but in this case, *good*. Obviously, we’d needed all the help we could get. “But I’ll talk to him, see if I can get him to ease up a little.”

“So.” Her arms came around my chest and she bent her head back, gaze wide, still looking hopeful but with a heavy dash of uncertainty. “What happens now?”

“Now . . .” I took a moment to memorize her like this, just in case, and I had to forcibly stop myself from saying, *Now, irrevocable commitment. Assurances. Legal ones. Contracts. Marriage. Today. Right this minute.*

Reminding myself to be a saint—in patience and intentions—I swallowed the demands, instead saying, “Now we do things right.” And even though it required smothering every instinct and desire within me, I added, “We take things slow.”

* * *

“That’s stupid.”

With considerable reluctance, I tore my eyes from Scarlet’s back and glanced at Cletus. “Don’t push it.”

“Of course I’m going to push it.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, his frown severe. “Y’all’re moving at a snail’s pace.”

“At least we’re moving.”

He grunted. Then he grunted again. “If you look at today’s events, the only time you made any progress was when we stepped in and forced the issue. If we didn’t *push it*, then you’d still be attempting to merely coexist with the woman.”

“Coexisting is a good first step.” I faced forward again, my attention moving over her. Walking arm in arm with Shelly, her step light, Scarlet hadn’t stopped smiling all day.

She smiled as we walked to the Uffizi. She smiled as we meandered about the great museum, pointing things out she thought were wonderful, asking me what I thought. She smiled when—mindless for a moment and overcome by the brilliance of her spirit and smiling eyes—I reached for her hand and kissed the back of it. She also blushed.

Then she smiled all through lunch, helping Ashley and Drew with Bethany by entertaining the little miss while they ordered and used the bathroom. Now we were walking back to the train station and she was still smiling. To me, therein lied the real progress. A happy, carefree Scarlet was the ultimate goal, and I’d do whatever it took to keep her happy.

“I don’t want y’all to coexist. I want y’all to *co-ha-bi-tate*.” Cletus threaded his fingers together as though to illustrate his meaning, earning a quick glare from me. And then, as though his only goal in life was to make my blood boil, he made a circle with his thumb and index finger. I stopped his other index finger before he could complete the lewd hand gesture.

“Cletus. Stop.”

He dropped his hands. “If it were me, I’d try the caveman carry again. There’s a time for yielding and there’s a time for charging, and this is definitely the latter. You should see the way she looks at you, like you’re one of my sausages.”

“I appreciate your efforts, Cletus. But now you need to let us figure this out on our own.” Nothing was simple. Maybe we were inching toward each other, but there still existed an entire universe of reasons to proceed with caution, not the least of which was the FBI investigation waiting for me back in Tennessee.

I didn’t think they had enough to charge me. If I kept quiet, they had no case, his word against my silence. And yet, I hadn’t decided whether or not to be silent, even if it meant giving up the senate race and everything else. Part of me wanted to confess.

But if Scarlet were to give us another chance—no. I would not make my decision her responsibility.

Cletus gave a short huff. “No.”

“No?”

“No. Nein. Negatory. Nada. Niet. Nee. Voch.”

I grimaced, mostly because my hip hurt. I’d walked too far today.

“You can’t be objective about this, Billy. I’m telling you, toss that woman over your shoulder and lock yourselves in one of those giant suites upstairs, she’d be *thrilled*. Why do you think we put y’all on that level together? You don’t think I wanted one of those big, nice rooms for me and Jenn?”

“Why you think you have a say in this, I don’t understand.”

“Why you think you don’t need my help, I don’t understand. For example—” he tugged on the sleeve of my shirt, bringing me to a stop “—when are you telling her the truth?”

We’d already stopped, but his question felt like walking into a wall. Silently, we regarded each other, the rest of our family continuing down the block, and I worked to wipe all hint of dread from my features, burying it behind indifference.

His eyes searched mine. “I’m talking about you taking her punishment when she ran away at fourteen, and about what happened to Razor’s—”

“I know what you meant.” My pulse quickened.

If Scarlet found out, that window would slam shut and I’d be the one to close it. She thought Ben had saved her. For years, she’d built a shrine to him with bricks fashioned of gratitude and obligation and guilt. But now she’d finally knocked it down and was finding her own way. Good. *Great*.

I didn’t want any shrines. I just wanted her, guilt-free, wanting me.

“Well?” he pushed, his stare searching. “When?”

“It’s none of your concern.”

His eyes narrowed, his mouth a flat line. “You’re not going to tell her, are you? You’re never going to tell her.”

I turned from him, struggling to keep the limp from my gait. “She doesn’t need to know.”

“Billy. Lord knows I love you something fierce. But you’re as wise as you are stupid, and this is why you need our help.”

“I don’t want your help.”

“Well, too bad. She needs to know who her real savior was. It’s on like ___”

“Listen.” I stopped, placing my hand on his chest to stop him. “Just listen to me. The last thing I need or want is her feeling a sense of duty toward me. I was never her savior, and neither was Ben. I did what I did because I loved her. I *love* her. She doesn’t owe me a damn thing, but she’ll never see it that way, it’s not how she’s wired. Everything is in trade, everything is a debt to be paid. If she feels indebted, I can’t trust her to make clear-headed decisions based on what she actually wants. This truth will not set her free. Can you understand that?”

Cletus slid his jaw to one side, glaring at me. “All I heard was, *Blah blah blah I don’t trust her*. Did you say something else?”

“Fine,” I ground out. “Fine. You told Duane, Beau, and Ashley. I need to know, who else did you tell?”

Watching me with hawkish eyes, Cletus slid his hands into his pockets, saying nothing. *For once*.

“Cletus. Who did you tell?”

“Well, think of it this way, Billy. Your luggage should be much lighter now your burdens are spread among so many folks.”

Frustration beat like a drum between my ears and I stepped away from him. “If you or anyone else tells her, that’s not something I’ll be able to forgive.”

My brother grew very still. “Holding grudges, Billy? Because that’s worked so well for you.”

“As the reigning king of grudge holding in East Tennessee, I’d expect you to understand.”

“No, I don’t. And if anyone’s judgment can’t be trusted in this, it’s yours. You’re the most honorable, steadfast person I know. I admire you, I always have. We all do. You’re fearless, brave, selfless. You’re the best of us, *except . . .*” He paused, and it was one of those rare moments where his gaze was steady, open, and clear of all pretense. “Except when it comes to Scarlet. You forget yourself, you lose yourself.”

He didn’t understand what it was like. He couldn’t. He hadn’t been the one bandaging up her cuts after her father got to her. He hadn’t been the one listening to her sing. He hadn’t been the one lying in that hospital room. He hadn’t been the one forced to watch the woman he loved marry someone

else, someone who treated her like trash. And then, she'd *mourned* the bastard.

Still, even now, the thought was torture, seeing her in pain, her spirit crushed, hating herself when she was everything good and kind and deserving. I'd been helpless to do anything for so long; I wasn't gambling this chance now.

"I get it, I do, I get the desperation, the sense of powerlessness. What if she doesn't forgive you? You've just reconnected, you don't want to lose that. But, I'm telling you, she will. She'll forgive you."

"It's not about that." He wasn't listening. *He doesn't understand.*

"As a concession for your excellent progress today, I'll give you the gift of time. Kiss the hell outta her on the train in front of God and witnesses, and I'll give you a whole week. I promise. But you need to tell her the truth before she leaves for Nashville or for Rome."

"I mean it, Cletus. I am not fucking around." I spoke between gritted teeth. "I swear, you breathe a word and I will never forgive you."

Something flashed behind his gaze, something unpleasant, angry, and he lowered his voice. "You know who you sound like, Billy? You sound like Darrell."

The blow landed and my stomach sunk, a slow descent to my feet even as I lifted my chin, fighting to ignore his jab and issuing my final warning. "Don't."

Cletus examined me like he was picking through my brain. A hint of sympathy fractured the severity of his scowl and his voice turned beseeching, "Listen. I've been where you are. And I'm telling you, if you don't have trust, you have nothing." His gaze darted over my shoulder and then back to me. Stepping closer, he said quickly, "Trust her. And, in doing so, give her a chance to trust herself."

"Is everything all right?" Jenn's gentle voice cut in. "Billy, you hurting? Is it your hip? Do you need help?"

"I'm fine," I said.

"It's his hip. He needs help," Cletus said.

Cletus and I had spoken at the same time and my words earned me a flat smile from my brother. I turned, preparing to thank Jenn for her concern and assure her that I was perfectly fine when I caught sight of Scarlet hovering close by, a wrinkle of concern between her eyebrows.

The next thing I knew, she'd stepped around Jenn and walked to me, slid her arm around my back and guided my arm around her shoulders.

"Here, honey. Lean on me. We'll walk together."

Well.

My blood pumped thick through my veins at her unexpected touch, the heaviness in my chest dropping lower and becoming something else entirely.

"Okay," I agreed automatically. Ignoring my brother's wry smile, I focused instead on the implausible and heady sight of Scarlet with my arm around her shoulders. In public. In front of my family. On purpose. Like we belonged to each other.

"We'll go on and get your tickets. Take all the time you need." Jenn grinned at both of us, her hands clasped under her neck.

"Yeah, take all the time in the world." Cletus placed Jenn's fingers in the crook of his elbow. "And if y'all need a topic of discussion, I'll be happy to provide *several*." With one more meaningful look, he turned toward the station and they walked on ahead.

Not even Cletus's veiled threat could puncture my mood in this moment.

"Shall we?" Scarlet smiled up at me, lacing our fingers together at her shoulder.

I nodded, unwilling to speak. Now that she was at my side, I didn't want to say or do anything that might send her running. I wanted her to stay. So I said nothing at all.

* * *

I watched for morning like a kid watching for Christmas, if that kid had a grumpy disposition, hadn't been able to sleep for days, and knew their presents slumbered right down the hall wrapped in skimpy pink pajamas.

Issue was, even after tossing and turning all night every night for five nights in a row, I wasn't certain I deserved any presents this year. Cletus's words in Florence weighed on me. I couldn't decide if he was right or wrong. Furthermore, I couldn't decide if it mattered.

Dragging myself out of bed with the first sign of dawn, I checked the time in Tennessee, needing something to take my mind off of this limbo.

My youngest brother was staying with Daisy and Trevor Payton since he'd been discharged from the hospital; I wondered if he might still be up. We'd been touching base every other day or so since I'd arrived in Italy, usually just a quick exchange of texts.

I missed him. I was used to seeing him every weekend, having him around. He was my buddy and I worried over him, especially now.

Unlocking my screen, I sent him a quick text asking if he was awake, and then I used the bathroom. Catching my reflection on the way out, I reminded myself to do something about my neglected beard.

My phone buzzed as I picked through my suitcase looking for some clean clothes, sorting a pile to the side that needed washing. Crossing to where I'd left my phone charging on the dresser, I scanned the new message.

Roscoe: *I'm up. And before you say anything about me being up so late, I've been sleeping all day.*

My lips curved at that. I could almost hear the words coming from his mouth, see him rolling his eyes at what he perceived as me hovering from Europe.

Billy: *I wasn't going to say anything about you being up. Wanted to see if you had time/energy to talk.*

I hit send and brought the phone with me, walking back to my suitcase. I'd just picked up a clean pair of shorts when my cell buzzed again. Glancing at the screen, I saw Roscoe was calling.

"Billy. Hey."

"Roscoe." The knot in my stomach eased and I exhaled a fair measure of the worry I carried between our calls. He sounded better. Stronger.

"How's Italy?"

I debated how to answer. Five days ago, after the train ride home from Florence and a quick dinner, I'd excused myself, planning to use the time to catch up on emails. Instead, I accomplished next to nothing, staring unseeingly at all the unread email in my inbox and debating whether—or when—to tell Scarlet the truth.

The days since had been more of the same. Every hour spent in her company had been both divine and frustrating. She talked and I said very little, keeping my hands to myself. Rather than ruin our truce by inadvertently saying something stupid or throwing her over my shoulder

like Cletus suggested, I was content to listen to her melodic chatter and just be near her.

Because, if I touched her, I was pretty sure she'd end up over my shoulder.

"Billy? You still there?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm here." I tossed the shorts back into the suitcase.

"How's Italy?" he asked again.

"Nothing to complain about."

"Drinking my share of wine, I hope."

I glanced behind me, searching for a place to sit. "Uh, no. How are things there? Did you have your latest checkup?"

"I did, yesterday. Everything is healing fine and the doctors say I can start exercising again next month."

"Don't overdo it."

"Don't worry, Dad. I won't." He chuckled as he said this, his voice full of affection so I let his *dad* comment slide.

"And how is Simone?" I asked, pushing fingers through my hair. "How's her recovery?"

"She's so great. She's already cleared for moderate exercise and will be going back to work soon." Roscoe heaved a sigh. If I had to name it, I would've called it wistful. "I wish she didn't have to leave. I'm feeling a little spoiled right now, seeing her every day, having her right down the hall."

I smirked at that. "Spoiled?"

"Okay. Spoiled and tormented. Is that better?" He laughed and so did I.

Deciding not to sit, I walked over to the sliding glass door. "Yeah, that sounds more accurate. I'm glad you're with the Paytons. They'll keep you from overexerting yourself."

"In more ways than one," he grumbled, and that also made me smile. He sounded so much better than last week, more like himself. "How about you?" Roscoe asked, and I heard a door close on his side of the call.

"Like I said, nothing to complain about. When are you going to—"

"Nuh-uh, Billy. How are you? I want to know. What've you been doing? What's on your mind?"

I leaned a hand against the doorframe and peered out over the Tuscan landscape. "Well, let's see. I've been dealing with this irritating campaign development person who keeps harping on me about my image."

“Your image? What’s wrong with your image? We look exactly the same, except you have those gray hairs.”

“No, Roscoe.” He never missed a chance to point out my gray hairs. I reckoned he was so proud of them because he was 50 percent of the reason they existed. “Not how I look. The man is near a fit since I called off the engagement with Daniella, keeps reminding me candidates without spouses don’t get elected.”

“Well, I’m glad you and Dani called it off. And for the record, so are the Paytons. In fact, I think they were relieved when she told them.”

That gave me pause. “Is that so?”

“Oh no, not like that,” he was quick to add. “They adore you, but y’all clearly weren’t suited for matrimony. They didn’t want either of you to settle for convenience. Anyway, how’s your hip?”

“Doing better.”

“It was bothering you last week? After you went to Florence?”

“Yeah. I’ve been resting it again, but I need to get out and do something. I’m not used to staying still for so long.”

“I hear you there. Have you been able to do any more sightseeing? Are you going to Rome? I know you’ve always wanted to go.”

“Is that why you made me go on this trip? So I could see Rome?”

He made a scoffing sound. “Nobody makes you do anything. I didn’t *make* you go, I merely insisted you leave me in peace and stop making me crazy, wanting to kill you with all your hovering. I’m not eight anymore.”

I chewed the inside of my lip, combatting an odd sense of grief. He was right. He wasn’t a kid. But I’d watched him grow. I took him to his first day of kindergarten, made all his lunches until fifth grade. I helped him with his school projects and taught him how to drive. I was his Boy Scout leader and soccer coach. It was difficult to stop searching for glimpses of the kid who needed me in the self-sufficient adult he’d become.

“I’m glad you’re there, Billy,” he said, his voice telling me he was sincere. “You needed to go. Like I’ve been saying for a while now, we’re all just fine. It’s time to take care of yourself, see to your own wishes. Enjoy yourself.”

“I didn’t have much choice about leaving, seeing as how you went to Dolly Payton and asked her to give me a leave of absence from the mill.”

“You still sore about that?” He sounded like he was grinning. “If it upsets you so much, maybe go drown your frustrations in some Italian wine

and that gorgeous redhead down the hall.”

My spine stiffened, my mouth falling open as comprehension hit me like a two-by-four to the temple. “You—”

“I hear y’all got a pool there. You want to stretch that hip of yours? There’s some two-person exercises that are well suited to a reduced gravity environment.”

“You little shit. You’re in on this too?”

Roscoe laughed. He laughed and laughed.

“I cannot believe Cletus.” I pushed away from the window, restless, angry, and yet reluctantly amused.

“Don’t blame Cletus. He may’ve assembled the TNT, but the rest of us are more than happy to take turns lighting the match.”

“What did you do? Have a family meeting without me? Do y’all have a Google Drive and a Hangouts group chat where you discuss plans and progress?”

“Maybe we do, maybe we don’t.” Oh man. Roscoe sounded *delighted*. That couldn’t be good.

“Unbelievable.” And so incredibly frustrating.

“Let me ask you this: would you be there at all if I hadn’t insisted you go?” When I said nothing, he continued, “And if they hadn’t arranged for y’all to get stuck in that basement room in Florence, would you be on speaking terms now?”

Glaring at the objects in my room, even though I knew he was right, I shook my head. “You can’t force two people to kiss and make up, not when there’s years of history and hurt between them. Nothing between Scar—between Claire and me is simple.”

He huffed. “Do you love her?”

Closing my eyes, I rubbed my forehead. I had a headache.

“Billy. Do you love her?”

“Yes.”

“Does she love you?”

A balloon fashioned from uncertainty and frustration inflated in my lungs, pressing outward until my rib cage felt too tight, my airflow obstructed. I paced away from the window. I paced back.

What had she said last week when we were trapped? *I’m still trying to figure things out for myself.*

It had taken Scarlet years to get to this point, and I'd spent every single one of those years learning how to be content with less and less: a glance, a word, sharing the same city, and eventually sharing the same state. I didn't want to push her, scare her off. I didn't want to give her a reason to leave and not speak to me. Nor did I want my family's well-intentioned meddling scaring her off either.

"Billy. Does she—"

"I don't know," I admitted, suddenly feeling like I could sleep a hundred years. "I don't know if she loves me, Roscoe." And that was the truth.

CHAPTER TWELVE

* BILLY *

“I may have lost my heart, but not my self-control.”

— JANE AUSTEN, EMMA

Surprisingly, I did sleep. After hanging up with my little brother, I passed out and slept clear through 'til after noon. I awoke to one hell of a caffeine headache, but overall, I felt better. Quickly changing and brushing my teeth again, I made my way downstairs, looking forward to and dreading the sight of Scarlet in equal measure.

It wasn't just indecision keeping me up at night.

Though I hadn't touched her all week, she'd touched me plenty: brushing against me as she skootched past in a tight space; laying her hand on my shoulder as she stood behind my chair and bent to my ear to ask a question; feeding me whatever she was cooking, whether it be cookies or soup or bread with melted butter. The worst/best was when she'd stepped forward to thread her fingers through my beard and tease me about how unkempt it was.

She'd even offered to trim it for me. *Not a good idea.*

Wrestling with the beast called anticipation, I searched the shared living spaces on the main floor for her. Coming up empty, I took the stairs to the basement and headed straight for the kitchen, her favorite place to be.

She wasn't there either, but Jethro was. Standing at the big table, he appeared to be sorting laundry, and he looked up as I entered the room.

“Hey,” he said, distracted. “Claire checked on you earlier, said you were asleep. Are you feeling okay?”

I nodded, peering down hallways and into the dining room. “Where is everyone?”

“Out.”

“Out.”

“That’s right.” Jethro picked up a tiny T-shirt with a dinosaur on it and folded it into a tiny square. “Swimming, picnicking, and the like.”

“Where are they swimming?”

“Here.”

“Here?” I set my hand on my hips. “This place has a pool?” I thought Roscoe was joking.

“It sure does. That’s where most everybody is now. Why do you think it’s been so quiet in the house during the day? The boys have been in the pool with Maya from dawn ’til dusk, passing out like drunk sailors every night.”

Convinced Scarlet wasn’t in the house, I searched the counter for the coffee machine. “Where’s the pool?”

“Up on top of the hill,” he said conversationally, picking up another miniature-sized piece of clothing. “And beyond that is a stretch of land we’ve been using to play soccer, and a playground for the kids. This place is great.”

“Yeah. It is. Any coffee left?”

Jethro gestured to an alcove behind me. “It’s just there, behind the little wooden door. And don’t worry. It hasn’t been Cletus-fied. We dumped that pot out after he left the room and we hide the good stuff back there.”

Sharing a commiserating glance with my brother, I opened the cabinet where I was pretty sure the mugs were kept and crossed to the alcove. Sure enough, behind a little wooden door sat a counter, and on the counter sat a drip coffee maker with half a pot of hot coffee.

“Hey, so, by the way . . .” Jethro began.

I poured myself a cup and glanced at him. “What?”

“I’ve been meaning to ask. How are things going with Dani?” Jethro had that same pointed look in his eyes from over a week ago when he’d told me Scarlet had been the one cooking all my food. “We saw her a couple weeks ago; she’s looking good.”

Shutting the alcove door, I said, “We broke up.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” I peered at my brother over the rim of my coffee cup, taking my first sip. Given the fact that Roscoe—who’d been recovering from a

near fatal stab wound—had been roped into Cletus’s scheming, I had to suspect Jethro was playing a part as well.

“All right, I gotta confess something.” He grinned, setting down the pair of little boy socks he’d just fitted together. “I already knew y’all broke up, Cletus told us. But you don’t seem cut up about it.”

“I had some other things going on, Jet,” I said coolly, my irritation with Cletus spiking anew. It was one thing to tell Duane, Beau, Ash, and Roscoe about my past with Scarlet. It was quite another to tell Jethro.

“Yes, I know, William.” Jethro mimicked my tone, crossing his arms. “Your social calendar has been quite busy, all that donating of bone marrow and whatnot.”

I glared at him while he stared at me, and, after about ten seconds, he blurted, “I’m sorry.”

I blinked, frowning, suspicion edging out surprise. “What for?”

“The usual. I haven’t apologized to you in a while, so I suspect it’s due.” My brother shrugged and smiled, like the futility of his constant apologizing had become an inside joke between us.

I studied him, taking a good, hard look. Perhaps I’d finally gotten a solid block of sleep because this time his painted-on smile did nothing to disguise the sadness lurking behind the surface. I bit the inside of my lip, battling with myself.

Habit and history told me 50 percent of what Jethro said was bullshit. And yet . . . *Is it even history at this point? Or ancient history?*

“You’re forgiven, Jethro,” I said and decided at the same time.

His eyes widened and he stood straighter. “What? Just like that?”

“You’ve been saying sorry for going on ten years now. Even if you don’t mean it, your persistence alone deserves to be rewarded.”

His smile flattened and his gaze narrowed on me. “Well, I think I’ll keep apologizing, just in case you change your mind.”

“Don’t. Don’t do that.” I waved away his words. “I mean it. And, I’m sorry if I ever made you feel like . . .”

“Like what? Like I wasn’t welcomed?”

“Yeah.” I nodded, a spear of regret lancing me, making it so I had to clear my throat. “I’m sorry. That was wrong of me and I hope you can forgive me.”

Lifting his chin, as though he was considering me and my request, he said suddenly, “You’re forgiven.”

I huffed a disbelieving laugh. “What? Just like that?”

“Are you kidding?” Uncrossing his arms, Jethro picked up another piece of laundry, grinning for real this time. “I’ve been waiting my whole life to forgive you for something, just lying in wait for you to do something wrong. This might be the only time I get a chance.”

I knew he was joking, trying to lighten the somber mood, but all I felt was a sense of despairing frustration at his words. “This is your problem, Jet. You’re too much like our momma, you forgive folks too easy. You think the best of people, even when they don’t deserve it. I just spent ten years rejecting every single one of your attempts to make things right. I say sorry once—just once—and I’m forgiven?” I did my best to keep my volume under control, but with every word I spoke I felt myself losing the battle.

But it pissed me off. Time and time again, our mother forgave our father. And time and time again, so had Jethro.

“What do you want me to do, Billy?” Jethro threw down the laundry he’d been folding, crossing the length of the kitchen to stand in front of me. “Make you walk through hot coals? Make you suffer? Why would I do that?”

“You don’t have to make everything so easy for everybody all the time!”

“And you don’t have to make everything so hard!”

My mouth snapped shut at that and I took a step back, glaring at him, working to shackle this directionless fury. I didn’t know why I was so angry, but I wasn’t mad at Jethro, not anymore.

I loved him. I loved his two boys and his charming, gregarious wife, and her family. I wanted us to be close, I’d never stopped wanting that. And I was tired of this chasm between us, one that I’d helped create with every biting word and cold shoulder.

Meanwhile, my brother sighed, looking older than me—for once—as he rubbed his face. “If I’m so much like our mother, then let me tell you what I think she’d say right now.”

Opening his eyes, he gave them to me and I had to swallow around a stone of grief. Jethro and our mother had the same eyes. The same shade. The same shape. The same guileless gleam of unconditional and loving patience.

“She’d tell you, ‘People only hold grudges when they can’t forgive themselves.’”

I blinked against the sting behind my eyes and nose, glancing away and shaking my head. How many times had my mother said this to me and my siblings when we would fight? I'd lost count.

"Billy. You're my brother."

I exhaled another laugh. "Am I?"

"You've always been my brother," he continued patiently, undeterred. "Now, sometimes I've been a shitty brother. And sometimes, yeah, you haven't made it easy for me to make amends. But I honestly wouldn't've had it any other way."

My jaw working, I glanced at him. "Why?"

"Because I knew the day I had your respect again, well, I would've earned it. I'd deserve it."

A rising wave of sadness and regret finally snuffed out the last of the anger. "I shouldn't have withheld it in the first place, Jet."

"No. No, you definitely should have," he said quietly, his gaze sober. "Your intolerance for my bullshit was a great motivator."

I kept shaking my head. "I was too harsh."

"Maybe, sometimes." He shrugged. "But your unwillingness to compromise your principles, your expectations for all of us, and your example—to reach our potential, to be better, to be *good*—gave us all something to strive for, to live up to. Especially me."

* * *

Jethro made me sit at the kitchen table and eat something. And then, both of us carrying a load of towels, we'd walked up the hill toward the sound of kids and adults splashing in water, soaking up the summer sun.

As we walked through the gate surrounding the pool, I scanned the crowd searching for Scarlet and halting abruptly when I found her. Sitting at the edge of the pool, dressed in a long sleeve swim shirt, bikini bottoms, and nothing else, I was both rewarded and punished for waiting so long to seek her out.

"Okay, everyone out of the pool. Time to clean up for supper. That means you, Ben! Put down that pool noodle and stop splashing your brother." Jethro grabbed my load of towels and walked on ahead, distributing towels to Ash, Drew, and Bethany, Beau and Shelly, Duane and

Jess—though Jess didn't need one, she was in the shade with Liam—and Sienna, Maya, Ben and Andy. According to Jethro, Cletus and Jenn as well as the Sheriff and Janet were off premises, sightseeing.

When my brother got to Scarlet, he shrugged. "Sorry, Red. I ran out of towels. But, hey, do you mind helping Billy get all these pool toys and such stacked up? We're not supposed to leave them in the water."

"Not a problem," she said, sounding out of breath as her gaze searched for and then found mine.

She smiled from her side of the pool, giving me a little wave.

I waved from my side of the pool, giving her a little smile.

My family cleared out slowly while Scarlet and I—given our marching orders—picked up the patio area. At one point, she jumped into the pool to grab a few diving sticks at the bottom and I physically could not tear my eyes from the sight of her gliding through the water, her red hair flowing behind her like a mermaid.

I swallowed my lust as she resurfaced, wading through the shallow end until she made it to the corner with the steps. As she climbed them, I stared at the droplets of water rolling down the bare skin of her back and legs until she twisted at the waist, and I had the presence of mind to tear my eyes away.

God. Damn.

"It's hot," she said.

I nodded, needing a cold shower. Searching frantically for something I could pick up and organize, I tugged my fingers through my hair.

"You should come swimming next time," her voice continued. "It feels good."

Keeping my brain focused on the task at hand was a struggle, therefore speech wasn't presently an option. So, again, I nodded.

"Did you have a good nap? When did you wake up?" Her voice was closer.

I shrugged, bending to retrieve the pool noodle Ben had been whacking his little brother with and added it to the pile, standing and turning, and coming face-to-face with Scarlet.

Stiffening, I took a step back. I had not expected her to be so close.

"Watch out," she said, her hands balled into fists and set on the dip of her waist. "If you take another step back, you'll fall in the pool."

I glanced behind me, seeing she was right, and turned back with the intention of extending my gratitude.

But before I could say thanks, she demanded, “Why are you being so quiet all the time?”

Startled, I stared at her and her flashing eyes. “I, uh—”

“You’ve barely spoken to me since last Wednesday.”

Sputtering and fighting a flare of panic, I asked a stupid question, “What do you want me to say?” and then I fought a cringe.

“I don’t know.” She threw her hands up, sending drops of water through the air like a fairy with pixie dust. “You might start by explaining yourself.”

“Explaining myself?”

“Yes. You may not like it, but we’re not going to have a future if we don’t talk about the past.”

I searched my monumentally confused brain. What else was there to discuss in our past? Ben was a selfish ass, the end. Hadn’t we worked through everything already?

So I asked, “Explain myself about what?”

“How about why you kept the fact that Duane and Beau are my half-brothers a secret.” Scarlet’s chin jutted out. “Why’d you do that? Don’t you think I had a right to know?”

Ah. My smile was apologetic. “I do think you had a right to know, but I swore I’d never tell anyone. My mother was worried what your—” I lifted my attention to the horizon, stopping myself from calling that monster her father. I didn’t want to link her identity to his, she deserved so much better. Rearranging my thoughts and picking my words more carefully, I tried again, “My mother was afraid what Razor would do, if he found out Beau and Duane were Christine’s. She was worried—she was terrified—he’d make them disappear. I never told you out of respect to her, and for their continued safety.”

Scarlet’s mouth curved in a rueful line. As she processed my words, some of her irritation appeared to diminish, but it seemed to be replaced with a hint of melancholy.

“I understand keeping a secret out of respect for Bethany. I’m sure you’re aware, but not many people know the truth even now. Duane, Beau, and I haven’t made our relationship widely known. None of us want to embarrass your momma or disrespect her memory.”

“Yes. I’m aware y’all decided to keep it private.”

“And protecting them from Razor also makes sense. I had similar worries. So, I guess I understand why you didn’t tell me.” Even though she’d conceded my point, she still didn’t look too happy about it. “But that still doesn’t explain why you’re being so quiet all the time.”

“Maybe I just miss listening to you talk.”

I realized immediately this statement was the wrong thing to say because Scarlet’s irritation flared anew. “Now that’s terrible reasoning. You think I want to carry every conversation? You think I don’t want to know about you? What’s going on inside that abnormally gorgeous head of yours? Say something. Anything. Talk about the weather.”

My lips tugged to the side. “The weather.”

“Honestly, Billy, I just want you to talk. Did I do something wrong? Are you mad at me?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Then—” Making wild hand gestures, she huffed, then yelled, “*Participate!*”

I glanced over her head at the horizon again, hoping to find some answers there, endeavoring to discover a path forward. She was right. I wasn’t talking. I didn’t want to ruin a single moment with her, send her running and lose her again. So I’d been silent.

“Okay, fine.” Her words clipped, as though she’d just decided something. I sensed her advance on me, lift her hands just before they made contact with my chest. “Then, how about this—”

One second I was standing at the edge of the pool, and in the next I’d been shoved backward, free falling. The last thing I saw before being submerged was her determined yet satisfied smirk.

It wasn’t cold, but it was a surprise. Nevertheless, I quickly found my bearings and shot upward. Breaking the surface, I wiped my eyes in time to catch hers move over my soaking torso with a fair amount of appreciation.

“You feel better now?” I asked, looking my fill as well. Toned legs in bikini bottoms, the flare of her hips, the indent of her waist, the luscious curves of her breasts in that thin swim shirt. I could’ve looked all day except now my sense of justice demanded she end up in the pool with me.

“A little.” She crossed her arms, making no effort to disguise her admiration for my body. “You should take off your shirt. It’s wet.”

My jaw working, I ignored her last comment as I made for the stairs, climbed them, and wrung out my T-shirt at my stomach. Her eyes dropped

to the exposed skin.

“You want to push me in the pool again? Would that help?” I toed off my shoes. I couldn’t chase her in wet shoes.

“It might.” She shrugged, her eyes sparkling like sapphires. “You offering?”

I made a beeline for her.

She must’ve read my intentions because her grin faltered. “Wait a minute.” She lifted her hand, like that would stop me. “Wait, what are you doing?”

“Come here.”

“Why?” She backed up.

“You push me in, I push you in. That’s how things work with us, right?”

“Oh, no. No, I’m good.” She turned and power-walked away, glancing over her shoulder as I advanced. “You can—uh—just give me that one for free.”

I jogged after her, making no attempt to look anywhere but at her backside. “There you go, changing the rules in the middle of the game.” I wanted to squeeze it, *bite it*.

“Is this a game?” She was full-on running now, like a damn gazelle.

“It is now.”

“Really?” she asked, then squealed, dodging me and turning just as I grabbed for her. “Well, if it’s a game,” she hollered as she ran, “then we should even the odds a little. It’s not fair. The odds favor you.”

“They favor me?” My hip didn’t like the sprinting, so I slowed to a jog again. Man, I’d forgotten how fast she was. “How do they favor me?”

“Well, for starters—”

“Hey, you two! No running around the pool!” Sienna yelled from somewhere, stopping us both in our tracks.

We looked around, searching for her, but found no one. Glancing back to Scarlet, I realized she was still distracted, looking for Jethro’s wife. No time like the present to take advantage. I stalked closer. By the time Scarlet took notice, it was too late. I had her cornered.

Startled, she glanced to her left and then to her right, looking for an escape. Unless she planned to climb up the rock surface at her back, the only way to freedom was through me, and I couldn’t help my wicked grin as her eyes widened with the realization.

Then, they narrowed. “See? Not fair.”

I felt my smile widen, my earlier fears forgotten for the moment. “Just because I’m winning doesn’t mean it’s not fair.”

She crossed her arms. “But you were going to win no matter what. You’re bigger and stronger. You can easily pick me up, carry me to the pool, and toss me in.”

“And you’re smaller and faster,” I said reasonably, inching closer, my arms spread to catch her just in case she decided to make a run for it. “If you’d wanted to get away, you could’ve already.”

She gave me a quelling look, lifting her chin. “Are you implying that I wish to be thrown in the pool?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not.” I shrugged, liking this expression on her face a little too much, like I was naughty and she thoroughly disapproved of me. I wondered if this had been what she was like with her misbehaving students when she’d taught high school drama. Good Lord, I suddenly felt sorry for all the hormonal teenagers in her class.

“You could always . . .” I began, close enough now to let my eyes wander, lower to her neck, the zipper at the front of her swim shirt. “Offer something else,” I finished, telling myself I was joking.

It was just a joke.

However, and maybe it was ungentlemanly of me to notice, her nipples puckered suddenly, pushing against the thin fabric of her swim shirt. My gaze lifted to her face and I found none of her earlier disapproval. It had been replaced with a hazy, hot expression.

And *that* definitely got a reaction out of me.

Scarlet’s lips parted, her eyes moving between mine, searching, her breaths growing shallower the closer I came, and any illusions I’d had about my statement being just a joke dwindled to nothing.

“Scarlet,” I said for no reason other than I wanted to say her name, her real name. I wanted to hear it while she looked at me this way, remind myself that she still existed, even if at some point in the future she existed somewhere beyond my reach.

She swayed forward as her lashes flickered, her hands rising to grab fistfuls of my wet shirt, her attention focused on my mouth. “What—” she said roughly, swallowed, licked her lips. “What did you have in mind?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered, stepping completely into her space and against her. God, I was so hard, and I didn’t care if she felt me. No, that’s

not true. I wanted her to feel it. In my sudden madness, I wanted her to know.

She shivered, her breath hitching even as she pressed her body more fully against mine, like she'd been waiting for me to move. Like this—not escape, but this—was what she'd wanted all along. Lifting to her tiptoes, her body slid upward, just two wet layers of clothes separating our skin.

I groaned.

What am I doing? Slow down.

My hands found her waist as hers lifted to my shoulders.

You need to take it slow. Step back.

“Billy,” she whispered, but it sounded more like a moan.

“I—I should change,” I said inanely, talking mostly to myself. “I’m all wet.”

“Then we’re even,” she said, placing a soft kiss on my neck, her hand capturing mine and bringing it first to her breast and then lower to her stomach.

Realizing her ultimate destination for my fingers, I imagined what would happen next. Squeezing my eyes shut, I stiffened my arm. She didn’t know, she couldn’t know, how very fierce and wild my want for her was. And as much as I desperately wanted to touch her body, make her moan and plead, I wasn’t going to do that against the rocks next to the pool.

Or on the grass.

Or in the pool.

Not for our first time.

She deserved rose petals and champagne, candles and music, silk sheets and seduction, romance and passion. Not *just* passion.

Resolved, I found the necessary thread of self-control at the last minute and I removed her hand from my wrist, stepping away. And then I took another two steps back, just to be safe.

“Scarlet—”

“What?” she snapped, heaving a watery sounding sigh that had my eyes flying open. Glaring at me, her cheeks red, her arms crossed, her shoulders lifted helplessly. “What, Billy? What? What can I do?”

“It’s not you.”

“I know.” Her voice broke. She cleared her throat and firmed her chin before continuing. “It’s you. And your lack of interest in touching me.”

“No.” Now I stepped forward, but she lifted her hands, turning her face to one side and walking around me.

“Forget it. Okay? You need time. Fine.” I heard her snuffle as she walked quickly away, breaking into a jog as she reached the gate. “I took time, now you need time. I took *years* to think things over, you had a week. It’s fine. Take your time.”

Ugh. Watching her leave felt like thousands of thumbtacks being pressed into my chest. But my sluggish, lust-soaked brain couldn’t figure out what to say, how to explain before she disappeared.

I’d worked so hard to say nothing, I’d ended up giving her nothing instead.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

* BILLY *

“I think of you only twice a day - when I am alone and when I am with someone else.”

— AMIT KALANTRI, I LOVE YOU TOO

First thing in the morning, after another sleepless night, I changed into workout clothes and headed downstairs. A few days ago, Duane had mentioned in passing that the property had a small gym and weight room down the gravel driveway and on the far side of the roundabout parking area. No time like the present to exhaust myself. Then maybe, after a shower, I’d find Scarlet and—

And . . .

Well, I’d do something.

After what happened at the pool yesterday, she’d been polite for the rest of the day. Not cold. Not warm. Just polite. Turns out the only thing worse than her constant little touches was when she withheld them.

I didn’t blame her. It was clear she was frustrated, and not just because of what she called my lack of interest in touching her. She wanted me to talk to her. I needed to talk to her. I would. *Today, I will find her and I will talk to her.*

That much decided, I further determined I’d focus on chest and arms in the weight room. Look at me, deciding things. *Finally.*

To my surprise, Jethro and Beau were already up and working out. This simplified matters considerably. We took turns spotting each other, and by

the time we were finished, the sun was much higher in a partly cloudy sky, fully committed to day.

“You want to go swimming?” Beau wiped his forehead with a towel. “Sure is hot today. You need to borrow some swim shorts, Billy?” Beau stepped off the long driveway, clearly planning to cut across the olive orchard instead of taking the longer, gravel path to the main house. “I have an extra pair.”

“Maybe later.”

“Hey.” Jet hit my shoulder lightly with the back of his hand. “If this orchard is too much like forest for you, you should stay close. Otherwise you may get lost.”

Beau chuckled.

“Shut it,” I grumbled, not precisely smiling. My family, especially Jethro, never let me live down the fact that I always got lost in the woods.

“Hey, who’s that?” Beau pointed at a barley field beyond the orchard and—after stopping, squinting, and straining my ears—I realized Scarlet was at least one of the people. The other three looked to be Jess, Shelly, and Ashley.

“We should go over and say hi,” Jethro suggested cheerfully.

My oldest brother, eyes on me, was *precisely* smiling, like he knew a secret about me. My frown was immediate. *Here we go.*

“Hey ladies!” Beau shouted, already walking toward them. “Y’all want to go—Wait, is that *food*?”

With a parting twinkle in his eyes, Jethro followed Beau, leaving me to bring up the rear with my suspicions. Soon, we were upon the gathering, which was obviously a morning picnic. Bethany came into view, picking red poppies among the green barley and handing them to her mother.

It was a sweet picture and I would’ve taken one, except Scarlet’s gaze locked with mine as soon as we cleared the trees, and I couldn’t seem to do much more than look at her and stand upright. She wore that pink summer dress, the one with strings at the shoulders holding it up. Her hair was in a loose braid and her lips were red as strawberries, probably because she had strawberries on her plate.

What I wanted to do was throw her over my shoulder, take her back to the house, spend the morning, afternoon, night, next morning, afternoon, and night exploring every inch of her magnificent body and learning all the ways she liked to be touched. But if I did, she’d spill the strawberries.

“Well, hello. Where y’all coming from?” Ashley leaned back, peering up at us.

“There’s a gym with a weight room down the drive,” Beau answered distractedly, circling the blanket to kneel next to Shelly. “What do you have there? Are those scones? Can I have some?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, giving him a small smile and breaking her scone in half. I noticed she offered him the bigger piece. “Here.”

He grinned at her, but then he leaned forward and kissed her full on the mouth, giving the corner of her lips a lick. “You had something, just there. Don’t worry, I got it for you,” he said, lying.

“Are you hungry?” Scarlet asked softly, her question for me, lifting up her plate of strawberries.

I swallowed thickly as I contemplated the offering. But then, glancing around at my family, everyone but Shelly and Beau were watching us.

I shook my head. “No. Thank you.”

Ashley heaved an exaggerated sigh. The look in her eyes seemed to communicate frustration, but her tone was light as she said, “We were just talking about the plans for the Venice trip coming up. Are you coming, Billy?”

Shoving my hands in my shorts pockets, I shrugged. “I believe I am. Duane cleared my calendar with Becca.” *And I doubt I’ll have a choice.*

“Well, Claire says she’s thinking about staying here,” Jessica said, and I shifted my eyes to Duane’s wife. Her pretty brown gaze was narrowed, one might even call it pointed. I did my best to read the womanly instruction there, but clearly I was missing something because—after a time—she also sighed. “Do you think Claire should come?”

“You should ask Claire,” I said, the answer obvious. “If she wants to go, then she should. If she doesn’t, it’s up to her.”

“But you’re going?” This question came from Jethro, and I looked to him. I got the sense he was trying to help. With what, I had no idea.

“Yes . . . ?” I said slowly, glancing between him and Ashley, searching for some sign as to what they wanted me to do. Both were looking at me intently, like they were waiting for me to finish a critical thought. At a loss and forced to guess, I addressed Scarlet. “And you should go. There’s no reason you shouldn’t go. Duane and Beau are your brothers. This is your family too.”

She nodded, a polite smile on her face, and her eyes dropped to her plate. “Yes. Absolutely. I’ve always wanted to see Venice.”

I nodded too, looking to Ashley for confirmation I’d done what she wanted. Instead, her lips were pressed in a flat line and her head was moving back and forth in the barest of headshakes. It was the expression she used to give the twins after they did something monumentally idiotic.

“Uh, Billy.” Beau stood, his tone easy but his gaze preoccupied. “Come with me for a sec, I wanted to show you this one thing over here. Jet, you too.”

Giving the ladies a tight smile—even though Jess, Ashley, and Shelly were looking at me like I was an extreme disappointment, even little Bethany was scowling in my direction—I turned and followed Beau, walking back into the orchard and almost to the place where we’d spotted the picnic originally.

As soon as I reached my brothers, Jethro looked me over, visibly dismayed. “That’s the best you could do? Reminding her that she’s related to Duane and Beau?”

Beau made a face of dismay. “Cletus was right. You do need our help.”

I reared back, splitting my attention between them. “Pardon me?”

“You gotta let us help.” Jethro lowered his voice to a whisper.

“Help? Help with what?”

“You’re out of practice, Billy. When’s the last time you went on a date? When’s the last time you flirted with a woman? You’re too gruff. Not every conversation is a senate hearing. Claire has a soft heart, she needs tenderness.” Beau gave me a sympathetic smile.

A disbelieving sound escaped me. “Are you serious? You want to give me advice about Claire?”

“No. We want to give you advice about women,” Beau said, sharing a glance with Jethro.

“I’m great with women.” I was. I was *fantastic* with women.

Beau set his hands on his hips. “Then why do you keep crashing and burning with Claire?”

“Here’s the plan,” Jethro cut in before I could object again. “We’ll take everyone back up to the house, make up some reason. They know what’s up, so they’ll come along.”

“They know what’s up?” I nearly choked.

“Right.” Beau ignored my question. “Now, you stay with Claire, offer to help her carry the stuff back up when she’s ready, but sit down so it’s clear you’d like to stay. You’ll have complete privacy, we’ll keep everyone at the house. Compliment what she’s wearing, or tell her you like it. Say something like, ‘I like this dress on you.’ Just that simple.”

Jethro glanced over my shoulder to the women in the distance and then stepped closer. “Then ask what she’s up to today, what she’s doing tomorrow, what her plans are this week, what she thought of the museums in Florence. Get her talking. And if you see an opportunity for a double entendre? Take it.”

“Exactly,” Beau whispered. “The point is to make her laugh, so you should be joking when you say it. The cheesier, the better. She’ll pick up on the intention and she’ll laugh. Got it?”

Despite myself, I listened, absorbing my brothers’ advice. I mean, they were definitely the experts. As insane as it was, at some point over the last two minutes and without expressly realizing I’d done so, I’d gone from incredulous to irritated to interested.

Not waiting for me to answer, Jethro placed a hand on my shoulder, but he looked to Beau. “Sorry if this next part is weird for you, Beau.”

“No. It’s fine.” The redhead waved off Jethro’s concern. “She’s my sister and her happiness matters, I don’t need to contemplate the details.”

“What?” I looked between them, again certain I was missing something.

Holding my eyes, Jethro continued, “Here’s the deal, and this is true with most women, ninety-nine percent of the time. If she touches you, like your hand or your arm or your leg—”

“Especially the leg.” Beau nodded firmly. “If she touches anywhere above the knee and leaves her hand there, that’s like the universal ‘ride below the crupper’ invitation.”

“Anyway, if she touches you, that means she wants you to touch her, the sooner the better.” Jethro explained with an academic air. “Do what she does. If her touch is light and flirtatious, do that. If her touch is more purposeful, well . . . then, there you go. Proceed as directed. But, the important thing is, if she’s opened that door and you don’t walk in, that’ll leave her feeling like you’re not as into her as she’s into you. In which case, verbal communication, boundary setting, and gentle—but firm—honesty are required.”

“Right. I knew that.” Now I was nodding, my mind working, remembering all the times and all the women who’d wrapped fingers around my bicep and squeezed, or touched my leg under a table, or dragged a hand down my chest. Once upon a time, I’d known what it meant and I’d taken note. Over the years, I still knew what it meant but I’d become indifferent.

“Okay? We got a plan?” Jethro gave my shoulder one more pat and then dropped his hand, making like he was going to walk over to the picnic.

“Wait.” I stopped him, the reality of what had just transpired finally catching up with the surprise of it.

Jethro turned back to me, his eyes questioning. “What? What’s wrong?”

I inspected him and asked before I thought better of the impulse, “Why’re you doing this?”

His eyebrows ticked up, like my question confused him.

I hazarded a glance at Beau and saw my younger brother understood what I was asking. Beau had always been good at reading people, picking up on undercurrents and nuance.

Returning my searching stare to Jethro, I asked again, “Why’re you doing this? Why’re you trying to help me?”

Understanding shoved aside confusion in my older brother’s eyes. “There’s nobody in the world who deserves happiness more than you two. I love you, Billy, even though you can be a real asshole sometimes.” Holding my searching stare, the side of his mouth hitched higher. “Come on, dummy. Let’s go get the girl.”

* * *

Upon returning to the picnic, Beau announced, “I think I’d like to go swimming. Who wants to come?”

And then, almost in unison and as though swimming was a code word for acquiring superpowers, everyone except Scarlet stood and promptly left, leaving behind basically everything.

Meanwhile, I stood stock-still at the edge of the blanket, doing my utmost not to seem conspicuous as Scarlet stared after my departing family, still chewing the remainder of the strawberry she’d just bitten into when Beau, Jethro, and I had made our second approach.

She stared at the blanket for a few seconds, and then lifted her gaze to mine, one side of her mouth curving upward. “I guess they really want to go swimming.”

Studying her closely, trying to parse whether she was pleased or uncomfortable, I asked, “Do you want to go swimming? I’ll help you carry everything back.”

She tilted her head, now studying me. “Do you want to go swimming?”

“No,” I answered immediately.

“Good,” she said quietly, and her small smile became a grin. But her eyes grew hazier the longer she looked at me, like she was lost within her thoughts. Meanwhile, I looked at her, taking note of how her legs bent and curled up, the hem of her dress rested benignly at mid-thigh, and her feet were once again bare.

My thoughts turned before I could rein them in and I pictured my hands on her skin, sliding the hem higher over her hips as she reclined, kissing my way up the inside of her thigh, and pulling aside that scrap of fabric between her legs to place a tonguing kiss on her—

“Strawberries,” she said, yanking me from my wayward imagination.

“Pardon?” My attention refocused outward.

“If you’re hungry, I got something for you to eat.”

“What was that?” I croaked, wondering if I’d been speaking my wishes out loud.

She held up the plate again. “I was too ambitious when I served myself and there’s no way I can finish all these. Are you sure you don’t want any?”

I swallowed the saliva that had rushed to my mouth during my sinful fantasy and tore my stare from hers, a chaos to which I was no longer accustomed made concentrating difficult. What was I supposed to do? What had Jethro said?

Sit down, a voice reminded me. I nodded, agreeing, and then moved to sit. *Not there! Next to her.*

“That’s right,” I mumbled, rubbing my forehead. Picking my way through the abandoned picnic items, I took a seat in the vacant circle of blanket adjacent to hers.

She leaned to one side as I sat, to give me room, but didn’t skootch away, instead turning toward me, her arm brushing along mine as she placed the plate on her lap and picked up a strawberry. I’d barely settled,

my legs stretched out in front of me and crossed at the ankle, when she lifted the berry in front of my chin, her eyes on my mouth.

“Here. They’re warm from the sun.” She smiled softly, bright eyes reflecting the blue of the sky, warm golden freckles seasoning pale skin, the sunlight shimmering in her copper hair. *Gorgeous.*

Watching her watch my mouth, I parted my lips and she gave me the nub of fruit, her lips also parting, her tongue peeking out as I bracketed the berry with my teeth, holding it in place but not biting. She seemed mesmerized, in a daze, her gaze unmistakably hot, intent, like me eating a strawberry was the most fascinating thing in the entire world.

Pressing my tongue against the fruit, I bit. She blinked. I licked my lips of the excess juice as her fingers moved away, slowly depositing the leafy remainder on her plate, her gaze still fastened to my mouth, and her hand falling like a feather until it landed on my leg. *Just above my knee.*

The weight of her hot palm was impossible to ignore. Nothing about this touch felt light. I hoped Jethro and Beau were right. I hoped her touching me like this meant she wanted me to touch her because my hands were already moving. Our surroundings, as beautiful as they were, faded away and I saw only her. Her breathing had changed and the haziness in her eyes grew restless, pointed, lifting to mine as my fingertips connected with her bare thigh, less than an inch below the lacy, pink hemline.

Maybe it was madness, but I surrendered.

I was going to lift her dress just as I’d imagined moments ago. The need to act burned within me, the flames fanned by the small, eager puffs of air with every rise and fall of her chest.

I’d barely spoken to her since being locked in that room. But in this moment, I couldn’t see past the desperation in her—unquestionably mirrored in me—to do *something*. Anything. Close the gulf between us with actions in much the same way we’d closed it last week with words.

However, even as frantic as I felt, to lay her back and touch her soft skin, lick and taste and suck on her sweet flesh, and make all these wishes come true, I needed her to say it. I would never, *could* never assume.

“Scarlet, do you want—”

“Yes,” she said, looking and sounding like she was in pain. “For God’s sake, yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.”

As though she couldn’t wait another second, she grabbed the front of my shirt, yanked me forward, and kissed me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CLAIRE

“There is no fulfillment that is not made sweeter for the prolonging of desire”

— JACQUELINE CAREY, KUSHIEL'S DART

He kissed me back. No hesitation. Just like that, like he was ready, like he'd known it was going to happen. Like he'd planned it. My back hit the blanket, my fumbling fingers in his hair, and his hot mouth consumed mine as he climbed over me, his tongue sweeping inside, demolishing, taking.

These weren't the sweet, searching kisses from our past. This was a monster, a beast fed by years of need and frustration and raw desperation. Now my hands were under his shirt, touching the hard ridges of his stomach, the smooth skin of his shoulders, and the coarse hair of his chest.

Something broke.

I mean, inside me something broke. Just clear broke. Like a glass full of water hitting a tile floor at full speed. I wasn't thinking. There was no thinking. There was no thought. There was only his greedy mouth on my neck, his fingers tearing at the ties of my dress, his hands on my body, hiking up my skirt, cupping me through my panties. And then he moved my underwear and his fingers were inside.

I heard my breath hitch and I felt my hips push forward.

I felt frantic. So frantic. He parted me, the soft pad of his middle finger circling, and I whimpered. He made me feel so much, he always had, feelings that were both necessary and dangerous in equal measure. It didn't

feel safe, what we were doing. The sensations and heat and mindlessness were the opposite of safe. I was in peril. I was lost. And I didn't care. I didn't fucking care.

"Scarlet. Touch me. You feel perfect."

He needn't have told me. My hands were already moving, my fingertips and nails scraping against his glorious torso on their way inside his shorts. And then my fingers were around him and he felt like heaven and sin and solid rock, and I swear I almost came. Low in my belly my body clenched, tightened, begged me to please, oh please, end this suffering. I suffered. It hurt.

I stroked the thick, hot length of him and he stilled, then quaked, his big body shuddering. "Wait, wait. I have no condom."

"I don't care." I did not care.

Actually, part of me did care—the irrational, hysterical, wackadoodle part. The part that wanted to issue an impregnation invitation. *Please. Impregnate me. Let's make some babies! NOW!*

I wanted him, needed him inside me and my hands on him and his mouth on my breast more than I'd wanted or needed anything. More than I wanted to be safe, or well, or good. I couldn't think about those things. They didn't matter. Only this mattered.

But Billy moved to the side, pressing his erection against my hip such that I couldn't touch him how I wanted.

"Please, Billy. Please."

"Shhh." His lips were at my neck, under my ear, moving lower as his fingers toyed with my body and I clawed at him, trying to reach what he withheld. But then he pressed his pelvis forward and the brutal, hard feel of him made me wild.

I pushed his chest and he reared back, his eyes wide, alert. "Did I—are you okay?"

Growling, I pushed and pushed and pushed until he lay on his back. I straddled his lap and I rocked, pivoting, rubbing, three layers of clothes between us and yet my body didn't seem to care.

"Scarlet, Scarlet—fuuuuuck." The expletive tore from him, the crown of his head pressing against the blanket, his eyes rolling back, his fingers digging into my thighs beneath my skirt as I chased friction, using his rigid heat.

“Oh God,” I moaned, the first of the splintering shards speared me, my movements turned covetous and graceless.

Our eyes locked.

His were wild, dazed, gorgeous blue fire, and his big, rough hands grabbed the straps of my dress and bra and yanked them down. I heard the sound of ripping fabric as he tore the front of my dress open. I didn’t care. Eyes on my naked breasts, Billy surged forward, his arms coming around my body holding me captive. His mouth feasted, biting and tonguing, his fingers pinching and cupping and *feeling*.

His hips thrust upward, using me to pursue his own pleasure. The vision of his coarseness and grasping—being the instrument of this beautiful, stoic man’s complete loss of control—had me crying out, the urge to stop and tense and bow forward a powerful one because I was coming. But I pushed my body to keep moving, chasing the friction and heat, to draw it out and rock and thrust even as he tensed, and he bowed, and he shuddered, surrendering himself.

And I came. So. Damn. Hard.

And then, I came down. Barely able to catch my breath, I couldn’t hold myself upright. But that didn’t matter. Billy was there, holding me, moving me to the blanket beside him. His lips still kissing, but sweetly. Softly. One arm beneath my shoulders, tucking me into the wall of his form, he continued his exploration. His calloused palm cupping and massaging my breast, and then sliding lower, over the bunched skirt of my dress and into the waist of my underwear.

My heart pounding between my ears, I watched him. I watched as his long, tan fingers disappeared into my panties, petting the curls before I felt him separate me, picking up where he’d left off earlier. With my underwear on, it felt like a thrilling secret, his hand moving beneath the fabric where I couldn’t see. My hips shifted uncontrollably, slanting upward, wanting the invasion he was withholding.

“Billy,” I choked, the word more air than sound. I felt lost, so lost, hungry, starving. I didn’t know what was happening, how I could still feel this way after already climaxing. All my experience reaching satisfaction had been solo, and I’d never felt the urge to chase one orgasm with another.

His mouth trailed cherishing nibbles along my shoulder to my collarbone, the coarse hair of his beard delicious texture along my skin. Licking and tasting, a sound rumbled from his chest, one of primitive

delight as his middle and index finger teased my entrance and he nuzzled the stiff peak at the center of my breast.

And then his body moved, the arm around my shoulders leaving me. His mouth was at my belly button and his fingers were pulling my underwear down my legs, and I wanted it even though this was a first for me and my heart was racing.

I wanted him to climb between my legs and kiss the inside of my thigh as I squirmed and panted. I wanted him to spread me with his thumbs and breathe on me, holding my eyes as he licked his lips. I wanted him to cover my aching center with his hot tongue and mouth and watch me as I completely unraveled until I couldn't. I could no longer watch him as he watched me. Seeing myself reflected, the deep, insatiable hunger in his gaze a mirror of mine.

It was too much. Too much. I pressed the base of my palms into my closed eyes and heard myself whimper against the soundtrack of Billy devouring my body with tongue and teeth and lips, finally, *finally* invading me with his fingers.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god," I chanted, certain I was being torn in two with the enormity and necessity of this pleasure.

Once again, I came, but this time I couldn't control the instinct to arch and bow, tense. My legs attempted to clamp shut around his head as uncontrollable, needful sounds of nonsense slipped past my lips. He pressed a palm to my stomach, maybe to hold me still, maybe to keep me from giving him a black eye with my knee.

The crisis receded slower this time, a roaring sea subdued over time to gently, lapping waves. As my legs relaxed, he lifted his head, kissing the interior of my thigh, stealing a quick bite of the tender flesh before rising over me and gathering me to his body.

I curled into him, into his heat, my hands pushing under his shirt and searching for his skin. He allowed it, helping me by lifting to one elbow so I could remove the offensive garment. Reclining once more in his arms, my cheek against his wall of a chest, I inhaled deeply, fighting the sudden urge to cry as I exhaled.

How much had I wanted this? And for how long? This closeness, intimacy with him. I felt like I was in a beautiful dream, and the terror of potentially waking slowly crept in.

“You’re a lot stronger than you look,” he said, surprising me by being the first one to break the silence with his rumbly voice.

I had to take a moment to think about his words, like my language center hadn’t yet switched back on. When I finally comprehended, I lifted my head and peered at him.

“I am?”

“You are.” A soft smile, one I didn’t immediately recognize, brightened his eyes and gave his lips the faintest curve.

“How so?”

“I thought you were going to break my jaw with your thighs.”

His mouth twitched and all at once I remembered where I’d seen this barely-there smile, this affectionate glimmer behind his gaze. This is what Billy Winston looked like when he was happy. My heart gave a tug, then a lurch as I devoured this vision of him, greedy for it, wanting to tuck it away for later when I could savor the sight and the memory.

But then, his eyebrows pulled together, the smile waning. “Are you—”

“I’m great,” I said, my eyes and nose stinging, and I couldn’t remember ever speaking words that were more true.

He examined me and I could see he didn’t know whether I was telling the truth, so I climbed on top of him, grabbed his face, and kissed his magnificent lips over and over, separating several times just long enough to say things like, “I’m so great,” and, “Never been better,” and then I kissed him again.

Billy held me at my waist as I peppered his face with kisses, but then his hands lowered to my bottom, squeezed, and he groaned. Returning me to the blanket, he lifted to his elbow, lying halfway on his side, and continued to massage my backside.

“I have so many things to tell you about your body,” he whispered darkly against my ear, making me shiver.

“You’re going to tell me about my own body?” I tried to force some contempt into my voice, but this was likely undone by how my hands moved over his body, delighting in every square inch of his physical perfection.

“Yes.” He kissed my neck, his palm sliding to my breast. “Your body has been on my mind for a very, very long time. I want to tell you everything.”

His beard and words tickled and I reflexively bent my chin to my chest, laughing lightly.

“That tickles,” he said, like he was cataloging information of great importance.

“Yes. That tickles,” I said, abruptly getting a good look at myself and my ruined dress and my bare chest and—

Yikes! *Lord only knows where my underwear is.* That thought cut through the fog of extraordinary lust, and I laughed again.

But this time with joy and wonder.

* * *

Neither of us could find my underwear.

This fact had been a little embarrassing at first. I tried to clutch my dress to my breasts and cover my back while also holding the skirt in place.

I was unprepared. I was mentally unprepared to be a confident sex kitten post-Billy-Winston-induced-dual-orgasm administration. Plus, there was the not-so-small matter of my scars—all over my back and sides, from my shoulder blades down—and those weren’t sexy at all.

But then Billy—handing me his shirt to slip on over my torn dress—offered to remove his underwear too.

“You can’t be serious.” Now I clutched his shirt to my chest, effectively hiding my front.

“I’m always serious.” His thumbs hooked in his shorts, presumably prepared to pull them down along with his briefs.

My thoughts scattered because his voice plus the look in his eyes told me he was serious. “So, what? We’re just gunna get naked? In a barley field? In Tuscany?”

He shrugged, looking at me like I was cute and silly and he wanted to gobble me up, moving the waist of his shorts two inches downward, exposing more of that delicious V thing bracketing his hips and a dark patch of hair just above his—

“Wait!” I gasped. And then I buried my face in his shirt.

“Too late,” he said.

And I felt a pulse of heat, like a *BOOM*, rock my body, everything coiling and then relaxing and then coiling again. “You—you’re naked?!”

Sneak a peek, Scarlet. What could it hurt? After what y'all just did, don't be a dummy.

We were in the throes of passion! This is totally different.

What about what happened at the pool yesterday? You basically shoved his hand in your bikini bottoms, and now you're embarrassed?

He'd been all wet. A wet Billy Winston is a lethal dose of aphrodisiac on steroids and meth. Plus, that was embarrassing afterward too.

He's already seen you naked.

I gulped, realizing all at once that he had seen me naked. Or, mostly naked. And he'd already seen most of the scars once upon a time.

"Yes. I'm naked," he confirmed calmly, and then added, "For the time being."

"What does that mean?!" I groaned, indecision a climbing musical scale between my ears.

"Well—" I heard movement and I almost peeked. Almost. "It means, when you were on top, I came mostly on my stomach, but also a little in my briefs. Now they're cold and sticky, but my shorts seem to be mostly fine."

I gasped again, another *BOOM*, but then I felt even more like a ninny. If I'd taken a moment to think about things, I would've realized that's what happened. While I was busy getting my jollies during the crazed straddling and grinding session, he'd also climaxed. Which also explained why my dress was damp in the front.

I felt selfish. I should've offered to go down on him too. I should've—

"Okay. You can look now."

Waiting another few seconds, mostly to get a hold of myself, I let the shirt drop a little and peeked at him. I'd expected him to be standing in front of me, doing something sexy and confident. Billy was sexy and confident—because he was always sexy and confident—but neither his confidence nor his sexiness were pointed in my direction. He wasn't even looking at me.

Walking around the picnic site, he gathered the hastily discarded plates left by his family, stacking them, folding blankets, putting away food, like we hadn't just attacked each other moments ago. Like life had *moved on*.

I tried to figure out how to feel about his unperturbed, focused demeanor, concentrating on *tasks*. Meanwhile, I was a flustered ruffle of horse feathers (Yes, I know horses don't have feathers. That's the point.)

His gaze flickered to me as he continued to work. “Is there something wrong with the shirt?”

“No,” I said weakly, making a face that probably looked like my nose itched.

He sat back on his heels—still shirtless and glorious and sexy and confident and mesmerizing—and studied me. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just”—I lifted my hand toward him—“you’re acting like everything is normal, like this kind of thing happens every day, and I-I feel like everything is not normal.”

“Not normal.”

How could I describe this to him? How did I explain how shaken I felt? The enormity of my happiness and fear—happy because we’d finally taken the first step over that line, fearful because I worried something would happen and we’d never do it again, or he wouldn’t want to do it again, or he wouldn’t want to do it with me. Which, yes, given our shared history, might’ve seemed like an unfounded worry. But, there it was.

If anyone knows how to stop worrying about stupid shit, please give me a call.

He stood and walked slowly to me, apprehension in his eyes. “Do you . . . do you regret what happened?”

“NO!” I shook my head frantically, adding on a rush, “Only that it didn’t happen sooner. But, Billy, everything is—*feels*—different now. New. *Changed*. I need you to talk to me about what’s going on in your head and heart. I love you.” I blurted this last part, wincing slightly as soon as the words were out of my mouth.

At my confession, Billy’s features softened, his smile was small but warm, pleased.

I wasn’t finished. I’d said this much, might as well say it all. “I love you,” I repeated, my voice croaky and raw. “I want us to be together, but I don’t want to rush you. I know you want to take things slow, and I respect that. You have many responsibilities to so many people. I guess I want to know what happens after Italy. This feels like a dream, not real life. I want us to be together *in real life*, and I want to know what that looks like. For you. If you want it too.”

The persistent happy little smile on his lips and behind his eyes eased some of my anxiety. So much so, I found myself smiling too. He seemed to regard me and my words, debating them silently, absorbing all their

possible meanings. This was something about him I discovered whenever we spent a significant amount of time in each other's company. When he was slow to speak, it was because he was being thoughtful with my words and his.

Taking one of my hands, he brought it to his—still shirtless—chest, over his heart, and pressed it there. “Make no mistake, what just happened between us was momentous for me. My life and heart have been forever transformed. You are the architect and artist of my own personal paradise. Now, when I close my eyes, I won't need to imagine what heaven feels like. I'll know.”

Oh.

If I'd been the swooning sort, I would've swooned. In fact, you know what? I still might.

“But Scarlet,” he said my name reverently, gently, like it was a prayer he repeated often, “I didn't need to see or touch or taste paradise to know how deeply and irrevocably I am in love with you. That hasn't changed. *That* is as constant as my soul, which has been, and will always be, forever yours.”

“Goodness,” I breathed more than said the word, feeling dizzy, lost in the labyrinth of his perfect words.

He stepped closer and carefully tucked strands of loose hair behind my ear like they were made of gold, his eyes watching the slow progress of his fingers. “I want to be with you, now and in real life. And our real life is ours to define, no one else's.” His tone was gentle, but held a note of defiance.

Like he dared anyone to tell us how to live our life together.

Like he dared me to disagree.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CLAIRE

“I’m not upset that you lied to me, I’m upset that from now on I can’t believe you.”

— FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Billy carried the heavy basket. I carried the blanket. He told me to leave everything else because he wanted to hold my hand on the way back.

I mean, how could I argue with that?

The fun started as soon as we walked in through the terrace door leading to the kitchen. Everyone was there, and I do mean *everyone*. All his siblings, their significant others, the Sheriff, Mrs. James, even little Liam. The room fell into a hush as soon as we entered. I could only imagine how it looked: a bare-chested Billy, me in his shirt, us holding hands, my hair a mess, my lips swollen, him sporting at least two hickeys. At least I’d put my sandals back on my feet.

Twisting my lips, I lifted my chin, doing my utmost not to succumb to the threatening crush of mortification as I glanced at Cletus. His eyes were twinkling, the fiend.

I’ll need to thank him later.

“Not a word,” Billy ordered, placing the basket on the ground, and then taking the blanket from me and laying it on top.

With that, he unhurriedly pulled me from the kitchen, past the downcast eyes and tightly pressed lips of his family to the back hall. As soon as my foot hit the third step, I heard the kitchen erupt in chatter, happy noises, conversations that had me both covering my face and laughing.

“They’re nuts. Completely crazy.” He laughed lightly, sending me an apologetic look.

“It’s just funny.” I wiped at my eyes. “And actually kinda sweet. They really love you.”

“They really love irritating me.”

“Are you irritated?”

“No,” he confessed, fighting a grin. “But don’t tell them that.”

We’d made a plan on the walk back to the house. Both of us would clean ourselves up in our own respective spaces, and then we’d leave for the rest of the day. We could take a train to Florence, or borrow one of the rental cars and drive to the town of Siena or Lucca, or maybe go have pizza in Pisa. I wanted to take one of those goofy pictures where it looked like he was holding up the leaning tower. He smiled at the suggestion, saying nothing, but the look in his eyes told me everything I needed to know.

That is, he thought I was as ridiculous as I was cute.

Part of me would’ve preferred getting dirty all over again while cleaning up together. But another part of me—the part that had been shy about my scars and embarrassed about seeing him naked—felt relief. I didn’t want him to see my scars again, not yet. I didn’t want to talk about them yet. I wanted to leave the past behind us for a while and keep our eyes on the future.

Now that he’d told me what was in his head and heart, I was able to view his actions last week through this new lens. For example, his lack of touching looked more like restraint, not disinterest. But I still didn’t understand his persistent silence.

Was Billy Winston just a remarkably quiet person now? And if so, how did I feel about that? I missed his voice, his sharing of thoughts. He had such a beautiful mind, a clever way of thinking about issues and approaching problems. I hoped he wouldn’t withhold it from me.

Anxious to see him, I showered and dressed in record time—like, ten minutes—and then, on my quick walk to his room, my stomach growled. Hungry, and fairly certain he hadn’t eaten either, I pressed my ear to his door. Hearing the faint sound of his shower still running, I decided to jot down to the kitchen and whip us up a charcuterie board.

Charcuterie is one of those words I never attempted to say out loud in front of people. I know what it is, what it looks like, how to make it, but I

always ended up fudging one of the syllables between my brain and my mouth.

“Char-cue-ter-ree,” I whispered to myself several times as I descended the stairs, but then frowned at the sound. “Shar-cut-ter-ree?” I tried.

Darn. See? Best to just call it an appetizer or a snack.

It didn’t occur to me until I was already on the basement level that Billy’s siblings and their families might still be milling about, congratulating themselves. Feeling a little weird about seeing everyone after the spectacle of our entrance, I tiptoed toward the kitchen, my courage bolstered when I heard just a faint murmur of voices. Seeing two or three folks wouldn’t be so bad.

I peeked around the doorframe. Cletus and Duane were standing nearby with most of Duane facing me, a severe scowl marring his expression.

“I’ll make sure he does,” Cletus was promising, his tone reasonable but firm, like he was trying to talk Duane off a ledge of some sort. “I know you’re tired, sleep deprived. Infants are a form of torture not covered by the Geneva convention. Just, settle down. He’s probably already told her. Did you see how happy they looked?”

I felt a goofy grin take over my features at that, and was just about to step into the kitchen when Duane’s salty voice said, “What if he hasn’t told her and Claire still doesn’t know?”

My whole body stilled and I eavesdropped before I could comprehend the fact that I was eavesdropping.

“Then, like I said, I’ll make sure, before she leaves for that music festival or for Rome, Billy tells her the truth.”

Duane seemed to grow more agitated. “You know I love Billy, you *know* I do. I want to see him happy same as everyone. But Scarlet has no one. If he hasn’t told her yet—”

“Duane. It’s not like it’s bad news, he’s done nothing to hurt her. Everything he did, he did to protect her. He saved her.”

“Lying to someone for decades *is* hurtful. Believe me, I speak from personal experience. I understand why *momma*—why Bethany—never told me and Beau the truth about Christine being our biological mother, but that doesn’t mean it still doesn’t hurt.”

Cletus shifted on his feet, like Duane’s words affected him, and his voice gentled. “I may not have the ability to know exactly what you’re

feeling, but my empathy works just fine. Trust me, Billy will tell her about what he did when she left. You have my word.”

“The whole truth.” Duane sliced his hand through the air. “Everything, from how they killed your dog in trade for that Carla girl to how they almost killed Billy in trade for Claire.”

I recoiled, both of my hands flying to my mouth to smother a gasp.

But Duane was still talking and my greedy ears kept listening, trapped by my own shock. “How he *voluntarily* handed himself over and they beat him so bad, he lost his chance at scholarships, college. How he was in the hospital for months and rehab for months after that. All of it.”

Stepping back, I pressed myself against the wall, needing the solid support as I stifled something that tried to burst from my chest.

“Even that tattoo, why he has it, what it’s covering up.”

“Telling her about the beating is enough, Duane. No need to traumatize Claire with graphic and gruesome details.”

“It’s important that she know, and understand, what he did for her, the extent of it. It changed him. He’s never been the same after.”

Someone grunted, maybe Cletus, and he said, “You and I are in agreement on the fundamentals.”

And then he said something else, but my brain couldn’t comprehend because it was racing, frantically searching through what I knew to be true. Or what I’d thought I knew to be true and what might be truth and who said what and when and—

They beat him?

I shut my eyes as I imagined it, gory details and all, my back sliding down the wall as my body shook with a sudden wave of nausea and anguish. My legs could not support my weight and the weight of this new reality. I curled forward and buried my face in my hands and the past rose up like a tidal wave, submerging me, choking me, and washing away everything I thought was true.

* * *

After I dashed upstairs and finished crying like it was my job, I lay on my bed and allowed myself to imagine it. I allowed myself to think about

Billy's broken body. If I didn't, if I kept pushing it away, I'd drive myself insane.

Once I'd done that and accepted what he'd done for me, how young he'd been, how brave and noble, and what he'd lost, I cried some more. I mourned for him, for that boy I knew and loved, and then I mourned for the man he'd become and all the burdens he carried still.

Scenes from my past materialized next. I catalogued all the decisions I'd made that had been flat-out wrong, and misguided, and based on lies. I mourned for myself too.

I mourned for that girl of fifteen, who thought the boy she loved didn't love her back.

I mourned for that girl of eighteen, who felt so obligated to someone that she let him touch her whenever and however he wanted.

I mourned for that girl of nineteen, marrying a boy who'd convinced himself and everyone that he loved her while she convinced herself she'd work every day to be worthy of his love. Maybe Ben hadn't known what Billy did for me, maybe he did. Either way, he'd lied to me. Regardless, the truth was, he didn't know how to love. He only knew how to possess.

And then, I buried her. All versions of her. All her misery and pathetic cowardice and decisions based on fear and false information. I was done with that. I wouldn't resurrect her.

But laying her to rest didn't mean I lacked curiosity, the need to know *why*, to understand. The questions—so many questions—remained, the most important and pressing being: why hadn't Billy told me the truth?

I wasn't a saint. Mistakes were made. I'd tried my best with the knowledge available to me and, even now, I believed Billy had tried his best too. There had to be an explanation. There had to be a reason.

When I thought about all our encounters, all the moments I'd pushed Billy away—implicitly or explicitly—there'd been a justification each time. What I owed Ben. Safety. My promise to Bethany. My feelings of worthlessness. Believing, deep down, Billy deserved better. Right or wrong, good or bad, there'd always been a reason.

In my heart, I felt certain Billy had justified the lie to himself each time he'd actively decided to withhold the truth. He had his reasons, and I did not want to believe any of those reasons were spite. Nevertheless, Duane was right, it hurt. It hurt so badly.

And that's where I was—hurting, confused, questioning—when I heard a soft knock on my door.

Licking my dry lips, I swiped at my eyes. They were dry, but I did need to clear my throat before saying, "Come in."

The door opened and I knew it was him. I didn't need to look up. I felt it.

"Hey," he said. A second later, the door closed and he walked toward me. I could see him in my peripheral vision.

Bracing myself, and hating that I had to, I took my time sitting up on the bed, giving him a small smile, but withholding my eyes. "Hey."

"I've been waiting for you. Did you fall asleep?" He sat next to my legs, placing his hand on my knee, his thumb drawing a circle over my kneecap. Then he stopped. "Have you been crying?"

I nodded, folding my arms. "Billy, I need to tell you something." I'd debated how best to do this, how to ask him without confronting him. I wasn't angry. Maybe I should have been, but I wasn't. I was hurt and tired of feeling wrung out.

"What? What's wrong?"

"It's about something that happened a long time ago." Some instinct had me covering his hand with mine. "And I hadn't planned on telling you. But something happened today, and I realized it's better to be honest and potentially hurt the person you care most about than protect them with secrets and lies."

He grew very still and didn't say anything for so long I looked at him. He seemed equal parts wary and concerned.

"What is it?"

I curled my fingers around his, holding his hand tighter. "That night you came to the hotel—that last night you came, when I called you—your mother overheard our conversation. She must've heard you on the phone talking to me."

"My mother?" His eyes narrowed, visibly confused, like I'd handed him one piece to a puzzle without providing the big picture first.

"She was concerned for you, so she followed you to the hotel. And after you left, she came to the door, and she, uh, she confronted me." Keeping hold of his gaze, I scratched my forehead, watching for his reaction. "She was worried about what we were doing. She asked me, in her sweet gentle way, to let you go."

His frown was one of confusion, not anger. “My mother did?”

“Yes,” I confirmed quietly. “And I promised her I would stay away from you after that.”

Billy’s eyes dropped to our hands, but I got the sense he didn’t see them, or me. His gaze had turned inward. “Why would she do that?”

“Don’t be angry with her.” I gave his fingers a squeeze. “She didn’t want you compromising yourself for me or for anyone. She didn’t want that kind of stain on your soul. She didn’t want you living with the guilt of being a cheater, or—maybe worse—justifying it to yourself as something acceptable, taking what you wanted just ’cause you wanted it. She said that was Darrell, how Darrell behaved. That he could justify every single one of his hurtful decisions, and she’d tried to raise you better than that. I agreed with her, so I promised.”

He stared at me while I spoke and it was uncanny, the echo of his former self just beneath the surface. He looked so young, almost naïve. And he looked hurt, like this information about his mother wounded him. Clearly, the fact that Bethany had thought these things about him was upsetting.

I knew it would be, which was why I’d never wanted to tell him. I didn’t want him thinking poorly of his mother. I didn’t want her memory to be corrupted. She wasn’t here to defend herself, to explain her perspective. It didn’t seem fair.

But maybe some situations just aren’t fair and will never be fair. No matter how much we plan, and think, and try to compensate, unfairness persists.

I continued, “I know your daddy cheated on her a lot, so I think it hit close to home. For her. She didn’t want that for you, and—”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” The blurted question was heavily seasoned with accusation, and he stood, taking his hand with him.

I refolded my arms, trying my utmost not to judge him for his outburst despite the hypocrisy of it. “The next time I saw you was the night before my wedding to Ben, after I’d already promised Bethany I’d stay away. Telling you then would’ve been counterproductive to my promise. When Ben died, it didn’t seem relevant. Being with you, sharing a life with you, felt like an impossibility. I was drowning in so much self-hatred and—”

“And her words reinforced that,” he cut in angrily. “You should have told me. No wonder you hated yourself, no wonder you couldn’t stand to

look at me. She made you feel like you were wrong.”

“I was wrong.”

“No.”

“No. I was. Sneaking around was wrong, Billy. I should’ve been honest. I wasn’t. I was a coward and I paid the price. Your momma being disappointed in me, losing her trust, that was part of the price. Actions have consequences, we don’t get to hide from them. Whenever she and I were in the same place together after that, I could see it, how she looked at me, like I was a stranger not to be trusted, who wanted to corrupt her son.”

He pushed his fingers into his hair, turning, ranting, “No. No! You weren’t alone. I was right there with you. She never should’ve put this on your shoulders. I’m the one who sought you out, took you to that hotel. If one of us corrupted the other, it was me. I *wanted* to corrupt you, God how I wanted it. And she never should’ve approached you in the first place, she should have come to me.”

“Hey, hey. I get it.” I stood, wishing I could reach out to him and end this conversation with comforting hugs and kisses, but knowing there was still too much to say. “Putting myself in her place, I get it. I didn’t blame her; I wasn’t angry with Bethany. All she did was tell me the truth. It may have been painful to hear, but that doesn’t make what she said any less true. And if I’d been *truthful*—if we’d all been truthful from the *beginning*—and brave enough to be honest with each other about *everything*, then all this heartache could’ve been prevented.”

Once again, he grew very still, absorbing my words. But this time the stillness was different, the energy of him was different. It was like watching an animal slowly realize it had been cornered.

He turned. And he glared at me, half panic, half anger. “You know.”

I met his stare squarely, doing my best to keep the hurt from mine, whispering, “Yes. I know.”

“How?” Now he whispered, panic edging out the anger. For the moment.

I ignored his question in favor of my own. “At any point, was there ever a chance that you were going to tell me the truth about taking my punishment? About saving my life?”

His chin lifted slightly, and I watched as he rebuilt the wall between us. I watched it with my own eyes as my stomach sunk. Brick by brick. Until it was him in his fortress and me left standing outside.

“Who told you?” His voice turned cold, aloof, and it sent chills down my spine.

“No one. No one told me,” I said quietly, gently, but making no attempt to hide my fatigue. I was so tired. Bone-deep exhausted.

“You don’t want to tell me.”

“No. I’m telling the truth. I overheard two of your siblings talking, I heard my name, and I was suddenly eavesdropping before I knew what was happening, like I was stuck, couldn’t move. That’s how I found out.”

“Who was it?”

My mouth curved into a sad smile. “I’m not telling you because it doesn’t matter. What matters is, why didn’t you tell me?”

He said nothing. And because he’d barricaded himself so completely, I had no idea what he was thinking.

“Fine.” I glanced behind him, ignoring the sharp ache in my chest. “You won’t answer that question, then here’s a few others. Why do you have that tattoo? What is it covering?”

Silence.

“Okay, how about this one. Did Ben know what you did for me?”

I hadn’t expected him to answer this either, so when he immediately said, “Yes,” I flinched.

I turned away, holding my stomach. Even if Ben hadn’t known what Billy did to secure my safety, Ben had still lied to me. But now? Now there was no way around it. Ben had taken credit for Billy’s suffering. I felt sick. I’d suspected, I’d hoped Ben didn’t know, but hearing it confirmed felt like a punch in the stomach.

Blindly moving forward, I encountered the bed. I sat on it. “I can’t believe he—he lied to me.”

“He knew the whole time.” Billy’s voice from somewhere behind me was monotone, lacking in all emotion. “He even visited me when I was in the hospital. When I questioned him about where you were, he acted like you were unreachable but safe. And then, over a year after that night at the jam session—over a year after the night of your engagement party—he sought me out to talk about it.”

“To talk about it?” I twisted to look at Billy over my shoulder. “What did he say?”

“I didn’t want him to tell you, he was in agreement. He thought I was going to.” A slight crack manifested behind his granite exterior as he looked

at me. “But I had no idea until you told me in Florence that he’d lied to you like he did. I had no idea he’d told you his family was the reason Razor left you alone.”

Incredulous, I asked, “What did you think Ben would say? When I asked him? He had to convince me it was safe to come back to Green Valley. And since neither of you were going to tell me the truth, of course he lied.”

“You’re defending him?”

“No. I’m not. I’m just asking what you expected. If you refused to tell me the truth, why are you surprised that he lied?”

“Ben wanted what was best for *himself*, so he made decisions for you, that’s why he lied.”

I turned completely around, facing him, anger finally awakening within me. “Then what’s your excuse? You—both of you—took away my ability to make decisions. You took it out of my hands. I didn’t have all the information, Billy.”

Billy’s jaw ticked, his eyes shuttering again as he ground out, “Then I guess Ben and I have more in common than I’d like to admit.”

Again, his words lacked any emotion, and behind his gaze a cold kind of certainty, a resignation had settled.

I hated it when he looked at me this way, like he thought he knew everything going on in my head and he just assumed whatever action would hurt him most would be the course of action I’d take. Even more, I hated that—until recently—his assumptions had been mostly right.

Because I never knew, because he never told me. I did the best I could with the information I had.

“You know what? I surrender.” I stood. I lifted my hands, showing him my palms. “I used to say you and I brought out the worst in each other. We do. Because you want me to live down to your expectations. You want to believe the worst of me. You watch me stumble and fall, and instead of offering a hand, you stand at the sidelines and congratulate yourself for calling the game.”

Halfway through my little speech, Billy started shaking his head, his eyes glassy. And when I finished, he turned and he walked away, crossing to the door.

Realizing his intention to leave, I sprinted after him, past him, and blocked his path, demanding, “Where are you going?”

He wouldn't look at me. "This conversation is pointless, we're done."

"No. We are not done. We are having this conversation. We are in the middle of this conversation. It is happening whether you like it or not. No wonder you hated me so much. No wonder you resented me so much."

His stare, now incensed, cut to mine, "I *resented* you because you were in love with me and you wouldn't be honest with yourself. I resented you because you chose guilt over us—time and time again. Ben wasn't the third person in our relationship, Scarlet. Your guilt was. We're not doing that. I don't want your guilt."

Billy turned and paced away, again stabbing his fingers through his hair.

I trailed after him, making no attempt to temper the volume of my voice. "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell me the truth?"

"You're kidding, right?" He gave me just his profile, his handsome mouth curving into a bitter smile. "I saw how you twisted yourself up for Ben, how you lied to him about what you wanted and what you were feeling, about how you lied to yourself. How, whenever there's some sort of imbalance, you feel like you have to work for the other person." Finally, he faced me. "You're not my employee, Scarlet. I don't want you to work for me. So, no. I didn't want the kind of relationship you had with Ben. I didn't want that for us. I wanted you to choose me free and clear, free of debts, free of obligations. There. Is. No. Debt."

"There is a debt! You gave up everything for me, and then, when you could have told me the truth—"

"No. I didn't give up everything for you. I didn't give up my family. I didn't give up their futures. I didn't give up my mother. I didn't give up my job at Payton Mills. I have built a life for myself hoping—always hoping—you'd eventually choose me. You'd want *me*. Not because you owed me. That's how this works, Scarlet. Love isn't about giving up. It's about *never* giving up."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CLAIRE

“Life is easy to chronicle, but bewildering to practice.”

— E.M. FORSTER, A ROOM WITH A VIEW

“**A**nd then what happened?”

“And then!” I threw my hands high in the air, pacing back and forth in front of Sienna. “He left. He just walked out. And he slammed the door on his way out!”

We were currently in her room. She’d found me in the basement assaulting bread dough (i.e. kneading it) and gently talked me down from the ledge, convincing me to come to her room and talk things through. And so I had. I’d told her everything. *EVERYTHING*. Even how I’d lost my underwear in the barley field.

She’d told me Lucy Honeychurch would be proud, whatever that meant.

“What did you do? After he slammed the door?” Sienna sat on the arm of their couch, her arms crossed, her eyes wide as she tracked my frantic movements.

“After a couple of seconds, I walked after him, figuring he would’ve gone to his room, but he wasn’t there. So I went downstairs and searched this huge monstrosity of a house looking for him.”

“So, he tells you love is never giving up, and then he leaves?” She sounded as confused as I felt.

“Yeah. Exactly. He drives me crazy and he makes no sense!” I mimed strangling him.

“And you couldn’t find him?”

“No. No, I couldn’t.” An aching breath left my lungs and I stopped my frantic pacing. “I can’t. I can’t find him.”

My friend was quiet for a moment, and then slid off the arm of the couch and onto one of the cushions. “Knowing Billy, I can believe all of these things. This sounds just like him. I mean, being stupidly noble and making incredibly dumb decisions based on black-and-white assessments that require nuance and subtlety. I don’t understand why he didn’t just tell you the truth originally.”

“At first, I’m pretty sure he didn’t know where I was or how to reach me. Given what I now know about Ben, I’m convinced he didn’t want Billy to find me.”

“So . . . Ben was an asshole?”

I shook my head, feeling helpless to answer this question. “I don’t know. Maybe. Yes. Sometimes. But—and I’m not defending him—but aren’t we all assholes sometimes? He wasn’t a villain, but he definitely wasn’t a saint.”

“I disagree, but that’s something you should definitely discuss with your therapist. Back to Billy, why didn’t Billy tell you the truth when you came back to Green Valley?”

“He said he didn’t tell me because he didn’t want me to feel obligated to him.” I rolled my eyes. “But what he still doesn’t seem to understand is that I’m freaking in love with him and was looking for a reason, any reason *at all* to throw my promises out the window and jump his bones!”

“Yikes.”

“I know! I mean, when I told Bethany Winston that I’d stay away from her son, I had no idea—”

“What? Wait, what? *Bethany* asked you to stay away from Billy? When was this?”

“Ugh. Just forget I said that. It’s ancient history. The issue is Billy and this impossible situation. I want to be with this man and he doesn’t trust me to be with him without feeling like there’s a debt to be paid. And so, I feel like he’s never going to trust me about how much I want him unless I do something to clear the balance sheet between us and make *him* indebted to *me*.”

“Don’t do that. Then it’ll be a lifetime of keeping score and I, for one, hate math.”

“And I’m still mad at him. He hasn’t apologized! It’s like, he’s incapable of seeing this from my perspective.”

“You should seduce him.”

I frowned, certain I’d misheard her. “What?”

“Seduce him. *Then*, in the middle of foreplay, explain it to him. Men are much more receptive to admitting they’re wrong when they’re just about to get laid.”

“Sienna.” I placed a hand on my hip. “Do I look like I know the first thing about seducing a man?”

“Honestly?” Her eyes moved down and then up my body. “You look like you could write a textbook on the subject. Besides, what is there to seducing men? Just get naked and lie on a bed. All their blood leaves their brain and they can’t think. Science.”

Despite the bleakness of the situation, I laughed.

Or maybe, because of the bleakness of the situation I laughed.

Dragging my feet, I walked to the couch and sat next to her. “I don’t know what to do. It’s like, I’m forever banging my head against brick walls, wanting things that are impossible.”

“What’s impossible? What is it you want?”

“Billy understanding my perspective and apologizing, *sincerely*. And then I want assurances that he’s done withholding the truth. First, he kept the fact that Duane and Beau are my brothers a secret from me, now this. If there are any residual secrets, I want to know them.”

“You don’t want him to grovel?” Sienna pushed my upper arm lightly with her fingertips. “Beg for forgiveness?”

I sent her a side-eye. “Billy doesn’t beg.”

“But it would be nice, right? If he did?” Now she elbowed me. “Picture him, on his knees, a long stem rose in his mouth, wearing one of those sexy, well-tailored suits of his—who is his tailor, by the way?—his hands clasped together. *Take me back, Claire! TAKE ME BACK!*”

I chuckled at the picture she painted and her dramatic imitation, it was so absurd. “Honestly? No. I don’t need him tying himself in knots. I need him *with* me. I need him to stay and talk through everything so we can build a bridge to the other side together. I feel like all these secrets between us built bridges to nowhere. And then . . .”

“And then?”

I couldn't help my rueful smile as I peeked at her. "Would it be terrible if I said lots of sex?"

Now Sienna laughed, her head thrown back as she smacked her leg with her palm. Her laughter was exceptionally friendly, so of course I laughed too, even though my cheeks were made hot by the admission. I hadn't been joking.

When she finished laughing, Sienna's eyes turned assessing as they moved over my face. "None of that seems impossible."

I glanced at her. "It is when I can't even get him to talk to me."

"Don't worry about it." She patted my leg and then stood. "Leave it to me."

I watched her cross the room, pick up her phone, unlock it, and then type furiously.

"Leave what to you?" My stomach twisted with discomfort. It was one thing to be the unwitting recipient of the Winston family's shenanigans and hijinks. It was quite another to be in cahoots with them.

Confirming my fears, Sienna grinned, and then winked, lifting the phone to her ear. "Or, more accurately, leave it to *us*."

* * *

Billy was with Ashley.

Sienna called Jethro and Jethro called Duane and Duane called Cletus and Cletus sent a group text.

Cletus: I know you hate group text messages same as me, but would someone please holler back if Billy is with them?

Their sister messaged almost immediately.

Ashley: He's with me, helping me carry groceries up the hill. Why?

Cletus: Stall him. I'll bring Claire to you and I'll help you carry the bags the rest of the way.

Ashley: Sure thing. Suddenly I feel faint.

Cletus met me at the front door, and we set off together down the hill. He didn't ask any questions. In fact—wearing a grim expression, his arms swinging with purpose, his eyes straight forward—he said nothing at all.

Billy and Ashley came into view almost immediately once we left the gravel driveway and cut along the steep nature trail that was set next to a small stream. A quantity of large lavender bushes lined the other side of the trail where little white butterflies flirted with the purple flowers. Across the stream was a primitive wooden fence and beyond the fence was a vineyard, tidy rows of emerald green grapevines capped on the end with rosebushes in full bloom.

Ashley was sitting on a big rock just off the trail, her elbows on her knees, surreptitiously glancing up the hill every so often. Billy crouched in front of her, his back to us, his head angled like he was inspecting her for strain or injury.

I felt a twinge of guilt, but just a twinge. If he hadn't walked out, then I wouldn't have tricked him now. Maybe that was screwy logic, but it was the only logic I had.

We were about fifty or so feet away when Billy glanced distractedly over his shoulder, doing a double take, and then slowly rising to his feet. The transformation of his features—one minute surprised, the next angry, the next aloof—complete as he faced us, slowly placing his hands in his pockets.

"Proud brother is proud," Cletus mumbled under his breath.

"Oh. Look at me." Ashley stood from the rock where she'd been sitting, turning to pick up several cloth grocery bags. "I'm feeling quite recovered all of the sudden."

Billy glared at his sister, and then he glared at Cletus. "Let me guess, you need me to go back to the store for something?"

"Yep." Cletus closed the distance to his brother and picked up the groceries near Billy's feet while Ashley lost no time in hiking past all of us straight up the hill with the dexterity of a professional mountain climber.

"What do you need?" Billy asked flatly.

“I don’t know. Parmesan cheese, maybe. Seems like we put it on everything here. Would you walk back to the store with Billy?” Cletus addressed this question to me, but his eyes were on his brother. “He can’t find his way out of a paper bag, ’cause paper bags are made of wood and that’s too close to being like a tree.”

“Yes. Of course. I’ll walk back with him, no problem.” Despite the nerves in my stomach, I pressed my lips together so I wouldn’t smile at Cletus’s antics.

Cletus gave Billy one more lingering squinty look, and then turned and marched after Ashley. I watched them go until they disappeared beyond the crest of the hill. And then I stared at the spot where they’d disappeared for a few more seconds, gathering my thoughts. Then I looked at Billy.

He wasn’t looking at me. His hands were still in his pockets and his eyes were on the vineyard across the stream. The severe line of his jaw and the ticking at his temple told me he was unhappy with my surprise hijacking.

“You know . . .” I took small steps along the trail until we were standing side by side, me facing him and the lavender, him facing the stream, fence, and vineyard. “You know why they plant the rosebush at the edge of each row?”

He said nothing, just kept staring. *And he calls me stubborn.*

“It’s because the rosebush and the grapevine are susceptible to the same kinds of diseases. The rosebush is the Italian version of the canary in the coal mine, as it were.”

His gaze drifted to the stream, but still he said nothing. He wanted silence? Fine. But I wasn’t leaving until we talked this through.

Closing my eyes, I listened to the water rush past and a bird call to another bird in the sky, inhaling the heady scent of lavender, green grass, dirt, and sunshine.

“So this is what it feels like,” I said, mostly to myself.

He persisted in silence, and I thought he wasn’t going to respond. So when I opened my eyes and discovered his gaze affixed to my face—just looking—I was surprised.

“What feels like?” he asked, finally speaking.

“The silent treatment.” My lips curved up, and I studied the blue of his eyes. I decided I’d call it Tuscan glacier from now on. “I forgot what it was like when you decide I’m not worth talking to. Wait a minute, before you

glare at me with those gorgeous judgy eyes, I realize we just went through an epic period of me giving you the silent treatment. So maybe I should just accept it now as my due, and maybe turnabout is fair play. Maybe it should be easy for me. But it's not. It's hard."

I took heart in the fact that, though he was firmly encamped within his armored fortress, he didn't look away.

I tested my luck. "Please. Tell me. Why do you have that tattoo? What is it covering?"

His lashes flickered, like I'd blown dust in his eyes, and his throat worked. "I don't want to tell you."

"Why not?"

"Because it's covering your father's name."

My stomach dropped, the world tilted, and I whispered, "What?"

Closing his eyes, he said, "When they took me, Razor cut his name in my shoulder first. Then he connected the lines so it would look like random marks. But I knew. So I covered it with a tattoo."

Lifting my fingers to cover my mouth, I stared at him in horror because I knew *exactly* what that must've felt like. "I can't—I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." I didn't want to imagine it, but how could I not? The image would haunt me for the rest of my life, and the sense of helplessness.

He opened his eyes, the desolation in his gaze quickly eclipsed by frustration. "Don't look at me like that." His voice was like granite, cold and severe.

"Like what?" I whispered.

"I am not Ben."

I blinked, confused. "What nonsense are you speaking?"

"I never told you because I didn't want you to look at me like you looked at him, with equal parts hero worship and resentment. I'm no hero. I'm a man, and I was in love with you, and I wanted you to see me, to want me."

I took a half step closer, encouraged by the raw honesty and gentleness of his tone. "You think I didn't want you?"

"Oh, I knew you did, that was never in doubt." He sounded so sad. "But you never saw me clearly enough to do anything about it."

"And whose fault is that?"

His Adam's apple worked, like he was swallowing my statement, or his reaction to it.

He rubbed his forehead. "I did what I did. And it's over and it's done and life has moved on."

"So you're saying you completely moved on from being beaten nearly to death? You're saying you didn't do it for me?"

Billy nodded firmly, returning his attention to the vineyard. "That's right, I did it for myself."

"You said that love means never giving up." I studied his profile, amazed at the serenity of our conversation thus far, how open and honest and calm. "Well, lying to someone is not how love works either. That's how fear works. Lying to me means you don't trust me."

His eyes sliced to mine, pain behind them, but not anger. "You don't know."

"What? What don't I know?" I stepped in front of him. Giving in to the desire to put my hands on him, I gripped his forearms. "Talk to me. Please, just talk to me."

"Fine. I couldn't deal with the thought of something happening to you, your father getting his hands on you again. I was going to do whatever it took." He turned his wrists, sliding his hands up my arms to my shoulders. He held my gaze, staring deeply into my eyes, like this next part was critically important. "But that's not on you, it's not your responsibility. I made the decision, for myself, not for you. I did it for myself."

"That's some crazy twisted logic, Billy. You did it for me and you've spent eighteen years hating me, resenting me because I had no idea."

He shook his head, like he was disappointed in my interpretation. "No. That's not what happened."

"Even if it's a little true, even if just a little of your resentment stemmed from taking my punishment on yourself, then that's exactly what happened."

"This changes nothing. I did what I did. I didn't do it for you, I did it for myself. And I don't regret it. It's what I wanted. Can't you understand that?"

This was how he'd rationalized his decisions to himself, how he rationalized keeping the truth from me. At least now I had my answer. Billy had never told me the truth because he was afraid. He didn't trust me to love him without obligation then, and he didn't trust me now.

Placing my palms against his chest, I grabbed loose fistfuls of his shirt. "This is what I understand: You withhold yourself from me—big, huge

parts of yourself—because you don't trust me to accept them and love you. When we were sneaking around, meeting at that hotel, you never wanted to discuss the past. You never wanted to talk about anything that came before, what happened while I was gone. I thought it was because you didn't want to hear about Ben. But I see now, you didn't want me to know about *you*."

Billy continued to stare at me from behind his fortress, his jaw tight, silence his sword. That was okay. Maybe he'd hear me, maybe he wouldn't, but I still had things that needed saying.

"I guess I'm supposed to be a mind reader?" I asked quietly, inspecting his handsome face. "Well, I can't read your mind. I don't know what you want or what's in your heart if you don't tell me. I'm tired of the secrets, I'm tired of the lies, especially lies for my supposed benefit."

His jaw worked and I thought I detected a crack in the fortress, a slight crumbling of stone. But maybe it was just me wishing.

"Listen to me. Listen. Do you know how hard it was to stop blaming myself and hating myself for being disloyal to Ben because I thought he'd saved me? Do you have any idea? And now it turns out, *he* was the one lying to *me*."

I let that sink in. I let him marinate in it.

And then I continued, "Did it ever occur to you that keeping this secret was harmful? Did you ever stop thinking about yourself, and what you wanted *from me*, long enough to notice you'd locked me in limbo? And you had the key all along."

While I spoke, Billy blinked and flinched, as though my words sliced him. His gaze lost focus.

But I wasn't finished. "Pretend for a moment that you hadn't been in love with me, hadn't wanted anything from me except my happiness. Pretend we'd just been friends. Would you have told me the truth then? If my happiness was all that mattered, what would you have done?"

Realization sharpened behind his eyes, his lips parting, giving me the sense this—what I'd just said—had truly never occurred to him.

"So, you're right." I tightened my fingers around the fabric of his shirt. "I don't owe you a damn thing. That debt has been paid tenfold."

To his credit, the drawbridge lowered with a crash, revealing a sudden anguish and remorse. Big, huge remorse. So much remorse. It spilled out of his eyes and the ragged breath coming from his parted lips.

“Scarlet,” he whispered, the sound of my name forged in tortured self-recrimination. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you for apologizing.” Taking a half step back, my hands fell from his shirt. “But where do we go from here? I don’t know, I really don’t. But let me be one hundred percent clear: I still love you, and I still want to be with you.”

He winced again, stumbling a step forward, his fingers on my shoulders flexing, and I recognized the telltale signs of shame and guilt, which made me feel guilty. Mentally, I shoved the guilt away, scraping it off and throwing it in the trash. That’s right, no more guilt for me.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m mad as hell,” I continued in gentle tones because I only wanted gentleness between us from now on. “That’s where we are. I’m angry with you and I still love you. And it’s not because of some stupid sense of obligation or any of that foolishness. I’m done with that. I still want you in my life. And yet, I have to wonder, what else are you lying to me about?” I searched his Tuscan glacier eyes for the truth. “What other secrets are you keeping?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

* BILLY *

“If you cannot teach me to fly, teach me to sing.”

— SIR JAMES BARRIE, PETER PAN

“I find your lack of progress disappointing.”

I glanced at my brother. Cletus had materialized near my shoulder without me noticing his approach. Given the weighty matters on my mind, I wasn't surprised he'd been able to sneak up on me.

Most of my siblings and their partners were moving about, socializing and clearing the floor of the music room such that there would be enough space for dancing. Scarlet was about to sing, and Drew sat next to her tuning a guitar. I hovered just inside the only exit, uncertain whether I was staying or going. Which just about summed up the last few days.

“Why don't you do something productive instead of standing here, brooding?” Cletus grumped, crossing his arms.

Before I could address Cletus's question, from my other side Jenn said, “There's a fine line between giving a person space and keeping your distance, Cletus. I'm sure Billy is doing what he thinks is right.”

Now I glanced at Jenn. I hadn't heard her approach either.

“You hanging in there, Billy?” She smiled at me, her eyes a startling shade of purple in her recently tanned face.

I debated how to answer her question as there was no saying *I'm fine* to Jennifer. The woman was too observant, and we'd become too close over the last few years for politeness.

Was I hanging in there? Well, as always, I wanted too much. I wanted Scarlet to forgive me; I wanted to forgive myself for my shitty, selfish choices; I wanted her to trust me; I wanted to hold her and kiss her, make love to her, talk to her, hear her sing, have her teach me how to dance.

But first, I needed to tell Scarlet about Razor, what I'd done to him, and I didn't have any good justification for my avoidance of the topic other than more shitty, selfish choices. I was frustrated by our past always holding more importance than our future, but that wasn't a good reason. Likewise, remembering it—the moment, the violence—was difficult, and I wasn't sure what to do about the FBI investigation, and I didn't wish to discuss it, but that wasn't a good reason either.

I'd been raised by a violent man. I'd been the recipient of extreme violence many times. I'd committed acts of violence against others. I didn't regret those acts. Each time I'd done what needed doing, and yet I didn't particularly relish the thought of exposing her to that side of me, who I'd become.

But I would tell her. I had to. The only question was when.

"Oh, he's fine," Cletus answered for me before I could arrange my thoughts. "Just dandy. I mean, why wouldn't he be? He's over here, and Scarlet is over there, and nary the twixt shall twain, or whatever that saying is."

"Nary the twain shall meet. The saying is, *Nary the twain shall meet*," Jennifer said, placing a hand on my shoulder and giving me a gentle pat. "When does Claire go to Rome?"

"Right after Venice," Cletus grumbled. "Though she mentioned something about maybe flying back to Nashville for that music festival first. Either way, we're running out of time."

I worked to breathe past the ache in my chest, schooling my expression. A new distance loomed on the horizon. Literal distance. If I didn't do something soon to make things right and establish a clear path forward, despite all the desire in the world, she was sand slipping through my fingers. Again.

"What I'd like to know is what the hell happened?" Cletus made a grunting sound. "Everything was progressing according to plan—*ahead* of schedule, I might add, and you know how I like efficiency—and then nothing. Three days of y'all being polite. Where's the PDA?"

"PDA?" I asked.

“Public displays of affection. After eighteen years of pent-up energies, I woulda thought we’d be finding y’all in closets and behind doors. Now, I’m not suggesting you put on a show. In fact, please don’t. Nevertheless, the way things were looking, Ashley had suggested we might need to bang pots before entering a room.”

As usual, Cletus’s attempt at subtlety lacked subtlety. He didn’t need to tell me how much I’d messed up or what I stood to lose. Just the thought of her leaving, not seeing her for days or longer after having her so close for weeks made me want to destroy something. I missed our chopping block at home. Now would’ve been a great time to split some wood.

“I know you’re giving Claire time, and I understand you wanting to be respectful, but have you thought about making a grand gesture?” Jenn asked. “When Cletus apologized to me for acting a fool, he brought me twenty-two birthday presents, one for each of my birthdays. I’m not saying you need to buy her something, not at all. It was about the thoughtfulness, that’s what made the difference.”

I tilted my head back and forth in a slight motion. I’d considered grand gestures. I’d spent the last three days wracking my brain, attempting to determine what I could say or do to express the enormity of my regret.

Except, I suspected Scarlet didn’t want me feeling regret any more than I wanted her feeling obligated.

“What you need to do is get her alone again.” Cletus placed an elbow on my shoulder even though I was three inches taller than him. “Once you’re alone, seize her.” He made a fist with his hand.

“She’s not a fort, honey.” Jenn sent her husband an affectionate look, like she thought he was cute.

“I said seize, not siege.”

“Even so.” Jenn turned her smile on me, it transformed from affectionate to sympathetic. “A woman only wants to be conquered after she’s done the conquering. Rescued after she’s done the rescuing. Then it’s a choice she’s actively made rather than a debt she needs to repay. I think the grand gesture you need to make is asking her for help.”

I stood straighter, caught off guard by her suggestion. *What an interesting idea.*

“Show her you’ve been conquered.” Her smile turned sweet and she added, “When was the last time you asked anyone for help, Billy? Or told

them how much you needed them? Maybe start there.” With one more gentle pat, she walked off to join Ashley and Shelly.

I stared after Jenn. *When was the last time you asked anyone for help?* I honestly couldn’t remember.

“Astute woman is astute.”

Shaking myself, I realized Cletus was still next to me, his elbow still on my shoulder, his attention fixed at some point in the distance—I suspected his wife based on the look in his eyes.

“Tell me something, dear brother. This is what I keep puzzling over: you are remarkably adroit with the womenfolk, and menfolk, and catfolk and dogs and hamsters when you want to be. But particularly women. I’ve seen you in action. You can be smooth. When you apply yourself, you got almost as much charisma as Beau and he’s basically considered a lethal weapon in most states. So why disarm the charm with Scarlet?”

I didn’t answer. The answer was complicated at best, dysfunctional and convoluted at worst.

Cletus was right. I was good with women, when I applied myself and when I had a goal in mind. With my family, employees, colleagues, and even constituents the goal was clear: I gave them what they needed from me in order for them to be successful, whatever that thing might be. Some folks needed praise, some folks needed boundaries and discipline, others charm and charisma, still others simply wanted frequent communication.

And yet, with Scarlet, even when we’d been teenagers, I didn’t know how to approach her. At first it was because I didn’t know what she needed from me in order to be successful. Once I realized that I was in love with her, it was too late to figure things out. She was gone. When she came back, my attempts to give her what I’d thought she needed had been one colossal failure after another.

Which brought us to now.

“Here’s another thought.” My brother dropped his elbow to stroke his beard with his thumb and forefinger. “Maybe flirt.”

I gave him a side-eye.

“You should flirt.” He nodded like this was the definitive answer to all my problems. “Not everything has to be blood, sweat, and tears. You’re *allowed* to take enjoyment in the woman you love, make her smile, make her feel pretty, special. What could it hurt to flirt?”

I opened my mouth to respond but in the next instant he'd smacked me on the back and said, "Good talk."

He then crossed to Jenn and stood behind her, placing his hands on her hips and bending to whisper something in her ear that made her laugh. My attention returned to Scarlet and Drew. Their heads were together, friendly smiles on their faces, though hers looked strained around the edges, fatigued.

You should flirt.

Drew resembled a Viking on most days, or a pro-football linebacker, and tonight she seemed especially small in comparison. Perhaps, I reflected with remorse, she looked so small because she also looked drained, like she carried the burden of weighty matters.

I'd never thought of Scarlet as small before. Her spirit—when she was happy, when she sang, and now I knew when she lost herself to pleasure—seemed uncontainable to me. Likewise, her body was breathtaking, but also not containable by the words *small* or *big*, *tall* or *short*. She was Scarlet, larger than life, beautiful in much the same way fireworks light up the night sky.

Watching her now, I wondered if this idea of her in my head was part of the problem.

Her skin seemed paler than usual; her cheeks lacked their typical rosy hue; even her freckles appeared faded. She may've had all the explosive beauty and spirit of a firecracker, but she was also just a woman who'd been struggling for a long time. I'd added to her struggles. I'd been the cause of many of them. I didn't want to do that or be that anymore.

I wanted to be the reason she smiled.

Maybe flirt.

Jethro and Beau had been right when they'd said I was rusty, out of practice. These last few months in particular I'd been avoiding all social commitments. I'd have to fumble through, figure out my flirt strategy as I went along. The time to close this distance between us—this distance I'd created and her plans to leave for Rome—was now or never.

Pushing away from the doorframe, I strolled to where Drew and Scarlet sat. At my approach, she did a double take but then gave me her eyes, which seemed interested rather than wary.

"Sc-Claire. Drew." I gave them both a nod while I tripped over her name, directing my next question to him. "I imagine you'd like to dance

with your wife?”

The big man peered up at me, the side of his mouth hitching behind his blond beard. “You imagine right.”

I reached out a hand.

He glanced between me and my hand. He then set the neck of the guitar in my palm. “When y’all are ready to dance, just let me know. Ash and I can take over.”

“Thanks. We will,” I said, exchanging another nod with my brother-in-law as he stood and moved off to find my sister.

My gaze shifted to Scarlet and we watched each other for a few beats of my heart. I’d planned to say, *Is this seat taken?*

But before I could say my line, she said, “Hello, stranger.”

“Stranger?” I repeated, trying the word on, lifting an eyebrow and then shaking my head. “Nope. Don’t like that word.”

Scarlet laughed lightly at my response, her smile making her look less weary, and she gestured to the stool Drew had just vacated. “Are you sitting here?” she asked.

“Is this seat taken?” There. I said my line. Now we were back on track.

“It is now,” she replied, just like I’d wanted.

So I sat on the stool, making a point to scoot an inch closer to her. This earned me a look of amused suspicion. Not a bad start.

I met her gaze squarely and, before I could catch the impulse, asked, “Seriously, do you mind if I sit here?” The last thing I wanted to be was someone she tolerated.

“No, Billy. I don’t mind.” She bumped my shoulder with hers, adding quietly, “I’ve missed you.”

This warmed me to hear and I knew what she meant. We’d talked briefly and intermittently over the past few days about nothing of consequence. We hadn’t descended back into stoic politeness, but I’d been careful to give her space. What I’d done wasn’t a small thing to forgive, and I certainly hadn’t forgiven myself.

Looking at her now, I swallowed around a rock of remorse, saying, “I’m sorry.” I hadn’t said it since our talk by the stream. Before I moved forward with any flirting tonight, I felt like I needed to say it again—for her, but also for myself. “I’m so sorry.”

“I appreciate the apology,” she said, wearing a smile that wasn’t reflected in her eyes. “And I’m also sorry.”

“What for?” Now that we were up close, I studied her. She definitely looked tired, and this conversation only seemed to weigh her down, which had not been my goal.

“For not telling you about Bethany.” Her forced smile diminished by degrees. “She really was just trying to do the right thing and look after you.”

I knew my mother, I knew her intentions, and I believed Scarlet’s interpretation of the situation to be true. However, it still seriously pissed me off. No one should’ve made Scarlet feel like less. Not ever.

Regardless, I wasn’t sitting here to talk about the past. I was here to ease her burdens, help her find her smile, so I said, “Thank you for telling me, and you’re forgiven.”

Her gaze told me I’d surprised her as it flickered over me. “Really? I’m forgiven? Just like that?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “Jethro recently reminded me of something our mother used to say, which—ironically—seems relevant. Whenever us kids would lose our temper with each other, she’d tell us, *People only hold grudges when they can’t forgive themselves.*” Needing to touch her, even if it was just in a small way, I lifted my fingers to her temple and tucked her hair behind her ear. “I don’t want grudges between us.”

When she smiled this time it looked more sincere, perhaps even relieved. “Me neither.”

“In fact,” I muttered, lifting the guitar onto my lap, “I don’t even want clothes between us.”

She reared back. “What did you just say?”

“I said, I don’t know how you made those sloppy joes, for all of us.” I blatantly lied, holding her eyes, examining her reaction to my ridiculous falsehood before adding, “Dinner was exceptional. Thank you.”

Scarlet had turned our meatloaf leftovers into sloppy joes. It had been quite impressive, but those were definitely not my words and we both knew it. *This better work.*

“You’re welcome,” she said haltingly, her forehead wrinkling even as her mouth curved, like she didn’t know what to think of me.

I slid my hand along the neck of the guitar. “When do I get to cook dinner for you?”

Her eyes widened, giving me the sense my question both surprised and delighted her. “Uh, whenever you want.”

“Whenever I want.” I strummed a chord, then another, the opening bar for Gordon Lightfoot’s “Fine As Fine Can Be.” “I’ll hold you to that.”

“Please do.” She shrugged. “How about tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow we’ll be in Venice. But after that we’ll be in Rome. I’ll do it then.”

Her eyebrows pulled together. “We will be in Rome?”

“That’s right. I keep meaning to ask, will our place have a kitchen?” Considering my heart was in my throat when I asked the question, I was mightily impressed by the tranquility of my tone.

She turned more fully to face me. “Are you coming with me?”

“Of course.” I also turned, arranging myself such that both she and her stool were between my legs. *So far so good.* “You just asked me to make you dinner.”

Her mouth dropped open and she sputtered for a second before saying, “I did no such thing! You offered.”

“Scarlet, it’s fine.” I played the opening notes to Dolly Parton’s “I Will Always Love You.” “I don’t mind. But if you wanted me to come to Rome, you could’ve just asked.” My lips wanted to tug to the side at her incredulous and adorable expression, but I managed to keep my face straight.

Her mouth opened wider and she stared at me like I was nuts, shaking her head. “Billy Winston, what are you doing?”

“Making dinner plans.” I gave her a small smile and her gaze dropped to my lips. She blinked, like the sight of my smile also surprised her.

When her eyes lifted, they seemed sharper. “Do you want to come to Rome with me?” she asked.

“Why, yes. Thank you for asking. I accept.”

Laughter burst out of her, her eyes big and disbelieving, but also unmistakably charmed—*thank God.*

She shoved my shoulder with her fingertips. “You sneak!”

“Hey now.” I caught her hand before she could withdraw and placed soft kisses on the backs of her fingers and then on the inside of her wrist. The skin was so soft and reminded me of her other soft places. “If you call me those kinds of names, I might change my mind.”

“Oh yeah?” She split her attention between my mouth and eyes. “Change your mind about what? Tricking me into inviting you to Rome?”

“Oh no. I’m not changing my mind about that. I tricked you, you offered, I accepted. We’re spending a week together in Rome.” I lowered her hand to my leg, leaning closer as I pressed her fingers to my thigh. My heart soared when she took over and slid her hand higher.

Scarlet’s smile fell away, but her gaze grew warm, hazy, her cheeks pink. “Then what will you change your mind about?” she whispered.

I dropped my eyes to her lips, her hand moving to the interior of my leg as mine settled on her hip. I curled my middle finger into the belt loop of her jeans and a hot, short breath escaped her mouth. My grin widened.

“I might change my mind about whether to eat dinner before or after I ___”

Suddenly, someone was snapping their fingers between our faces. Flinching back, I followed the arm up to my brother’s surly expression.

“All right, all right. Way to overachieve, William. But now’s not the time. Y’all had all day to do this, put a pin in it.” Cletus dropped his hand from between our faces and reached into his pocket, withdrawing a pen. “What’re you playing first? And do you take requests? If so, Jethro wants ‘La Vie en rose’ by that French lady. If Roscoe were here, he’d know how to pronounce it right.” From his other pocket he pulled out a packet of Post-it Notes.

While Cletus spoke, Scarlet snatched her hand back and faced him, blinking furiously like she’d truly forgotten where she was as we’d talked—I mean, as we’d *flirted*.

Good.

If Scarlet had let our surroundings fade to the periphery, maybe some of her weariness, worries, and struggles had faded as well.

“I—I guess we can take requests,” Scarlet stuttered, sneaking a glance at me.

I gave her a small smile which—thankfully—had her bestowing me with a second look. As much as I cherished the blush that bloomed over her neck and cheeks, I cherished the sweet hopefulness in her stare even more.

“We’ll take requests within reason, Cletus.” I lifted my chin to peer up at my brother. “Scarlet doesn’t need to be singing all night. And no ‘Bohemian Rhapsody.’”

“Well, shoot. There goes that idea,” Cletus mumbled, scratching his forehead. Turning, he lifted his voice to address the room, “Okay, listen up.

Claire is going to sing and we got Billy on guitar. Billy will also be singing.”

“I never said I was going to sing.”

“Like I said, Billy is going to sing,” he said, like I hadn’t spoken. “If you have any requests, I got a pad of paper here. Just write them down and our duet will be happy to oblige. Also, Duane, no showing off please. We all know you’re the superior dancer, i.e. no lifts.”

“Jess just had a baby, Cletus.” Duane gave his eyes the beginning of an eye roll. “I wasn’t going to do any lifts.”

“Good.”

“But there’ll be some spins and dipping,” Duane warned, his arm coming around his wife’s waist.

“Fine.” Cletus twisted over his shoulder and settled his distracted glare on me. “Did you decide what you’re playing first?”

I glanced at Scarlet. She glanced at me. And before I could think better of it, I suggested, “‘Ring of Fire’?”

“Are you really going to sing with me?” She asked, like she was afraid I’d pull the rug out from under her, change my mind at the last minute. Her guarded eyes and cautious excitement did something to me, made my chest tight with regret.

I hated that I’d ever given her a reason to approach me with caution instead of trust.

Leaning in, I said for her ears only, “I promise, if you’ll have me, I’ll sing with you whenever or wherever you want. But only with you, Scarlet. I only want to sing with you.”

Her eyes brightened, her smile widened, and happiness shone from her, sunrays, moonbeams, and starlight.

Uncontainable.

Breathtaking.

Scarlet.

* * *

The last song we performed for everyone was “Come Away With Me” by Norah Jones. They seemed to be in a mood to do more than dance by the

end of it and couples left the music room, citing all sorts of unnecessary excuses.

Through some implicit agreement, I continued to play the guitar and she continued to sing even after everyone else had cleared the room. I think I could've sat with her forever, listening to her hypnotic voice, watching her, being close. But in the end, we only played a few more songs, a soft rendition of "Free Fallin'," a quiet version of "I'll Fly Away." At the end of "Broken Hearts," Scarlet tried to hide a yawn behind her hand and I knew our time was up.

"Come on, sleepyhead." I stood and stretched, setting the guitar on its stand.

"What? We're not finished."

"You're exhausted." I stepped close to her stool, where she still sat, and slid my finger along the line of her jaw, up to her cheek and over her ear, pushing my fingers in her hair. "Let's get you to bed."

A beat passed before I realized what I'd said, during which her smile slowly grew. Suddenly, she didn't look quite so tired.

"Promises, promises," she whispered, lifting her chin, the light in her eyes as mischievous as it was nervous.

Grinning ruefully at my thoughtlessness but also combatting all my body's sudden support for my slip of the tongue, I took a step back and reminded myself I still hadn't told her about Razor. We'd have a week in Rome, during which I could arrange for plenty of champagne, silk sheets, rose petals, and candlelight.

Tonight had been progress. She'd smiled most of the night. Listening to her divine voice had been an indulgence. Singing with her again had been indescribable. If this—just singing and kisses—was our life together, I'd die a very happy man. Of course, the cause of death would likely be chronic excessive sexual frustration.

I would leave her at her door. But we'd also probably kiss. Maybe I'd walk her inside, but that's it. And then I'd take a cold shower.

"You're cute," I said, my voice gravel as I offered my hand. "Let's go."

Scarlet placed her fingers in my palm and stood, allowing me to lead her from the room. "How am I cute?"

I sent her a glance, but that's it. If I had to list all the ways she was cute we'd be up another twenty-four hours.

“You know how you’re cute?” she asked, climbing the stairs in front of me, giving me a magnificent view of her backside. I still wanted to bite it. I also wanted—

I’m not a good person.

“I’m not cute,” I said gruffly, swallowing the sudden rush of saliva. Maybe I’d take an ice bath.

“You are cute.” She glanced over her shoulder, smiling at me. “Your bushy beard is especially cute.”

Unthinkingly, I stroked it. “It needs a trim. Maybe tomorrow.”

She stopped on the second to last step, turning to face me, her hand on her hip. “How about tonight? Let me do it.”

“Pardon?”

“Let me do it.” Her fingers lifted to pet my face, her nails scratching with light pressure against my jaw. If I were a cat, I probably would’ve purred. “I would honestly love to trim your beard for you.”

Maybe after Rome, after we’d sorted through the rest of everything and we’d both defined the clear path forward. But now?

I opened my mouth, an automatic *no* on my lips, but she descended a step, bringing us to eye level and much closer.

Her arms came around my neck and she gave my nose a small peck. “Is your shaving stuff in the bathroom?”

I nodded.

“Go downstairs and get a folding chair. I’ll go to your room and get everything ready.”

I opened my mouth again to say no, but then she pressed her lips to mine, her arms around my neck tightening, bringing her body flush against mine. My hands were on her hips, drawing her even closer, her mouth parted and I slipped inside, her tongue teased mine, velvet and sweetness.

And then she pulled away, turned away, and marched up the last few steps. “Go get the chair and meet me in your room. See you in a minute!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

* BILLY *

“Those who restrain desire do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained.”

— WILLIAM BLAKE, THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL

This was torture.

Her hand on my shoulder, under my jaw, positioning my chin like she wanted; her knee braced on the chair between my legs; the light touch of her fingers, her body incidentally brushing against mine.

Torture.

And she'd changed. I'd shown up with the folding chair, using the five minutes of our separation to mentally fortify for the beard trim, just to discover she'd changed into some sort of white cotton nightgown that ended mid-thigh. Which was why, when she'd offered a warm towel to cover my eyes, I'd accepted, figuring I'd be able to distract myself, keep my mind otherwise engaged if I couldn't see her.

My mind was not cooperating.

“For the record, I like your face. A lot,” she said, a smile in her voice.

Do you? Want to sit on it? I clamped my jaw shut at the errant thought, just one of a plethora of ungentlemanly suggestions that had occurred to me in the last ten minutes.

She'd already trimmed the excess length, shaped it with the scissors, and brushed away the clippings. Now she was finishing up with gentle fingers.

“Shoot,” she muttered, her hand on my shoulder tensing before pulling away. “Just a second. Are you comfortable?”

No.

“Mmm.”

“Okay. Don’t move.”

I heard the rustle of fabric, maybe a towel, and then she was back, the heat of her body a gravitational anomaly. I had to dig my fingers into my thighs to keep from reaching for her and maybe encouraging her to sit on my lap and put those gentle fingers to better use.

Torture.

Her hand cupping my jaw; the press of her knee between my thighs; her gentle breath falling over my face—did she have any idea? Did she understand how every feather touch and soft sigh doubled the ache in my body, the excruciating need to put my hands on her?

I’d been pushed over that edge between pleasure and pain, ecstasy and agony. I couldn’t think, every inhale like fire. I was suffocating and I’d officially reached my limit.

But just as I’d lifted my hands to set her away, she said, “There. All done.”

The towel at my eyes was tugged to the side, used to dab at my face, as my hands—now without purpose—sought her hips and I comprehended how truly thin the fabric of her nightgown was. That too was torture, but not as severe since my mind quite suddenly determined pushing her away had ceased to be an option.

I opened my eyes. She hovered above me, her attention following the progress of the warm towel at my jaw.

“Do you want a mirror?” she asked, and my stare dropped to her mouth.

She was so damn sexy, a goddess of both carnality and sweetness. Now that I’d tasted her, I also knew all her colors. The shade of her lips was the exact same shade as her clit, a fact I would never cease to forget every time we kissed.

“No,” I said, my hands moving down her hips to the hem of her nightgown. Without asking permission, I brought my middle finger to the apex of her thighs and gently stroked her through her underwear.

Her movements stilled.

“I need you,” I said, meaning the words in so many different ways.

She closed her eyes, a rush of air leaving her, her hands dropping to my shoulders, gripping them as though to hold herself upright.

My other palm caressed the back of her thigh and I was held transfixed by the chaotic arrangement of her features, her abrupt loss of composure. Sliding my hand into the back of her underwear, I kneaded the flesh of her bottom as I continued my feathery stroking at her center.

“I need you,” I repeated, gently pulling aside the scrap of fabric and drawing a tender circle around her entrance, finding her just as I remembered—hot, wet, and so fucking soft.

Scarlet’s legs seemed to wobble, and she swallowed, her hands at my shoulders grabbing fistfuls of my T-shirt. “Please, Billy,” she panted, her voice high and strained. “I—I need you too. So badly.”

I stood, drawing her nightgown up as she stumbled backward, the chair behind me upended in my haste. Her bra was off next and I lifted her in my arms, carrying her to the bed in three large strides. Her fingers in my hair, her mouth fused to mine, I relinquished her lips only long enough to tear off my shirt and lie beside her. I could not stop touching her body, my hand at her breast, cupping her exquisite softness, glided down to her backside, grabbing hold. I wanted to feel her everywhere, all at once, with every part of me.

She tore her mouth away, gulping in air. “Billy.”

“Too rough?” I asked her neck, climbing over her, needing the feel and sight of her beneath me.

“No, God, no, I just—take off your pants.”

My hand slid to the front of her hip and then lower, cupping her, encouraging her to open her legs for me so I could reach within her panties and dip my fingers inside. I groaned, raw and unsteady, I bent to bite her jaw, her neck, drawing her wetness from her body and painting the circle around her clit with two fingers. “I want to make love to you.”

“I want you too,” she said on a short, choppy breath, her hands frantic at my fly, yanking down the zipper and shoving her fingers inside to grip and stroke me. I hissed, pressing into her hand, my hips jerking. Fuck. I needed to be inside her.

In a hurry, she helped me push off my pants and boxers, but I captured her hands before she could remove her underwear.

“Let me,” I said, hungry, starving for a taste of her velvet sweetness.

Her lips parted as I slid down her body and bit her waistband, tugging her underwear lower with my teeth. Sliding the lace to her knees, then ankles, I knelt between her open legs and bared her body to my eyes. And then, my mouth watering, I tasted her arousal with the flat of my tongue, holding her gaze beyond the soft mounds of her breasts, teasing the back of her legs with my fingertips before entering her with two fingers.

Scarlet pressed her head back against the mattress, her back arching off the bed. “Wait . . . I need, I want—”

I knew what she needed, what she wanted. With one more sucking French kiss, I rose up and settled my hips against hers, using my erection to stroke her with no preamble but a whole hellavalot of restraint.

She gasped, her eyes rolling back as her eyelids closed, her fingers twisting in the sheets at her sides and as her back arched again. She spread her legs wider, as though anticipating and accommodating the weight of me, baring all her most vulnerable places for my gratification—her neck, her breasts and stomach, the clenching entrance to her body.

An invitation.

“Billy,” she said with a desperation verging on anguish, and it fed some starved part of me. I couldn’t get enough of her desperation, of her *pleases*, of her asking for and wanting me. I bent again to taste her skin at the juncture of her neck and shoulder. My fingers plucked at her nipple, taking a bite of her as I continued stroking the softest part of her with the hardest part of me.

There. The heat of her pulse point beat beneath my lips, her heart raced. Her chest rose and fell with harsh breaths, like she struggled with the anticipation of what might come next.

“Billy, God, *please.*” A hitching whisper and a moan, a hint of frustration. Her lashes lifted and she stared at me, her eyes hazy and frantic and beseeching.

Gripping myself, I lifted to my knees, positioning the head of my cock and moving a thumb to trace the swollen and slick bundle of nerves above her entrance. Curses escaped her as she continued to pant, her gorgeous breasts bouncing with each jolting rise and fall of her rib cage, shifting her hips to force and speed my progress.

I entered her.

She shuddered and so did I, and I savored the moment.

I savored the sight of her willing body on display—sunrays, moonbeams, and starlight—the beauty of her vulnerability and surrender. I savored the hazy, lust-crazed look in her eye. I savored the feel of her silky heat around my cock and the fact that I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, it would never be enough. I'd be chasing this feeling for the rest of my life, like a junkie, like an addict. This perfect moment where the anguish of our shared past met the bliss of our present and everything was exactly the way it should be.

And then I moved.

Anchoring one hand to her hip to control the angle, I leaned forward so I could roll my hips, ensuring her clit would stretch with every stroke. She whimpered, cursed, took the Lord's name in vain, her hands kneading my muscles, her nails digging into my flesh. She seemed lost to her own desire, nonsensical, grasping and greedy and I loved it. I loved how I wrecked her, because she wrecked me just the same.

But as soon as she opened her eyes and our gazes locked, she came like a comet, her canal tensing and spasming around me in violent bursts as her body bowed. She reached for me. A cry, a whimper, a moan, mindless sounds and sensations that pushed me beyond reason. I drove into her, my thrusts covetous and significantly less considerate of her pleasure as some primordial instinct demanded I claim her, coming inside her body, filling her with my release and hedonistically rejoicing at our lack of restraint.

The desire to touch her unending, I gathered her pliant body against me as I rolled to the side, careful not to crush her with my weight. Where I directed, she followed, resisting only to place sleepy kisses on my chest and throat, her arms twining around my neck.

"I love you," she whispered between kisses, still breathless, clearly exhausted. "God, how I love you. I love every part of you and I want us to make love every day, ten times a day for the rest of our lives."

"Agreed."

She snuggled closer, nuzzling my beard. "I never want us to be apart."

"Agreed." I encouraged her to wrap her leg over mine, my hand sliding up her thigh to her bottom.

"That means we eat every meal together from now on."

"Agreed."

"And shower together."

Fuck yeah, I thought, but kissed her forehead, saying another, "Agreed."

Fact was, she could ask me for anything right now and the answer would probably be *Agreed*. Like Scarlet's spirit, my happiness and satisfaction in the moment could not be confined. It was simply beyond expression.

Or reason.

* * *

Reason hunted me down in the middle of the night.

I awoke with a start, not knowing where I was, tangled in the threads of a nightmare. Once I comprehended my surroundings—and that I was alone in bed—I wondered for a moment if making love to Scarlet had also been a dream. My eyes adjusted, the blood ceased rushing between my ears, and I heard the shower running. I was naked.

Not a dream.

Dread swelled just under my ribs and I rubbed my eyes with the base of my palms. *We didn't use a condom.*

This had been the seed of my nightmare, the irreversible fact from which multiple scenarios of chaos and misery had stemmed. In all iterations of my nightmares, Scarlet had been pregnant. But what happened next had been like watching a parade of horror stories written by Stephen King. At the end of each, she hated me.

Standing from the bed, I walked to the bathroom. I needed to see her, to determine what she needed from me, what I could do in order to make things right and atone for my recklessness and selfishness. I pushed open the door, blinking against the brightness. She hadn't turned on all the lights, just one above the glass shower, illuminating the form of her but not the details.

I took two steps toward the shower before I stopped, a different kind of reason emerging as sleep inertia faded. Lucidity materialized like a wise bartender, pointing out facts I already knew. *She doesn't hate you.*

"Billy?"

Scarlet came into vivid focus, peeking out of the door to the shower, most of her body hidden by frosted glass. A shy-looking smile hitched her mouth higher on one side as her attention moved over my body.

“Did you want—” She huffed, rolling her eyes, her smile growing. “I mean, do you want to join me?”

My mind told me to hesitate, to think. Whereas my feet were already carrying me forward. She opened the door wider, stepping back. Soon I was inside the small shower stall and sharing the hot stream of water with a watchful Scarlet, her arm making a valiant—and failing—attempt to cover her breasts.

“Did I wake you?” she asked, her voice higher than normal and cracking a little on the last word.

I breathed in the steam and responded without thinking, “I had a nightmare.”

Her shyness vanished, her forehead wrinkling, and she took a half step toward me. “Oh no. Are you okay?”

A light, self-deprecating laugh tumbled out of me when I realized what I’d admitted, and I lifted my eyes to the wall behind her. “It’s fine. I don’t know why I told you that. Still waking up, I guess.”

Scarlet placed her hands on my biceps, shifting closer. “Let’s wash up and then you tell me about it, okay?”

As though pulled, my gaze dropped to hers again and I studied her lovely upturned face, wondering what Scarlet’s real thoughts were about the condom issue. Was she worried about pregnancy? I didn’t even know if she was on birth control. We hadn’t talked about it. We’d been completely reckless.

“Scarlet . . .”

She angled her head to the side, peering up at me, her gaze soft and open. “What’s wrong?”

“We didn’t use protection.”

“Oh.” She blinked several times. “You’re right, we didn’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

Now she laughed lightly, her cheeks warming in a way that had nothing to do with the hot water. “I could’ve stopped us. I could’ve said something too, but I didn’t.”

This reasoning went against my sense of justice. “I should’ve stopped us.”

Her eyebrows pulled together like my statement pained her, her fingers digging into my arms, her lips pressing together in an unhappy line. “Please don’t say that.”

“I should’ve—”

“Please don’t be sorry about what happened.” Now she closed her eyes, her voice just above a whisper, like she was saying a prayer. “Please don’t regret it, not even a little, not any part of it or what it might mean. Because I don’t.”

I stared at her and her momentous words, at the moisture beading in her lashes, the pink of her cheeks, the downward curve of her lips, and I memorized this moment. All traces of my earlier dread faded to nothing, a consuming sense of rightness and exhilaration taking its place.

Setting my hands on her waist just to slide them around her back, I brought her soft body flush to mine, holding her, and praying to God she would never want me to let her go.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

* BILLY *

“Mistrust all enterprises that require new clothes.”

— E.M. FORSTER, A ROOM WITH A VIEW

Venice was—*is*—beautiful. It’s one of those places that make you believe fairy tales are possible and is exactly how you imagine it to be. Except the presence of all the other tourists, and I blended in with the tourists.

“You look like a peasant.” Cletus looked me up and down. “Or a personal trainer named Stefano from New Jersey.”

I said nothing, refusing to show my irritation. Nevertheless, Cletus was correct. I looked like a peasant. Typically, I wore a suit to work every day. I enjoyed wearing a suit to work every day. I was not accustomed to dressing like a personal trainer named Stefano in public.

This morning, at the very last minute, I’d let my twin brothers talk me into wearing workout shorts and a T-shirt to Venice. They’d shown up to my room, Beau wearing shorts and T-shirt, warning me that it would be hot and I’d be miserable dressed in fine clothes. Likewise, the rest of my family had been similarly attired as we left the villa for the station.

Then, when the train pulled into the Venice stop, everyone changed in the bathrooms.

“Oh. You thought I meant in Venice? No, no. I meant on the train,” Beau had clarified, wide-eyed and innocent.

Liar. I could see through his deceptive statements just fine *now*.

That had been some hours ago. Presently, we'd already been to the Palazzo Ducale, the Doge's Palace, and now were on our way to a midafternoon gondola ride. Beau seemed particularly anxious about making our reservation on time.

"What you need to do is wear Italian shoes, black ones." Cletus lifted up the pant leg (of his dress pants), showing me a pair of very nice Italian leather shoes. "Then you blend in with the locals. But you look like you're from Jersey Shore or something, Stefano."

Someone bumped my shoulder on my other side, and I glanced over, expecting Jethro's teasing remarks. He'd also dressed like a gentleman today. Everyone had. Except for me.

But it wasn't Jethro, it was Scarlet.

My grin was immediate. "Hey."

After taking a mostly chaste shower together in the middle of the night, we'd gone back to bed tangled together. I didn't tell her about the nightmares, no reason she should have to bear that burden too.

In the morning, Scarlet woke me up with kisses but evaded my attempts to pull her back to bed, rushing off to get ready for the trip. However, she did leave me a cinnamon roll, a big cup of black coffee, and a haiku,

I loved you last night.

I'd like to love you now, but

There's a train to catch.

-Forest Fairy

Presently, she grinned up at me, affection and commiseration in her eyes. "I look like a peasant too." She gestured to her yoga pants, sneakers, and T-shirt. "Jessica told me it would be hot and I shouldn't dress nicely."

Irritation flared anew and I glared at Beau's back. This was obviously my family's idea of a joke.

Scarlet curled her fingers around my wrist, sliding her palm against mine, sending a warm shock up my arm. "Don't be cranky. You always look handsome. Today we can be frumpy together."

My eyes trailed over her appreciatively. "Impossible."

“What’s impossible?”

“You looking frumpy.”

Her eyes narrowed on me, like she was unimpressed, but her smile persisted. “Very smooth, Stefano.”

I grinned again.

Her cheeks pink, her gaze happy, I decided maybe this wasn’t so bad.

Scarlet seemed significantly less fatigued and weary today than she had last night. Cletus’s teasing notwithstanding, I was grateful to my brother. Finding enjoyment in the woman I loved, giving her reasons to smile, had been the right answer. My only regret was Scarlet and I hadn’t danced last night, an oversight I planned to rectify as soon as we arrived in Rome.

Just two more days.

“We’re here,” Beau announced over his shoulder. “Everyone just wait a sec, let me talk to the reservations person. Cletus will fill you in and we’ll be right back.”

Scarlet leaned in close. I lowered my head to give her my ear as she dropped her voice to a whisper. “Let me guess, they can only fit two people per gondola.”

No sooner had she said the words than Cletus stepped forward, turned to face the lot of us, and announced, “They can only fit two people per gondola, so we’re going to have to pair up.”

Scarlet chuckled, her shoulders shaking as her chin fell to her chest.

“What are the chances?” I bent to whisper, making her laugh harder. I caught myself smiling too, and that’s when I knew my family had finally worn me down.

The boats fit more than two people. Canals were full of gondolas with four and five people. But, sure. Whatever. They wanted us to have a boat ride all to ourselves, fine. If I fought against it, they’d figure out a way to make it happen anyway. Additionally, in this case, taking a gondola ride with just Scarlet was my preference.

I surrendered.

“Me and Jenn together in a boat, obviously. Beau and Shelly, Jethro and Sienna, Ash and Drew, and—uh—I guess that leaves Billy and Scar-er, Claire.” The Sheriff and Mrs. James, Duane and Jess, Maya, and all the kids had stayed behind at the house. “Now, everyone give me your phones and wallets.”

“What is this? A stickup?” Sienna asked good-naturedly.

“Not this time. I have a watertight bag here.” Cletus withdrew a plastic bag from his pocket and waved it around. “Best you give me your stuff to keep it dry.”

Still chuckling, Scarlet strolled toward my brother, handing over her phone and wallet. “Okay, Cletus. Which boat is ours?”

I thought I heard Jethro mutter something to Sienna like, “That was a lot easier than I thought it would be.” And I turned to inspect him.

He gave me a shit-eating grin but said nothing else.

Soon we were shown our boat and were on the water, but it’s important to mention our gondolier was the largest human I’d ever encountered. He was Italian, appeared to be training for a strongman competition, and didn’t speak any English except the phrase, “Sit there,” which sounded suspiciously like a threat.

Like Venice, the boat itself was beautiful. Rich, dark wood with detail in the sloping and spiral carvings. Red velvet cushions covered the seats and a red sash had been draped from the bow to the stern. I wanted to question our gondolier as regards to the age of the boat, it looked extremely well maintained and yet ancient, and had just decided to make an attempt at communicating when he pointed to Scarlet—sitting next to me, her hand on my leg, our fingers entwined—and then pointed to the seat at the center of the boat closer to him.

“Sit there,” he said.

She glanced at me and I glanced at her.

“No, thank you,” she said, leaning more firmly against my side.

He stopped the boat. He pointed at her, he pointed at the seat. “Sit there.”

“No, grazie. No, thank you,” I answered for her, sensing her discomfort.

He released the paddle—or the oar?—and stepped forward, his eyes on Scarlet in a way that had me rising to my feet and placing myself in front of her.

“Back off.” My adrenaline spiked, accompanied by the cool, calm focus I felt every time I found myself in one of these situations.

That’s not to say I often found myself face-to-face with a surly gondolier the size of Andre the Giant. More like, I’d faced my fair share of big, dumb Iron Wraiths; I’d always been outnumbered, and I’d always kept my wits about me. The oar could be a weapon. So could the sash.

Undeterred, the man advanced. I crouched lower, bracing my feet apart as I watched him come.

But then Scarlet stood suddenly and scrambled to move around me. "It's okay. I can sit on the center seat. It's okay."

I grabbed for her and the boat rocked, unsettling itself, and what happened next still perplexes me.

One minute, I had a hold on Scarlet, and in the next she'd been picked up and dropped gently into the canal by our gondolier. My stunned confusion only lasted a split second, but my judgment had been compromised. Instead of securing the boat first, I reached over the side for her hand to pull her back in.

And that's when I was pushed from the gondola.

This water was colder than the pool, but my mind was still on Scarlet. I propelled myself to the surface, searching frantically for any sign of her and finding her at once, treading water just a few feet away, her eyes wide with shock.

"Are you okay?" She swam to me, cupping my face and searching my eyes.

"I'm fine. Are you okay?" I smoothed her hair away from her face.

She nodded, in a daze. "I don't understand. What just happened?"

Several gondolas loitered nearby, but I spotted our gondolier some thirty or more feet away, steering his boat through the canals with impressive speed. "He wanted us out of his boat, so he tossed us out." I said the words even though I still didn't quite believe them.

She gave her head a quick shake. "Why would he do that?"

"Oh hey, y'all."

We both spun toward the sound of Cletus, finding him and Jenn safely lounging in their gondola, reclining on velvet cushions. Jenn held a glass of champagne and had the decency to appear sympathetic.

"You should swim over there," she called, pointing to some place behind us. "I see a ladder leading out of the water."

But Scarlet shouted over her, her voice full of fury. "Cletus! You did this! You hired that man to shove us out of the gondola. I will get you for this if it's the last thing I do!"

"Your accusations are unfounded, and frankly insulting. And I would please ask you to moderate your tone. We are family, after all. Or will be soon enough."

“Cletus.” Jethro’s voice sounded from a boat to our right. “When you said that thing about the horse, I didn’t know you meant to literally drown them.”

“Oh, they won’t drown, they’re both real good swimmers.” Ashley—from her gondola—was responsible for this pragmatic observation, adding, “Now you know what I had to deal with growing up, Claire. I’m so sorry, I had no idea what these hooligans had planned.”

Shelly leaned over Beau to chime in, “Make sure you’re on time for the tour reservation tomorrow.”

“You might want to clean up first.” Beau sent a sparkly smile down to us, his gondola the farthest away. “I don’t think that sewer water is appropriate for the places you’re going.”

“So this is why you wanted us to dress in these clothes.” Now it all made sense.

“Beauford Faulkner Winston! This was your idea?” Scarlet pointed at the redhead. “You are on my last nerve.”

“That’s not true, Claire. You still got a lot of nerves.” He smiled at his sister affectionately but was clearly enjoying himself.

“Since this was your idea, Beau, I think *you* got a lot of nerve,” Cletus chimed in.

“You’ve definitely gone *overboard* with this one, Beau,” Jenn added.

Despite the circumstances, despite everything, I chuckled at her play on words.

Scarlet’s head whipped toward me, her big eyes searching my face like I was a stranger. “You’re laughing?”

I stopped laughing.

“Come on, y’all. Please. Go swim to that ladder,” Jennifer urged. “I promise, your day will improve.”

With one more scathing glance for Beau, Scarlet swam toward the ladder. I looked around at my siblings, each in turn, and then swiftly caught up with her.

“Are you okay?” I asked, already plotting my revenge against the twins.

She nodded tightly. But then she laughed, closing her eyes. “I can’t believe Beau. I can’t believe him.”

“He and Duane have always been big on practical jokes. Where Cletus might lock us in a basement for an hour, Beau and Duane always seem to take things to the next level. I’ll set them straight.”

“No.” Her eyes narrowed and glinted dangerously as she pulled herself up the first step of the ladder. “Let me deal with them.”

As soon as we climbed the ladder to land, we were greeted by a group of kind folks with big towels who seemed to be expecting us. A woman stepped forward and introduced herself as Mrs. Olsen, our hostess for the next hour or so. She ushered us into a nearby and exceptionally fine old house. Scarlet was directed one way and they attempted to direct me another way.

“No. We’re staying together.” For the second time in fifteen minutes, I stepped in front of her, grabbing her hand. I’d had enough of the practical jokes.

Mrs. Olsen broke away from the assembly again and approached us with a big smile. “Ah, perhaps this note will help?”

She handed me an envelope, which I opened. Within was a card with an address scrawled on one side, a key, and a note in Cletus’s tidy scrawl.

Dear William and Scarlet,

We got tired of y’all finding reasons to sneak off, throwing yourselves out of boats and such, so you’re on your own tonight and tomorrow.

Please enjoy the very romantic dinner Jennifer arranged, bought and paid for. The food and wine have already been selected, no ordering required, and she was there early this morning to make your dessert.

The clothes you’ll be wearing and all of Scarlet’s fussy hair and makeup are provided by Jethro and Sienna’s Italian team of stylists and clothiers. Let them clean you up.

Mrs. Olsen is a good friend of Jess and Duane’s, you can thank them later for the use of her house.

Ashley and Drew (and Bethany) were responsible for your accommodations this evening, if you’re looking for someone to blame for that, please see the Warden. When you check in, they’ll show you how to get to the restaurant (spoiler alert: it’s right next door).

The private tour of the Venetian glassworks we’ve got scheduled for you in the morning is with one of Shelly’s old school chaps from University of Chicago. I really think you’re going to like it. It’s something special.

Simone and Roscoe send their love since they can’t really send much else, seeing as how they’re both under the care of nurses at the Payton

house back in Tennessee. But I figured, given how big their hearts are, love is enough.

Enjoy yourselves. Or else.

-Cletus

* * *

“I can’t decide if the best thing about Italy is the art, food, or people.” Scarlet set her fork down, staring at her plate, her hand covering her stomach. “I can’t finish this, but it’s so good. And that makes me sad.”

I smiled at her conundrum, though I was relieved she was full. Every time the waiter set a new course down in front of us, she’d taken a bite, rolled her eyes back, and sighed with pleasure. From where I sat next to her, dinner had been full of distractions. To say the least.

“We can always box it up for later.” I set my napkin on the table, leaning back in my chair and enjoying the view, where the view was Scarlet with scarlet red lips, scarlet red nails, in a delectable form-hugging scarlet red dress.

My brothers had outdone themselves.

It took a bit more convincing after Mrs. Olsen handed over Cletus’s note—mostly just Scarlet assuring me she was fine with us separating—but I’d ended up alone in a room with a shower, a brand-new suit, and Italian shoes in just my size. After a long, necessary shower, I pulled on the clothes and almost forgave the twins. *Almost.*

The cut was perfectly customized to my measurements, which made me wonder whether Jethro had contacted my tailor in Knoxville.

A barber had come in with an offer to trim and shape my beard. I declined, but I did allow him to cut my hair. I’d been neglecting it for weeks and it was much longer than was my custom. Satisfied with the appearance of my hair, the barber left muttering unknown Italian words. I decided, before I returned to Italy again, I would learn the language.

I then left the room and strolled through the house, retracing my steps to the grand entryway where we’d entered. A large spiral staircase curved upward from a black-and-white marble floor to a skylight ceiling with leaded glass. In the center of the entryway stood a large, circular wooden table with a quantity of huge sunflowers rising out of a cobalt blue vase.

The house had been beautiful, unreal. Like a dream. But then Scarlet had appeared, attired in her red dress, her red hair cascading over her shoulders, a big, happy smile on her gorgeous face.

If this was a dream, I never wanted to wake up.

“Do you think the hotel room has a fridge?” Scarlet reached for her wine and took a sip. “I’d hate to waste it.”

“And we still have dessert,” I reminded her, also reaching for my wine. I’d lost count of how many glasses we’d had. Though they’d been short pours, there’d been a new wine pairing with each course, so maybe eight? “Even if the room has a fridge, I think Cletus will murder us if we don’t eat the dessert here.”

The card Mrs. Olsen had handed over earlier contained the address for the boutique hotel where Ashley and Drew had arranged for accommodation. We’d checked in earlier and were shown to our room, a spacious suite with a water view.

My family had also left champagne cooling and two boxes on the bed—one labeled *Hers* and one labeled *His*. Rather than peek inside, we’d walked on to the restaurant so as not to be late. I’m not quite sure what qualifies a hotel as being a “boutique hotel.” If I had to hazard a guess, I’d say refined details, small size, and willingness to be bribed by well-intentioned yet meddling families.

“I’m sorry. I can’t eat any dessert.” She sounded truly dismayed. “You’ll have to eat mine, and you’re going to have to help me get this dress off.”

“Okay,” I agreed quickly, too quickly, and that pulled a smile out of her.

“Not like that.” She narrowed her eyes on me. “I meant, it’s a miracle it zipped up in the first place.”

“Then you should definitely take it off.”

She heaved a beleaguered sigh, her gaze narrowing further, but she was also smiling. “What am I going to do with you?”

“I have some ideas.”

Now she laughed, rolling her eyes, her cheeks turning from pink to red, and I laughed too.

This was so great, and I didn’t mean the food or the impeccable yet understated ambiance of this upscale restaurant. We could’ve been eating at a café, or an open-air pizzeria, or anywhere as long as we were together.

“You know this is our first date.” Scarlet crossed her arms under her breasts, tilting her head to the side as her gaze moved over me.

I thought about that, realizing she was right. “The first of many.”

“Yes, well said. The first of many. Though this one will be hard to beat. What should we do for our second date?”

“You’re assuming my family hasn’t already planned it.”

She laughed again and I basked in her happiness, leaning forward, needing to be closer, placing my elbow on the corner of the table between us. “But if I get to choose, I say we go dancing.”

“Dancing?” She also leaned forward, mimicking my posture, bringing our faces within inches. “We could dance now.”

“Here?” I questioned, though I realized immediately she was right. The restaurant had a small balcony off the back overlooking the ocean, and the music was soft, sounded like an Italian version of 1940s big band or the equivalent. It would be perfect for slow dancing.

“Yes.” She nodded once, her smile growing and her gaze lowering to my lips. “Or we could save the dancing for our second date and head back to the hotel now.”

I hesitated, debating. Both options seemed selfish. Is this what I could expect from our life together? I suspected every moment with Scarlet, no matter where we were or what we were doing, would feel like an indulgence.

Unable to sit still any longer knowing she could be in my arms, I covered the hand on her lap with mine, entwining our fingers, and pulling her to her feet.

“Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’re dancing.”

Reaching the balcony, I took her to the farthest edge, right against the railing where we stood among the stars above and the reflection of moonlight on the water below. I brought her body flush with mine, lifting her arms to my neck, and settled my hands low on her waist. She watched me with a soft smile as I did this, her nails scratching the back of my neck with light pressure.

After a short while of me holding her and our bodies moving to the music, Scarlet said, “Why yes, Billy. I would like to dance instead of heading back to the room quite yet. Thanks for asking.”

My lips curved, pulling to the side. “Is this your way of telling me I’m bossy?”

“No. Why would I tell you? You already know it.”

I chuckled and she grinned, her eyes dropping to my smile. The song was in Italian, a tenor crooning some romantic ballad I didn't recognize, but I was glad for the slowness of it. Whoever invented the concept of slow dancing was a genius.

Our bodies fit just right, and she was warm and soft. We hadn't kissed like I'd wanted all day and my fingers flexed at the feel of her swaying in perfect time with me. Restless, I placed a kiss on her upper arm near her shoulder, her glowing skin bathed in starlight.

Her full lips distracted me. They may have been painted red now, but I was intimately familiar with their real color. *Maybe slow dancing isn't such a genius idea.*

“Hey,” she whispered, bringing me back to now and the obvious curiosity in her eyes. “What's on your mind?”

I slid my hands to her back, needing more of her in my arms even as I struggled to think of an appropriate topic of conversation not related to the colors of her body. “How was your week?”

“How was my week? That's what you were thinking about?”

I held her tighter, torturing myself with her generous curves beneath too many layers of clothes. “Tell me about your week.”

“It was pretty good, all things considered.” Scarlet relaxed against me, though her tone belied confusion. Resting her temple against my jaw, her breath tickled my neck. “I got some work done. Then Jethro, Ashley, and I took the kids to a cashmere goat farm just outside of Radda.”

“A cashmere goat farm?” I smirked despite the way my blood continued to pump through my veins, thick and hot. “Knowing Jet and Ash, yarn must've been involved.”

“It was. But the children also got a chance to feed the goats.”

I nodded, asking inanely, “Did you feed the goats?”

Scarlet paused, slanting her chin back as her eyes returned to mine. She searched my face, like this might be a trick question.

“I did,” she finally admitted. “We fed them corn; they ate it out of our hands. It tickled a little.”

“That's not hard to believe.”

“What? That it tickled?”

“No. That you had them eating out of the palm of your hand.”

Her eyes moved between mine, pale silver by the light of the moon, and a slow, spreading smile claimed her features.

She chuckled, shaking her head and laying her cheek on my chest. “Oh, you’re cute.”

“I’m cute?” It was not the word I was hoping for.

“Very. And for the record, I like this version of Billy Winston. A lot. He’s fun.”

Now I was grinning again. “Good to know.”

“By the way”—her arms slipped from my neck to encircle my chest—“how was your week?”

“Fine, mostly,” I answered honestly, deciding talk of my week would definitely dampen the fire at the base of my spine. “I had a ton of phone calls, trying to fit everyone in before we left.”

“How’s the senate race stuff?”

She couldn’t have picked a less sexy topic. “We’re just in the early planning phases right now,” I said, feeling my body settle. “Fundraising, organizing the community groups. It’ll ramp up after the first of the year, if I decide to actually do it.”

“You haven’t decided?”

“No.”

Scarlet leaned back again, inspecting me. “You look irritated about something, sound irritated too.”

“You picked up on that?”

“I did. What’s wrong?”

I felt my lips flatten. “I have to fire the campaign liaison the party sent. He’s a pain in my ass, but it can wait until I get back.”

“He’s a pain? How so?” She sounded truly interested.

“He keeps seeing problems where none exist.”

“Like what?”

“Like he’s irritated I have a beard. Wants me to shave it off.”

Her frown was immediate and severe. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

“Please tell me you’re not shaving your beard.” Her arms squeezed me and a spark of something glimmered in her eyes. It looked akin to possessiveness. “In fact, promise me.”

I smiled. “I didn’t know you liked my beard so much.”

“Of course I do. Gives me a reason to touch your face.” As though to demonstrate the truth of her statement, she lightly scratched her nails through it. “I like to pet it. What else is a problem that doesn’t actually exist?”

I pressed her hand to my cheek for a second before bringing her fingers to my lips for a quick kiss, and I answered her question without thinking, “He also says he can’t get me elected unless I’m married.”

Scarlet stopped swaying. In fact, she just full stopped. It took me a moment to realize what I’d said. When I did, my chest tightened uncomfortably, the dull ache throbbing outward reminding me how much this woman controlled every aspect of my physiology.

“Scarlet—”

“Is that so?” she whispered, her hand sliding from my face. “Does it make any difference who the woman is? Or will anyone do?”

“Like I said, I’m firing this guy when I get back. He’s full of shit.” I stared at her intently, wanting to make sure she saw and understood that I was serious.

But her eyes narrowed, seemed to focus inward, like this information gave her plenty to consider. “I guess—” she started, stopped, licked her lips, then gave me back her gaze. “You know what they’ve been calling me in the news?”

I was unable to control the sternness of my frown or my flare of temper. I’d read the news. I knew they’d been calling her Devil’s Daughter.

“They shouldn’t be calling you that. Those people are garbage.”

She managed a weak smile, her arms falling away as I continued to hold her. “Billy.”

“Scarlet.”

“Have you thought about this?”

“About what?” I ground out. Even though I knew exactly what she was about to say, I hoped she’d decide not to say it.

“Do you really think you could win a senate race if you and I were together?” Some of my fury must’ve been visible on my face because she was quick to add, “I mean, publicly. If we were together publicly.”

Careful to keep the volume of my voice low, I asked, “What other way is there to be together, Scarlet?”

She stared at me, her gaze searching, her lips parted like the words were on the tip of her tongue.

“Nope. No way.” I shook my head. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Billy. If being with me publicly means—”

Still shaking my head, I captured Scarlet’s fingers and pulled her back into the main dining room, through it, and out the door. We were going to talk about this, but I wasn’t doing it with hushed voices on the balcony of a restaurant.

Like we were some kind of secret.

CHAPTER TWENTY

CLAIRE

“The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them.”

— ERNEST HEMINGWAY

I marched into the hotel room, turned when I reached the approximate center of it, and faced a livid Billy Winston. “I’m not saying it would be forever. I’m just saying—”

“Don’t.” He prowled back and forth in front of me, his eyes flashing fire.

Perhaps a different approach would be prudent.

“Don’t you think you’ve already given up enough for me?” I placed my fists on my hips. “In what universe am I going to allow you to throw your senate race—everything you’ve worked for—just so we can go out to dinner in public? We can order in! What is the downside of holding off? Just until-until—” I wracked my brain, attempting to estimate an appropriate timeframe we’d need to wait.

Not next year, the senate race would still be going on.

The year after? But only if my record label agreed to soften their image of Claire McClure. If not, then I’d finish my last two contractually obligated albums for them and look for a different label. So, three years? Four? No. Not four. By then he’d have a reelection campaign.

“Until when?” He stopped pacing. “How long this time? I’m finished putting us on hold. And your name shouldn’t be printed in the same

newspaper as your father's. Your names shouldn't even be spoken together, he has nothing to do with you."

"My love, it's not just him, or that they're calling me Devil's Daughter. It's my record label. They've painted me as the vixen of country music—never mind that I sing bluegrass—but even if my father weren't in the news, taking our relationship public makes no sense for your career."

"I haven't decided to run for the senate seat."

"That's ludicrous." I lifted a warning finger. "Don't you dare end your candidacy because of me."

He paused, considering me. Some of his fury faded. "What if it weren't because of you? What if I had to end it for a different reason?"

Unbelievable. "Oh yeah? Like what?" Crossing my arms, I glared at him. He drove me crazy. Cletus was right about Billy vying for the Most Honorable Martyr award.

"Like—" His stare searching before turning inward. "What if I were in jail?"

"In jail? For what?"

"I need to tell you something." Billy's gaze cut back to mine and held. I did not like the look in his eyes.

A fissure of alarm had me closing the distance between us and reaching for his hand. "What? What is it?"

He'd dropped his eyes to where our fingers were tangled and his Adam's apple moved like he was struggling to swallow. "I did something. I don't regret it, but it was illegal. And when I get back to Tennessee, I might be arrested for it if I don't turn myself in first."

He sounded so stark, so resigned, like he'd already accepted his fate. This whole time we'd been reconnecting, finding our way back to each other, had this been weighing on him?

Lifting his palm level with my chest, I pressed it between both of mine, my heart suddenly going haywire. "What happened? What did you do?"

Billy glanced around the room and then tugged me over to the couch, sitting us next to each other. Once we were settled, he held my hand, cradling it, studying it, as though this might be the last time he saw it, or me.

"You're scaring me," I blurted, staring at his grim profile, fighting the urge to climb in his lap or handcuff us together. *Note to self, always bring handcuffs.*

“I am scary.” The slant of his lips told me he was frustrated, but not with me.

“No. You’re not.” Now he was *really* scaring me. “Just tell me what happened. We’ll figure it out.”

The night your—Razor, the night Razor attacked Roscoe and I found them . . . I cut his hands.”

He blinked once and then lifted his eyes to mine, his blue eyes steady as they braced and inspected me for my reaction.

Meanwhile, I was confused and could do little more than stare at him and repeat his words over and over again in my mind, searching for the meaning. *I cut his hands. I cut his hands. I cut his hands.*

“Whose hands?”

“Razor’s.”

I reared back, my grip on him tightening instinctively. “You did what?”

“When I heard the gunshots that night, I turned my car around and drove back to the diner.” Again, as Billy spoke, he sounded so calm, resigned to some mysterious fate. “I walked in, Razor was standing over Simone, knife raised. I knocked him out, and then I put ice on Roscoe and Simone, that’s the end of the official story.”

“Okay?”

“The FBI hasn’t released the fact that sometime between me knocking out Razor and the ambulance arriving, his hands were cut open. Scarlet, I sliced his tendons in half, straight through the palm. Your father will never be able to pick up or hold anything ever again.”

Originating at the base of my skull, a shiver raced down my spine and I flinched, struggling to understand the jumble of emotions vying for first place.

“I don’t regret it,” he said quietly, fiercely in the face of my continued silence. “After what he did to you, after what he did to me, I don’t regret it. But I didn’t do it for you. I did it for myself. And I’d do it again.”

Tears flooded and stung my eyes and nose as I looked at him. My dear Billy, with the voice of an angel and the heart of a lion. The sweet boy who’d brought me hot chocolate and cinnamon rolls in the winter, who’d changed my bandages and snuck me into his house so I wouldn’t sleep in the cold. He’d been the first person to ask about my hopes and dreams, to make me believe in possibility. And he’d been the only person I trusted to hold me, keeping watch and the monsters at bay.

My love. The strongest and best man I'd ever known. What had life done to him?

Throwing my arms around his neck, I clambered onto his lap. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry."

"Shh. Don't be sorry." His arms came around me, held me tight as I straddled his hips. "You have nothing to be sorry about."

But I did. I'd exposed him to my father, I'd shown Billy my scars, and he'd been beaten because of me. I couldn't imagine the kind of festering anger he carried. I couldn't believe his resentment hadn't already swallowed him whole.

And in all of this, I didn't understand myself or what I was feeling. My weary heart both rejoiced and mourned. I'd lived my whole life terrified of my father. Reason told me he was in jail and could never hurt me or anyone else again. Reason told me the double panic rooms in my house—both in Green Valley and in Nashville—were absurd. Reason told me to live my life without constantly looking over my shoulder for his shape in the shadows. Nightmares don't care about reason.

Now he could and would never hold a knife again. My solace in this fact was palpable, a corporeal thing. And yet, at what cost? I despised that my father had inspired such a level of hatred in Billy that he'd committed this violent act. Maybe Billy was broken, maybe not. At the very least, his soul was wounded and that was unacceptable.

I was a mess of horrified relief and grief, uncertain how to feel or what to feel first. But one thing was for certain, there was no way *in hell* Billy would be going to jail for this. No way. No. Fucking. Way.

"What can I do to make this right?" I cried against his neck, wishing I could take this burden from him, wishing I could make it all go away.

"Nothing." His fingers threaded into my hair, stroking it and then stroking my back. "Everything is right."

"What are you going to do?"

He placed a kiss on my neck, speaking against my skin, "I don't know."

"You *are not* going to jail for this." I held him with all my strength.

"We'll see."

Abruptly, I leaned away, gripping his shoulders and capturing his eyes. "No. We will not *see*. You will not go to jail for this. You will not. You will not turn yourself in. We could—we'll travel forever. Move to a country with no extradition treaty with the US."

His mouth slanted with a weary smile, but his eyes warmed as they trailed over my face. “And live off what?”

“I can work anywhere.” I shrugged. “And I’ll fly back to the States for the promotional stuff. I’ll be your sugar momma.”

His hands slid down my back until they rested just above my bottom. “No. No, I don’t want that. I’d miss my family. They might not need me as much anymore, but I still need them just the same.”

“But, Billy—” Desperation built a mountain in my chest, painful and tight. “Do the police have enough evidence to charge you?”

“The FBI is running the investigation and, no. I don’t think so, no. It’s his word against my silence.”

“But why be silent? Why not just say you didn’t do it?”

His weary smile grew. “I’m not going to lie.”

I fisted my fingers into the fabric of his shirt, frustration building a new mountain next to desperation, but hot like a volcano. “Yes. You will lie. You will say you didn’t do it and then it’ll be his word against your word, not your silence.”

Billy lowered his forehead to my shoulder.

“Please. Please. Lie. Lie and be done with it.”

“I’m tired, Scarlet,” he whispered. “I’m so tired.”

My chest ached, I ached. I firmed my lip and voice before my chin could give a betraying wobble or my throat could clog with emotion. I lifted my eyes to the ceiling, blinking to stop new tears.

Of course he was tired. He’d been shouldering so many burdens all alone for so many years. No wonder his family had seen fit to meddle. Billy needed a respite, an oasis, a safe place. He needed to be protected. And rescued.

“Okay, okay.” Pushing my fingers into the short hairs at the back of his neck, I massaged him, touched him. “We’ll talk later. But tonight, for now, you let it go. Let me handle it.”

He sighed like the breath came from his bones. His hands slid lower and pressed me forward, inadvertently hiking my dress up in the process. I didn’t care.

All I cared about was showing him how much I loved him, and needed him, and how essential he was to me. Because now that we’d found each other, I was never letting him go.

* * *

Billy slept.

We'd kissed. He'd removed his jacket, shoes, socks, belt, dress shirt, and tie. *So many layers of clothes.* Then we'd cuddled and kissed. Eventually, he'd slept, curled around me, his exhales falling against my shoulder.

Meanwhile, I channeled my inner Cletus and plotted.

Ben had told me a few times that I didn't understand the difference between right and wrong like other folks. Perhaps my childhood was the issue, how I'd been raised, an intrinsic distrust of the law. My brain prioritized honor and justice over lawfulness. Laws varied depending on the place and time, required documentation, due process, and interpretation. You couldn't count on the law to serve justice.

Honor didn't need to be explained. It just was. Within most people existed honorable impulses, whether they listened to those impulses or not. Honor was the reason the majority of folks rooted for the underdog and never questioned why.

What Billy had done wasn't lawful, but it was justice, and now he refused to lie out of some insane sense of honor, a sense of honor I didn't share. Not in this case.

I'll lie for him. I'll save him.

Over the course of my life, when possible, numbing myself had always been preferable to suffocating on fear. Fear, as an emotion, fascinated me, my relationship with it a pendulum. To survive, fear was essential. To truly live, fear was detrimental. But over these last few weeks with Billy I'd come to realize that if I feared what I couldn't control, then I would fear everything.

The answer wasn't to hide from what scared me most, but to call it out, to confront it, to destroy it.

Restless, I extracted myself—slowly, carefully—from Billy's arms and tiptoed to the bathroom, pausing briefly when I spotted the *Hers* box that had been left on the bed but that we'd set aside earlier. Snatching it up, I closed the bathroom door and flipped on the light. Once the lid was removed, I found my phone, passport, and wallet, and I took it as a sign.

I knew what I had to do.

Also within the box was a clean outfit of mine; the Winstons had obviously borrowed it just to hide it here. Stripping down to my undies, I mapped out my next moves, what I'd need to do in order to fly back to Nashville as soon as possible, how to get in touch with Simone Payton, how to bring Cletus up to speed without telling him too much and compromising him.

I didn't want to put him or any of the Winstons in legal jeopardy, but I did need their help if my plan was going to work. We'd band together, as a team, to rescue Billy. We would eliminate the threat of my father and I'd use the Nashville Music Festival as a cover story.

As I was pulling on the clothes from the box, I paused, catching my reflection in the mirror. Specifically, the determined set of my jaw. I didn't like mirrors. I didn't like seeing myself, a replica of my disinterested mother staring back at me, marked with my father's knife.

Billy thinks you're beautiful.

My attention drifted lower to my stomach and I turned, looking over my shoulder at the scars on my back. They'd faded, but unlike the ones on my arms and legs, they hadn't responded to the cosmetic laser therapy. Those marks were basically invisible now, enough that I felt comfortable wearing bathing suit bottoms and tank tops. But the ones on my back would never fully disappear.

The whole time I was with Ben, he'd never noticed my scars. We'd been intimate, but always in the dark. He'd barely touched me during or after, and I'd never felt the urge to share the burden of my past with him. He didn't carry burdens with grace, he didn't like being needed if it meant giving more than he received. I comprehended that clearly now.

But Billy had seen my back. He'd changed my bandages when I was fourteen, and he must've seen them again last night in the shower. Billy had borne my burdens with me. This whole time, he'd carried them silently, and then asked me for more.

Being with Billy now was like coming home to myself, to the person I once was. She was scarred, she'd struggled and lived through dark times. And yet, I'd missed her, her bravery, her fierce fortitude, her sense of justice. I didn't realize how much I'd missed her until right this moment, on the precipice of confronting my nightmares.

Scarlet St. Claire had been wholly her own person, and she was who Billy saw. She was the woman he considered beautiful, and she was who

looked back at me now.

Placing the clothes back on the counter, I pulled off my bra and underwear and set them aside. Returning to the room, I left the bathroom door open to allow light to fill the space. I climbed back in the bed and moved as close to my handsome man as possible. I then crept on him for a few minutes, watching him sleep, and I didn't even feel weird about it. He was mine as assuredly as I was his. We belonged to each other. I comprehended that clearly now too.

Lifting to my elbow, I placed a lingering kiss on the corner of his mouth. Then another. Then one on his chin.

"Scarlet," he muttered, stirring.

I smiled, liking that he associated me with kisses even when he was asleep.

"I need you," I whispered, kissing his lips fully this time, sliding my hand beneath his undershirt to feel the beguiling form and shape of him, the hair on his chest, the solid muscles beneath.

Billy started, his eyes blinking open, still dazed with sleep. I witnessed the exact moment I came into focus. He reached for me, groan-growling when he discovered I was naked.

"Scarlet," he rasped between slow, dragging kisses. "If this is a dream, don't wake me up."

"It's not a dream."

"Then touch me." He encircled my wrist, redirecting my palm to the front of his pants, encouraging me to unbutton his fly and reach inside. A thrill raced up my arm at the bold contact and my stomach twisted with lovely heat. While he rolled me onto my back, his mouth lowering to love my breasts, his big hand caressing and then spreading my legs, he came alive in my hand. Hard and ready, his hips rolled, mimicking his seductive movements from last night.

But his undershirt was still on and I wanted his skin. I wanted all of him.

Gently lifting from the bed and shifting his palm to my breast, I rose to my knees, grabbed the hem of his shirt, and tugged it up and off. He allowed it, but then he was on top of me again, pushing me back, rising above to divest himself of his pants and boxers.

Bracing on one arm, he used his knee to gently nudge mine apart while gliding his palm from my hip, over my stomach, my ribs, higher, his

movements slow, almost dreamlike. He watched his hand on my body and my instinctual responses to all his touches.

This was so different from last night. Last night had been a starved frenzy. But now he took his time toying with me, moving his thigh between my open legs, applying both friction and pressure. My need built. My hand became grasping while he continued his tender touches, lovingly licking and sucking my breasts, my neck, my ear, like I was a buffet of fine foods to be sampled.

“I need you,” I panted, shivering, my toes pointing reflexively, my body tensing with anticipation. “Please.”

I felt his smile at my neck as he replaced his thigh with his fingers, petting me, cupping me. “I love it when you say please. So polite.” He bit me, soothing the spot with a lick as his fingers mimicked the swirl of his tongue.

He liked me saying *please*? Okay then.

“Please,” I repeated, trying to reach for him. “Please.”

I felt the change in him, the stiffening of his muscles in his stomach and sides. Finally, he settled between my open legs, gripping himself and capturing my mouth with a kiss as he filled me in one fluid stroke. I shivered again, pushing my head against the bed, my back arching, stretching at the vital invasion.

“Say thank you.” His voice was gruff as he moved, his hips rolling rather than thrusting, rubbing the most crucial part of my anatomy with each sliding stroke.

I moaned instead of saying thank you, gasping, beyond words. I could only feel, the texture of his rough, hot skin, his hard body, his hand on me, plucking and rolling my nipple. The warm, heavy ache between my legs intensified, coiled until I entirely lost my grip on self-possession, spiraling.

Abruptly, he lifted to his knees, his hands bracketing my hips and lifting me, his stare hungrily moving over my face as I lost myself to the pleasure of it. I closed my eyes, my body bowing as I came apart, and still he moved.

Tremors fading, my lashes fluttered open and I found his gaze—dazed and hot and greedy—waiting for me. His eyes trailed to my chest, stomach, and finally to where he entered me. Sliding one hand to the front of my hip, he rubbed a circle around my clitoris with his thumb, causing my breath to hitch as my body coiled anew with sudden sharpness.

Grabbing the sheets in my mindlessness, searching for purchase, I splintered once more, the pain of it matched only by the pleasure. Vaguely, I was aware that this time he also lost himself, lying on top of me, his mouth fastening to mine as his hips jerked, thrusting roughly, filling me completely.

“I love you.” The words burst from him as he gathered and crushed me against his chest, rolling us to the side. “Marry me, please. Marry me.”

He sounded so lost, so vulnerable. Even in the aftermath of my bliss, the sound of his plea squeezed my heart, sobering the intoxication of the moment and solidifying my decision to rescue him. Pushing against his chest to wiggle free, I captured his face in my hands, holding his gaze intently so he could see the clarity in mine.

“I will marry you. You will be my husband, I will be your wife. And I will keep you safe.”

He blinked, as though my words startled him. Or perhaps he hadn’t realized he’d expressed his hopes out loud.

So I added, “But first you have to ask me twenty-four hours *after* we make love, when I’m convinced you’re thinking straight.”

A surprised, joyous looking smile split his face, his gaze suddenly sharp, but then he frowned just as suddenly. “We didn’t use a condom.”

I laughed, shaking my head and kissing his lips. “No. We didn’t. And I might get pregnant. And we haven’t talked about whether that’s something you want.”

“It is. But is it something—”

“Yes. With you, yes.” I placed featherlight kisses over his eyes, but when I leaned back, he was still frowning.

“I don’t want you to feel rushed,” he said solemnly, his gaze searching, his arms tightening around my body.

“Are you kidding? Was that a joke?”

A hint of a grin softened his features, but his tone turned thoughtful. “I keep telling myself there’s no rush, we should take our time, get to know each other as we are now.”

Unable to stay the impulse, I leaned forward and nibbled on his ear, whispering, “How’s that been going for you?”

“Not well.” His voice was gravel, his hands sliding down to my bottom. “I don’t know how to be cautious with you.”

That made me smile.

“We’ll add it to the list of items to discuss. Go back to sleep.” I turned, snuggling my back against his front as he nuzzled my ear.

“You got what you wanted, and now you let me sleep? Is that it?” he asked with obvious humor and affection.

“Yes. But I reserve the right to wake you if additional services are required.”

He laughed, a deep, rumble of a sound, tickling my ribs with one hand and holding me hostage with the other. “Good,” he whispered hotly against my ear, palming my breast. “I live to be of service.”

My body liked the sound of that, and my heart loved the smile in his voice. It was my brain that broke up the party, reminding me why I needed Billy to sleep.

He’d put everything on the line for me time and time again, risked his safety, his freedom, his health, his soul. He’d said his actions and decisions to save me from Razor had been for himself and now I finally understood. It wasn’t a debt to repay. He loved me, and so Billy had done whatever it took to keep me safe.

I couldn’t let him go to jail. What I was about to do was for myself. *I love him, and I will do whatever it takes to keep him safe.*

“Sleep time,” I whispered, forcing my body to relax.

He kissed my shoulder, and I felt him shift, arrange himself in a comfortable position all the while keeping hold of me. I waited until his breathing evened. I waited until he was asleep again. And then I waited a half hour longer, listening to him, feeling the press of his body, memorizing it.

Then I stood, showered, dressed, grabbed my phone, passport, and wallet, and wrote Billy a quick note before I left.

Dear Billy,

I was invited to perform at the Nashville Music Festival, but I was too afraid to commit. You’ve made me brave, your strength inspires me to be brave, and so I’ve decided to go. I couldn’t sleep, and if I want to make it on time I have to leave now.

I’ll meet you in Rome at the end of the week and we’ll pick up exactly where we left off (i.e. you naked, me naked, provision of services, etc.). Here’s a haiku to see you through:

*Past, present, future.
I'll never regret any
Moment loving you.*

-Love, Scarlet

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CLAIRE

“He lay back, put his arm over his eyes, and tried to hold onto the anger, because the anger made him feel brave. A brave man could think. A coward couldn't.”

— STEPHEN KING, MISERY

“Cletus.”
“Scarlet?”

“Did I wake you?” I glanced around me, mollified by all the empty seats surrounding my chair at the airport. Still, I made certain to keep my volume low so as not to be overheard.

“No. I was just waking up.” His scratchy voice told me he was lying.

But I didn't have time be polite. “I need to talk to you about something very important. I need your help.”

Without hesitating, and sounding much more alert, he said, “Proceed.”

“I'm at the airport, about to fly back to Nashville.” I didn't want to lie, but I also didn't wish to expose him or Simone or anyone else to unnecessary risk. “I don't know how many details you—uh—know about that night Billy rescued Simone and Roscoe at the diner, but the FBI are investigating Billy for assaulting my father while he was unconscious. They think Billy cut his hands.”

Now Cletus did hesitate before asking, “Did Billy tell you he cut Razor's hands?”

“Did he tell you?” I countered.

He was quiet for a beat, like this question was a riddle. “No. He hasn’t talked to me about it and I didn’t ask him, but I suspect.” His voice reminded me of Billy’s, so stark, resigned. “I have spoken to Simone about it, however. She gave me a friendly heads-up about the FBI’s investigation. Between you and me, it’s been weighing on my mind.”

“I think I have a plan,” I whispered, tracking a man in a suit as he walked by my seat.

“You have a plan?”

“I do. But I need your help. I need you and Simone to get me in to see my father tomorrow, as soon as I touch down in Nashville.”

“Scarlet. No. You will not be exposed to that—”

“Listen to me, just wait a minute and listen. I’m guessing Razor won’t talk to anyone, right? Probably not even his legal team. But he’ll talk to me.”

Cletus made a grumbly grunting noise. “Why on earth would you want to talk to him?”

“I think, if Simone can get me in to see him, I can get Razor to admit he cut his own hands.”

“Wait. You don’t think Billy cut Razor’s hands?”

Choosing my words very carefully, I said, “I think Razor will admit to me that he framed Billy. I think I can then make a statement to the FBI swearing to this as fact. And then I think they’ll drop the investigation and your brother won’t go to jail. That’s what I think.”

I listened as something rustled, then the barest sound of footsteps, then a door close. “I hope you’re happy. I’m now sitting in the bathroom at the butt crack of dawn so Jenn can’t overhear your plan to commit perjury.”

“Who says it’s perjury?”

“Scarlet.”

“You have a better idea?”

“Fine. Fine. Let’s say you go see Razor. Let’s say you swear up and down, left and right that he admitted to framing Billy. Don’t you think it’s suspicious that you’re flying back in town just to meet with your father and exonerate the man you’re in a serious relationship with, about to marry, give birth to a litter of babies, and live happily ever after with for the rest of time?”

Despite the direness of the situation, I couldn’t help my involuntary amusement. *If you give Cletus an inch, he’ll take a light-year.*

“No. Because I’m not in town to see my father. I’m really there to perform at the Nashville Music Festival. Seeing my father is just a whim, a curiosity. I have no ulterior motive.”

“Oh yeah? Then what about being in a relationship with Billy? You don’t think they’ll see right through your bias?”

“Not if they don’t know Billy and I are together. So far, no one knows. Billy and I will be in Rome and by the time we get back to the States, it’ll all be over. The FBI will already have closed the case, stopped the investigation. Reasonable doubt counts for a lot. That’s also why I was thinking, if Simone could ask one or more of the agents to somehow overhear my side of the conversation, then it wouldn’t just be my word.”

“Those conversations between inmates and visitors are completely private. No one will hear him unless he agrees to it. You think Razor will agree to letting the FBI listen in on his conversation with you?”

“He doesn’t have to. In fact, it’s better if they don’t hear what he says. But I want them to hear me. I want them to hear what I say. Then no one is lying.”

“Except you.”

“I never said I was going to lie. I simply—”

“Right, right. You *think* you can get him to admit he cut his own hands.” He grumbled once more, something indistinct, but then said, “Simone speaks highly of that Agent Nelson. She’d make the most sense.”

A flash of hope burst in my chest and I sat up straighter. “Does that mean you’ll help?”

“On the scale from one to ten of the illegal things I’ve done—sorry, *allegedly illegal*—this is like a three. Maybe even a two point five,” he mumbled. “We can’t let anyone else know what you have planned. I’m not putting Simone or anyone else at peril. We tell everyone you’re there for the festival, but you had a sudden desire to visit dear old dad in prison.”

“No one is in peril—not you, not me—because I’m not doing anything illegal.”

He ignored my statement. “Billy will be fit to be tied when he discovers I let you go face-to-face with that monster.”

“You’re not letting me do anything, Cletus. This is my decision. I’m just asking you to help me get into the prison. That’s all.”

“Even so, Billy isn’t going to like this when he finds out.”

“I know,” I said honestly. “I know he won’t. But Cletus, I couldn’t tell him. You understand that, right?”

“I do.” He sounded tired. “Better than most, I understand it’s sometimes better to ask for forgiveness than permission, especially when it comes to protecting the ones you love. But, after, you have to tell him the truth.”

“I will.”

“Right away. No more of y’all keeping noble, long-suffering secrets. I will lock you together in another basement.”

“I’ll tell him. No more secrets. But don’t you think it’s time someone stepped up and helped him? He’s done so much, not just for me, but for you, your family, for Green Valley, for Tennessee. Someone has to put him first. Someone has to keep him safe.”

“This isn’t about paying a debt is it? You know he did what he did because—”

“Because he loves me,” I finished for him. “And I swear, this isn’t about paying a debt. Between people who love each other, there is no debt, only surplus. I’m doing this for myself.”

“You’re flying back to Nashville to have a chat with Razor Dennings for *yourself*. Sure. Seems legit.”

“Is that a yes? Will you help me?”

My friend grumbled something, sighed, grumbled something else, but eventually said, “Okay. Yes. I’ll help.”

* * *

When you’re the only civilian with a stampede of FBI agents, and are escorted into the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in Nashville surrounded by said stampede of agents, you will draw curious glances, glares, and side-eyes. This is especially true when you’re the first visitor Razor Dennings has agreed to see or talk to outside of his legal team.

Or maybe the employees and guards gave me a second glance because they recognized me as country’s reigning bad girl of bluegrass? Doubtful.

Build a wall. One brick at a time. Don’t let anything in. Don’t let him in.

I’d been repeating these words to myself since leaving the hotel in Venice almost twenty-four hours prior, an old incantation I hadn’t summoned in almost two decades. I thought I’d prepared, I thought I’d built

the wall that would keep me safely numb. But walking through this place reminded me of the Iron Wraith's compound—with all its stark cement, random stairwells, labyrinth of hallways—and now I'd broken out in a cold sweat.

For Billy. Do it for Billy. Think of Billy.

That helped.

“Through here, Ms. McClure.” Special Agent Hisako Nelson opened a black metal door and gestured for me to step inside it. “In a few minutes, your father will be at the second stall. Pick up the phone if you want to talk to him. As you requested, I’ll be just out of sight, listening in. If you want to end the discussion, you can just stand up and leave. Okay?”

I nodded my understanding, but I hesitated just inside the door, my feet refusing to take another step forward. I was so afraid. I knew he couldn’t touch me—he’d be behind the glass partition, there were guards, this was a maximum security prison, he couldn’t even hold a knife—and yet, the fear paralyzed me.

“Ms. McClure?”

I glanced at Agent Nelson. *Simone’s friend*, I reminded myself.

Agent Nelson had picked me up from the airport with her stampede of FBI. She’d made no effort to disguise her inspection of me then, and she made no effort to disguise it now.

“Ms. McClure, are you sure you want to do this?”

I nodded again.

Her inspection intensified. “You seem terrified.”

“I am,” I whispered.

The agent shifted on her feet, seeming agitated, and glanced behind me to the stampede of agents. “Back off. Give us a minute.”

I heard reluctant footsteps on the linoleum floor as the agents behind me moved away, giving us space. Hisako Nelson reminded me of that actress Linda Park, only taller, with a deeper voice and a take-no-shit attitude.

Her gaze tracked the withdrawal of her fellow agents, and then moved back to me. “Why are you here? If you’re so scared of him—and believe me, I get it, he’s fucking terrifying—why fly all the way back from Italy to see him?”

I’d practiced this part, and my desire to be believable for Billy’s sake edged aside my terror paralysis. For the moment.

“He’s not why I’m in Nashville. I didn’t fly back to see him.”

“He’s not?”

“No.” I fiddled with the edge of my sweater. “I’m here performing at the Nashville Music Festival. My-my father was arrested while I was overseas.”

“And yet, here you are.” Her gaze narrowed, moving over me as though my goals might be written someplace on my clothes. “Again, if he scares you, why are you here?”

I pressed my lips together, angling my chin in a show of defensiveness. “He’s my father.”

“He’s a serial killer.”

“That’s not proven.” Good Lord, I felt like I was going to be sick as soon as the words left my mouth.

Her lip curled in a display of sudden disgust. “You know, I’ve met your mother. You look a lot like her, sound like her too.”

The cold resolve and detachment that had evaded me as soon as we walked into the prison made a sudden reappearance. Obviously, Agent Nelson believed my act so far. And that was good. I didn’t need her respect, but I did need her to trust I had no hidden motives. Thus, comparing me to my mother was an excellent start.

“I’m ready,” I said, meeting her stare squarely.

“Go ahead.” She gestured to the hall dismissively.

Turning from her, swathed in my cloak of numbness and determination, I told my feet to move, I told my feet to stop at the second booth. I told my body to sit in the chair facing the glass. I told myself to cross my arms. I told myself to wait.

Out of the corner of my eye I noted—and rejoiced—that Agent Nelson hadn’t closed the door and other agents had started to gather. I knew they wouldn’t be able to hear my father’s side of the conversation, but as long as she kept that door open even a little, they’d hear everything I said. Which meant I had to be believable. I had to say my lines perfectly.

Build a wall. One brick at a time. Don’t let anything in. Don’t let him in.

I didn’t allow myself to think about what would happen next. The truth was I had no idea what to expect, but the goal was to talk to him for fifteen minutes—at most—and then leave. That’s it. That’s all. I could do that. *For Billy. Do it for Billy. Think of Billy.*

A loud buzzing sound followed by the sound of a door unlocking yanked me from my thoughts and I flinched. My muscles tensed, ready to

flee, and I held my breath. Using a mental crowbar to force my features to relax—or at least appear relaxed—I carefully wiped my face of all expression.

Wrestling with my frantically beating heart, I retreated within myself, telling my mind to take me far from here. *Think of Billy. Think of Venice. Think of barley fields and red poppies.* My heart slowed even as a voice within my head screamed at me to leave, to run, to flee. I smothered it.

Vaguely, I was aware that he'd sat down in the seat on the other side of the glass and bile rose up my esophagus. I felt a little faint. I needed to breathe. *This is it. Think of Billy.* I drew in a lungful of bracing air, held it, and I lifted my gaze.

Those electric blue eyes—which were inescapable in my nightmares—stared at me from behind wire-rimmed glasses. I breathed out slowly. They were still terrifying. I firmed my lips. I held his stare. My jaw ached.

He watched me for several seconds, inspecting me as I sat perfectly still, a wave of revulsion followed the trail of his eyes. My heart didn't precisely slow, but it had ceased galloping. Then he moved. I flinched instinctively, even though all he did was reach for the phone. Clumsily, he held it pressed between the back of his hands. I watched as he used a combination of his chin, shoulder, and the side of his limp fingers to position it in place.

I blinked, my frown genuine as I observed this shackled man and his awkward attempt to hold a telephone receiver. While he struggled, I allowed myself to truly look, to see my father as he was now and not the menacing figure in my memory.

His once long, black hair had been sheared short. He wore a cream-colored jumpsuit, much too baggy for his thin frame, that blended in with his pale skin. The large lenses of his glasses seemed too big for his narrow face. I couldn't help but think, *He's a lot smaller than I remember.*

Then he lifted his chin toward the receiver on my end and mouthed something like, *Pick it up.*

I did.

As soon as I brought it to my ear, his voice said, "Baby girl," but it was slightly distorted by the connection, like talking to someone through a paper cup. Eyes narrowed, he continued his piercing inspection of me. "I can't believe you're here."

“I can’t either.” My voice was flat, but something about it or my words had him cracking a smile.

“Fucking dry humor.” He lifted his chin, trying to move his mouth closer to the receiver. “Why are you here? Huh? You working for the law too?”

“I’m a singer. I work for myself.”

This statement seemed to amuse him as well. “Yeah, I know. They call you the Devil’s Daughter. I like that a lot. You’ve done me proud.”

I swallowed against another threatening rise of stomach acid, shifting in my seat, suddenly wanting a scalding hot shower.

“What do you want?” His gaze grew assessing, sharper. “And don’t tell me nothing. You only come see your daddy when you want something.”

I contemplated his statement even as I spoke without vetting my words, spurred by a sudden morbid curiosity. “I do want something.”

For Billy. Do it for Billy. Think of Billy . . . But also, think of yourself.

“That’s my girl.”

“But how will I earn it? You can’t hold a knife. What happened to your hands?”

“Fucking Billy Winston happened to my hands. But I’ll see him rot.”

Morbid curiosity became something else at the sound of Billy’s name passing his lips. *How dare he say Billy’s name.*

Instead of fear, I felt anger, for what he’d done to me, for what he’d done to Billy and all those families. It rose like a tidal wave, washing away every trepidation and worry. I was a warrior of justice. I rode on the wings of righteousness. I would destroy this man. I would protect and keep Billy safe. And yes, I would do it for Billy.

But I would also do it for myself. For all the little Scarlets out there, abused and neglected and so terribly afraid. I would do it for the girl I’d been. The girl who’d been content to merely survive, who didn’t dare dream or hope for more. I would do it for her. I would do it for a future free of fear.

Think of Scarlet.

Something about the shift in my expression perplexed him. His gaze darted over me, confusion behind his eyes.

Now was the time. *Do it now.*

“What? Why would you do that? What on earth possessed you to cut your own hands?” I asked loud enough for Agent Nelson to hear.

He started to lean forward but then stopped himself as the phone slipped slightly from his shoulder. “What the fuck are you talking about?” he snarled, clearly distracted and frustrated by his inability to hold the phone.

“To get revenge on Darrell?” I paused, as though thinking. “That makes no sense. How would cutting your own hands get revenge on Darrell?”

Razor stared at me, his lips parted slightly like he was uncertain what was happening or what I’d just said. I stared at him, pretending to hang on his every word. I needed his mouth to move. It didn’t matter what he said, I just needed him to speak.

And then he did. “Darrell Winston’s son is the reason I can’t hold this phone right now—”

For Scarlet.

“You held it between your knees?” I made a horrified face. “You hate Darrell Winston so much, you’d maim yourself just to frame his son?”

He blinked, plainly bewildered and looking at me like I’d lost my marbles. But then in the very next instant my father’s eyes widened with realization. I watched as it all clicked into place for him, what I was doing, why I was there, and satisfaction beat like a drum in my chest.

That’s right, motherfucker. Game over.

“You bitch.” His insult was more breath than sound as his shocked eyes moved over me, like I was a stranger, or like he was seeing me for the first time.

My mouth curved, a smile of gratification only he would be able to see. “I wish you hadn’t told me this. I have no choice but to tell the FBI the truth about what you did to yourself. I can’t be an accomplice in your attempts to frame an innocent man.”

My father exploded, launching from his seat. Despite the fact that he was on the other side of the glass and shackled, I flinched back, my heart jumping to my throat and taking off like a frightened rabbit. The way he looked at me, like a wild animal, murder in his eyes, I knew I’d never forget it. And he threw himself against the glass over and over, spitting as he screamed, telling me he was going to kill me, until two guards hustled in and attempted to restrain him.

His enraged shouts could be heard through the phone I still had pressed to my ear. So I hung it up. I stood. I turned away. I walked back to the black metal door on wobbly legs, allowing my steps to falter when I caught sight of Agent Nelson standing there, her arms crossed.

“Anything you want to share with the FBI, Ms. McClure? Before you head to your concert?”

I walked past her and into the hall, leaning against the wall for support and flinching again as the buzzing sound filled the air followed by a heavy, hopefully impenetrable door being closed.

I can't believe I just did that.

“Do you need a minute?” She appeared at my elbow, her arms still crossed. “We can take you back to our field office if you don't want to talk here.”

Lifting a shaking hand to my forehead, I didn't have to pretend to be rattled. “He—he said he cut his own hands to frame Darrell Winston's son. But, I swear, that's all he said. I don't even know why he told me.”

The Agent's perceptive gaze moved over me, her features unreadable. “Is this your official statement? Would you be willing to sign an affidavit?”

I hesitated, hoping I looked torn and knowing I still looked scared. Obviously, I wanted to make an official statement, the official statement was the entire point of this. But Cletus told me it might raise suspicion if I seemed too willing to go on record. Thus, the hesitation.

My heart was out of control. I closed my eyes but then quickly opened them again when an image of my father flashed through my mind—demented, homicidal. *Right after I leave this place, I'm calling my therapist.*

“Ms. McClure, it's either here or at the FBI office. Your choice.”

“I have to make an official statement?” I needed to focus. The hard part was over. If I didn't pull myself together, all of this would be a waste. “But, w-why can't I just tell you? What if the—what if *people* find out I ratted on my father?” Hopefully this was enough hesitating because I didn't think I had it in me to keep this up much longer.

Agent Nelson traded a look with someone over my shoulder. The other agents. I'd forgotten for a moment they were still present, and I sent a prayer upward. *Please God, if this works, I will never lie about anything ever again.*

“After what we all just overheard, you will have to make an official statement. But we can petition the court to seal your identity,” she said judiciously. “I'm sorry, but that's the best we can offer.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

* BILLY *

“Accepting help is its own kind of strength.”

— KIERA CASS, HAPPILY EVER AFTER

“**D**on’t freak out.”

I glanced over my shoulder at Cletus, somewhat surprised to find him hovering in the doorway to my room.

“Oh. You’re speaking to me again?” Checking my phone, I saw I had two hours until my next call. I wasn’t looking forward to it. Karl, the incompetent campaign liaison, had found something new to panic over and wanted to talk.

Standing from my chair, I crossed my arms and leaned back against the desk. “I already apologized to Jenn.”

Ever since I returned to the villa from Venice yesterday, Cletus had been pointedly avoiding me. I suspected this was for a few reasons. One, Scarlet wasn’t with me. Two, we’d left the restaurant in Venice without eating the dessert Jenn had prepared. Of the two, my brother probably considered the latter a bigger sin.

He was more fanatical about his wife’s desserts than he was about his own homemade boar sausage. To put this into perspective, I once turned down a second helping of sausage and a priest appeared at our door the next day, ready to conduct an exorcism on the demon that had obviously taken possession of my soul.

“When was I not speaking to you?” Hands shoved in his pockets, he slowly descended the two stairs into my room. “I’ve just been busy is all.”

“Right.” Studying my brother, I took note of how his attention seemed to be pointed everywhere but me, a telltale sign he was feeling uneasy.

“This is a nice room.” He dragged a finger along the top of my dresser. He inspected his finger. “You should dust.”

“You’ve been in this room before. What’s on your mind, Cletus?” I’d spent most of yesterday before returning to the villa wandering around Florence, taking in the sights on my own and thinking through things. I especially thought about that moment right after we’d made love in Venice when Scarlet had said she’d be my wife.

Which was why, when I found myself at the Ponte Vecchio, a block of jewelry stores bridging the Arno, I bought us rings. At the very least, even if she turned me down, Scarlet would learn that I never bluff.

Clearing his throat, Cletus returned his hand to his pocket and rocked back and forth on his feet, sneaking a quick peek at me. “So, I may have done something—or agreed to something—that has me fixating, as it were.”

“Fixating as in frustrated? Or fixating as in anxious?”

“Anxious.” He frowned, looking anxious. “I don’t regret it, and I trust in time you’ll see it was the right decision for all involved, but—uh . . .”

I waited for him to continue. Cletus’s propensity to fixate wasn’t always a reason to worry. Sometimes he fixated on blueberries. Sometimes he fixated on the alarming lack of small spoons in the kitchen at the big house. On the other hand, sometimes he fixated on plotting the downfall of criminal organizations.

Basically, his fixating could be anything.

When he didn’t continue speaking but continued to visibly struggle, I straightened from the desk and crossed to him, setting a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Hey. It’s okay. Tell me how I can help.”

“It’s Scarlet.”

I tensed, a spear of worry making my heart stutter.

She’d disappeared in the middle of the night, leaving me a note about attending a giant music festival in Tennessee, but also leaving me confused. I wanted to be a support to her. I would never hold her back. So though I wasn’t upset she’d left to chase her dreams, I was disappointed. I wished she’d asked me to go, I’d follow her anywhere. However, her promise to meet in Rome at the end of the week had helped soothe some of the sting.

But now, examining my brother’s anxious profile, worry ballooned. “What about Scarlet?”

“She did it to help.”

I held still, asking quietly, “What? What did she do?”

Cletus closed his eyes. “She’s going to tell you when you see her next, she promised me.”

“Then you can tell me now and save her the trouble.”

“Okay,” he agreed immediately, like he’d been waiting for me to make this very suggestion. He opened his eyes and held mine. “Somehow, Scarlet ascertained that Razor had accused you of assault with his own knife while he was unconscious at the diner. So she decided to fly back to Nashville, visit him in prison, and see if she could get him to admit he was lying. And therefore, make an official statement to the FBI and clear your name.”

“She WHAT?!” My hand dropped.

My brother winced at my shouted question, his shoulders bunching. “She decided to fly back to Nashville, visit—”

“I heard you the first time, Cletus!” I spun from my brother, stabbing my fingers through my hair. I knew my brother well enough to know what he really meant was, Scarlet flew to Nashville to visit Razor so she could *lie* to the FBI.

My brain was on fire. My heart had left my body. I paced back and forth, feeling caged, feeling helpless. I *hated* feeling helpless. I couldn’t—I couldn’t— “And you knew? You knew she was going to do this? What was she thinking? And what the hell were you thinking? Letting her go see that man? Do you have any idea what he did to her? The kind of hell he put her through?”

“That’s why I’m fixating.”

“Damn right, you should be fixating!”

“I mean, other than the coming face-to-face with her father, her plan is solid.”

“Fuck the plan!” I stopped myself before I cleared the desk of my laptop, phone, the vase, and the lamp just so I could hear the noise of destruction.

“No. The plan is good. And it saves you from going to jail, which—”

I advanced on my brother, my hands balling into fists. “I don’t care about going to jail, Cletus. I did what I did and I’m not sorry for it and it’ll be a cold day in hell before I let Scarlet put herself through the horror of facing her father just to protect me.”

“Oh? You mean like how you put yourself through the horror of facing her father just to protect her?”

I glared at him. “That was different.”

“And why was it different?”

“Because—” I couldn’t focus on my brother through the red clouding my vision. How could she do this? Why would she put herself through this?

“I reckon she did it because she loves you,” Cletus said, and I realized I’d spoken at least one of my questions out loud.

“She lied to me. She said she was going to Nashville to perform at a concert.”

Cletus shook his head before I’d finished my sentence. “She did not lie to you. She is going to Nashville to perform at that concert. It’s tomorrow.”

“You know what I mean. She misled me.”

“Yep. Probably because she knew you’d try to stop her.”

“Damn right I’d try to stop her. I would’ve turned myself in. I would’ve —”

“Gone to jail,” he finished for me. “And then she’d be visiting you weekly instead of visiting her father just the one time. That sounds like such a nice future for y’all. I can’t imagine why she took matters—and her happiness—into her own hands like she did. How selfish.”

My fists on my hips, I scowled at my brother and his nonsense. As I scowled and as he met my heated stare straight on, his words penetrated the rage barrier around my brain.

Reluctantly, I ceded he had a point. But I couldn’t wholly accept his argument.

On a visceral level, the thought of Scarlet seeing her father again sickened and enraged me. The mere idea was abhorrent to every part of my being. Even as I sparred with my brother, I grappled to keep a grip on the violent intensity of my seething wrath.

I hated the man. I’d been the one who’d cut his hands, not Scarlet. And I hadn’t regretted the decision, I hadn’t repented or felt an ounce of contrition about it until just now, now that she would pay the price.

“If she gets caught lying for me, we’ll both go to jail,” I pointed out the obvious, fear and anger coating my throat. Just the thought of her in prison, suffering for my act of vengeance, I’d go crazy.

“Then don’t get caught,” he said, like it was so simple.

I looked at my brother. And then I *looked* at my brother, realizing he didn't seem at all anxious anymore. In fact, he almost looked pleased with himself if you didn't factor the stern line of his mouth and the slight shade of sorrow behind his eyes.

Facing me fully, he shrugged like he was tired. "I understand your anger and I hate that she had to do it."

"She already did it?"

He nodded.

Anguish filled my lungs like a leaden weight, an ache sinking down to my stomach. The need to be with her, to comforter her *right now*, abruptly overshadowed my frustration.

"If there'd been any way to do this without sending Scarlet into battle," he continued, "I would've. But she was desperate to do something. Since she was so adamant, I thought it was better to help than hinder. No reason to make it harder on her."

"You could've stalled her, told me what she had planned."

"No. I don't think so." His eyes twinkled, but the line of his mouth remained stern. "I know this might be a hard pill to swallow—because it was for me—but you don't get to wear the cape all the time. In some instances, you're the rescuer. Other times, you're the rescuee. That's how it works. And you can stay here, simmering in your sour stew at not being the hero this time, or you can take Sienna's plane back to Nashville and thank your woman for saving your ass."

"I can't though, can I? After what she just put herself through, she needs me right now. She's got to be going through hell, facing Razor. But if I fly out there and we're seen together, it'll undermine her credibility."

"You're right. She does need you, so go to her. Sneak in, sneak out. Again, just don't get caught."

"Just don't get caught, huh? Like it's so easy."

"It is easy, Billy. Do you know how many times I've broken the law and not gotten caught?"

"I don't want to kn—"

"More than a lot. If I can do it more than a lot, you can do it once."

"It's not just that, Cletus." *Here we go again.* "I didn't want it to be like this. I don't want us to be a secret."

"Compromise a little, Billy. My contact at the FBI thinks once they close the investigation, it'll definitely stay closed even when you two go

public. We're talking one week, two weeks tops of being circumspect, and most of that time will be when y'all go to Rome. No one in Rome cares about a Tennessee congressman and a country music star canoodling over fettuccine. And, not only did Scarlet do one hell of a job, the FBI wasn't all that interested in investigating you to begin with. You think anybody cares about getting justice for Razor Dennings by putting the man who caught him in jail? No. Justice might be blind, but it ain't that blind." Pulling his hand from his pocket, he checked the watch on his wrist. "Oh. Time's up. If you want to be a comfort to your woman, you gotta go. No need to pack a bag, I'm sure your fairy-suit-father will have something for you in Nashville upon arrival."

"You're a sneak, Cletus," I said wearily, grabbing my phone from the desk and stuffing it in my pocket.

"True." He nodded thoughtfully, adding, "But it's not just you carrying the load anymore, Billy. Like it or not, sometimes the only way to win is to surrender."

* * *

Maybe if I'd been calmer, my mind clearer, I would've been more receptive to Karl's hysteria. Or, if not receptive, dismissive. But I was not calm, and my mind was not clear.

Point was, I shouldn't have answered the phone. While I'd been traveling, all ten of his previous calls went to voicemail. Pacing Scarlet's dressing room backstage at the festival, waiting for her to show, I made the mistake of picking up his eleventh call.

"Billy."

I ground my teeth. "That is my name."

"You've been impossible to reach and we have an emergency. Don't worry, I've handled things. For now." He sounded like he was out of breath.

"Fine."

Karl waited for me to ask about the emergency. I wouldn't. It wasn't my habit to ask a question when I knew the other person was eager to provide an answer. That would be a waste of breath. Instead, I let my gaze wander over the contents of the dressing room, the big bouquets of flowers, the

bags of gifts, the trays of gourmet looking appetizers, the various bottles of champagne, soda, and water on ice.

My hand closed over the small velvet box in my pocket, nerves and anticipation tying a knot in my stomach.

Eventually, the silence stretched past Karl's capacity for patience. "The situation is bleak. Catastrophic. We are staring down the barrel of defeat. We haven't started polling yet, but I know you're going to lose unless we fix some of your issues fast. Is there any chance Ms. Payton might be open to an engagement of convenience? Just until the senate race is over next year. Beg her if you have to."

"I don't beg."

Karl made a series of sputtering sounds.

Enough. I'd had enough.

Before he'd regained his ability to speak, I added, "I'm not running. I withdraw. Tell them to find someone else. Goodbye."

Well. That's decided. Moving on.

Ending the call, I easily pushed Karl from my mind and tapped on my message icon again, just in case I'd missed another text from Scarlet. Finding no new messages, I scrolled through the ones she'd sent me while I was on the airplane. I hadn't received them until after landing.

Scarlet: *I miss you and I'm sorry I left so suddenly. If you have time to talk today, let me know.*

Scarlet: *I hope you're not upset with me about leaving, but if you are, I completely understand.*

Scarlet: *A haiku—*

When we are angry,

Let's set a timer, make up

Sex within one hour

Despite the disorder of my thoughts, this last message pulled a smile from me. Most of my anger had dissipated by the time Sienna's plane had landed. Scarlet was about to perform in front of a huge crowd after facing her

father, after lying to the FBI. Mostly, I was anxious to put my eyes and hands on her, to confirm she was safe and well.

And if she wasn't safe and well, I'd do whatever she needed.

The door opened and I looked up, my heart climbing to my throat. I heard someone greet her, call her Claire. I heard her voice as she said thanks, calm and collected. She then stepped backward into the dressing room, not yet seeing me, while I'm sure my eyes bugged out of my head.

Standing in profile, wearing leather pants like a second skin—which, technically, I guess they were—a black, low-cut tank top, and Converse sneakers, she nodded, smiling at whoever continued to hold her attention beyond the door.

But then, as though sensing she wasn't alone, her eyes drifted to the room and she did a double take when she spotted me, her expression morphing into one of shock.

The person she'd been speaking with must've noticed, because a second later a male wearing a headset peaked inside, looking where Scarlet looked, his eyes also widening.

"Well, hello," he said, his gazing moving down and then up my new suit from my fairy-suit-father that had been waiting for me upon my arrival in Nashville. "Are you . . ." He glanced at Scarlet, then back at me. "Are you one of her gifts?"

The question seemed to wake Scarlet from her trance, and her cheeks tinted pink. She opened her mouth as though to answer, but I was already answering.

"Yes. I'm one of her gifts." I couldn't have her introduce me. No one was supposed to know Congressman Billy Winston was involved with Country Music Star Claire McClure—at least not for a few more weeks.

The man grinned, sending Scarlet a sly smile as he backed out of the room. "I'll make sure you're not disturbed."

Visibly flustered, she looked at the man, then at me, then at the door he'd swiftly closed, leaving us alone and not to be disturbed.

She exhaled a short, harassed breath and faced me, crossing her arms under her breasts, her gaze cagey. "What are you doing here?"

"Cletus told me. If anyone asks, I'm Alex Greene from Chicago." No use beating around the bush.

A flash of pain and dismay arrested her features just before she dropped her chin, hiding her face with her long, copper hair. "Please don't be angry."

If any residual anger had remained, it completely vanished at the sight of her slumped shoulders and the sound of agony in her voice.

Crossing to her in three steps, I pulled her against me and into my arms, reassured by the contact and feel of her. “What can I do?”

Scarlet tucked herself under my chin, her arms tight around my torso, and gathered a deep inhale, as though she could pull me inside her body by breathing me in. “Don’t be mad.”

“I’m not. I was angry, mostly with Cletus. But I’m not now.”

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t think of another way. I couldn’t lose you again.” Her voice sounded watery.

I slipped a finger under her chin, lifting it to place a gentle kiss on her lips before speaking against them. “Next time talk to me. Please. Give us a chance to figure it out together.”

“Okay. Okay. I will. I swear it, cross my heart.” She stole another kiss, her eyes wide and glassy. “I’ve learned my lesson.”

I felt my mouth hitch on one side. “I’ve learned my lesson too.”

“You have?” Her voice cracked, her head shifting back an inch. “Lesson about what?”

Fighting a smile at the irony, I quoted my brother, ““Sometimes the only way to win is to surrender.””

A puff of a laugh escaped her chest and I felt myself unwind as her smile grew. “Is that one of your momma’s sayings?”

“No. But I suppose it’s now a family saying,” I responded dryly as I searched her eyes. She still looked unsettled, frantic, and my stomach twisted afresh at the thought of her facing her father. “Scarlet. What can I do? You are safe, with or without me. No matter what you decide for your future, he will never touch you. I swear. Believe me.”

Her chin wobbled and she pressed her lips together, tears gathering in her eyes. “Oh, it wasn’t so bad,” she whispered, the crack in her composure widening with her lie.

The look in her eyes, the terror she’d so obviously felt when confronting her father, reminded me of a fourteen-year-old Scarlet. It also brought to mind a sixteen-year-old me, frustrated with my helplessness.

Sniffing, she forced her lips into a smile. “You know what? That’s a lie. It was terrible, and I hated it.” Now she laughed, like she found herself ridiculous. “And you know the worst part? I’d forgotten how lonely it is, to be scared like that.”

“You’re not alone,” I said fiercely, cupping her cheek, wiping away a wayward tear and memorizing the velvet feel of her skin.

“You’re not alone either.” Her tone was also fierce, and her self-deprecating smile fell away. “I’m here.” She punctuated these words by giving me a gentle shake, her eyes fastened to mine. “I’m right *here*. Your burdens are mine, so are your hopes and dreams. I want it all. I want to share everything with you. Please. Trust me to be strong.”

“I trust you.” I smoothed a hand down her back, pressing her closer, my eyes drifting to her lips. “I love you.”

“I love you.” When she smiled this time, it was small, but it was also serene.

I took a moment to gaze upon her, my beloved, before asking quietly, “What can I do to help you get ready?”

“Ready? For what?”

“For the concert.”

She stiffened. “Oh my goodness. I’d—I totally forgot.” Loosening her arms, she moved to step away. With great reluctance, I let her go. For now.

We have plenty of time. No need to rush.

“My hair is done. My makeup person should be here soon.” She glanced around the room, spinning in a half circle. “I need to warm up.”

“I can help with that.” Spotting a few guitars in the corner, I walked over, selected the Martin D-45, and admired it on my way to the couch. “This is a nice guitar.”

“You like it?”

I nodded, strumming a few chords. “Good sound.”

Standing in front of me, watching me play for a half minute, she set her hands on her hips. “Is it weird that I’m a little jealous?”

“Jealous?”

“Yes.”

“Of what?”

She gestured to the instrument, taking the seat next to me. “Your hands are all over that thing and it gets to sit in your lap.”

That made me chuckle, and I glanced at her out of the corner of my eyes. “If you want to warm up on my lap, I’m more than willing.”

And that made her laugh, but it also made her blush.

Playing the intro to the first single on her last album, a song entitled, “When Winter Sings,” I leaned closer, brushing my arm against hers. “What

do you want me to play? For the warm-up.”

Her attention moved between my hands and my eyes, hers growing thoughtful. “Hey, so, I have a question,” she said suddenly, making me think she didn’t want to warm up quite yet. “How did you get here so fast?”

“You know how Sienna has that plane?”

“You took her plane?”

“I did.” I switched to “Free Fallin’.” “And, Sienna apparently has the ability to secure backstage passes and unlimited access to any concert event in the world. Which is how I got in your dressing room.”

For the record, I did not like the implications of this at all. At some point, Scarlet and I would have to talk about tightening her security.

But then she surprised me by saying, “Well, that’s distressing.”

I studied her, holding my silence.

Her gaze lost focus, turning inward. “I should talk to my security. I only have them for shows and events, but they shouldn’t be letting folks in my dressing room no matter who they are.” She seemed to think about this for a few seconds, and then her attention came back to me. “Unless it’s you, of course.”

“Of course,” I agreed. Because, *of course*.

Her eyes wandered over me in my new suit. “I have another question.”

“Yes.”

Now she laughed. “I haven’t asked it yet.”

“Whatever it is, I’m probably going to say yes.”

Her gaze warmed, heated, and she leaned in closer, a hand smoothing down the front of my tie, her voice dropping to ask, “So, you’re my gift?”

The velvet box in my pocket pressed insistently against my leg as I stared at her, but I decided now wasn’t the right time. She was about to go on stage, perform for thousands of people. She didn’t need her attention divided.

Setting aside the guitar, I also leaned in close and slid my palm up her thigh. “I’d like to be a gift for you.”

“You are a gift to me.” Eyes hazy with happiness, she climbed on my lap and twisted her arms around my neck. “Never doubt that.”

Embracing me, she rested her head on my shoulder and placed a kiss on my neck. And I held her, savoring the sweetness of the moment.

We’d climbed mountains to get here, crossed stormy seas. I was under no delusions our future sailing would be smooth. But hopefully, given the

last few weeks and all we'd fought for, resolved, and shared, whatever path we traveled, we'd be together from now on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

* BILLY *

“And he took her in his arms and kissed her under the sunlit sky, and he cared not that they stood high upon the walls in the sight of many.”

— J.R.R. TOLKIEN, RETURN OF THE KING

We spent the next several weeks in Rome, Scarlet finishing her latest album, me working remotely sometimes, but more and more just cooking her dinner, rubbing her feet after a long day, and making love to her all night.

Rome was awesome.

But I didn't propose. I'd made a plan to several times—in the gardens of the Villa Borghese, under the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, at the restaurant down the block from our apartment that had quickly become our favorite—and yet, when it came right down to it, no moment seemed like the right one.

Instead of flying straight to Nashville via a commercial airline, which had been the original plan, Sienna bribed us into stopping by Green Valley first by sending her private plane. Jethro also sent along another new suit for me, signing the card with, *Your Fairy Suit Father*, which had Scarlet cracking up.

We touched down midafternoon. Ashley met us at the airport with Bethany and Ben, both of whom were remarkably excited to see us. There's no greeting quite like a little kid greeting, kisses and hugs and exclamations of undying love as well as non sequitur show-and-tell sharing.

“What’s that you got there, Ben?” Scarlet gestured to a ball of something that looked like felt in his hand as we walked to Ashley’s car.

“This is a dryer ball. It bangs the clothes around in the dryer so they dry faster and Ms. Winters from the library is a witch.”

“Well.” Scarlet looked at me and we nodded at each other, taking his statement in stride. “Okay then.”

It didn’t take us long to drive to the homestead, just forty minutes or so, but when I arrived, I experienced an odd pang in my chest and a strange moment of grief. For the first time in my life, it didn’t feel like coming home.

I’d been present the whole time Jethro had cleaned it up, restored it, picked colors and painted the exterior, picked stains and trim and new soffits and refinished the porch. But seeing it now, the collection of all his years of hard work, changes, and personal touches, I realized it wasn’t *our* home. It was Jethro’s and Sienna’s and their boys’ now.

And I was a visitor.

“You okay?” Scarlet asked from my shoulder, slipping her hand into mine.

I nodded, putting my arm around her shoulders instead, and removed the transient grief from my voice as I responded, “I will be.”

Inside was a flurry of activity, and I soon lost track of Scarlet as she was pulled into the kitchen to make soap with Jenn and Shelly. Meanwhile, Jethro, Roscoe, Drew, and I walked across the field to the woodshed.

“Believe it or not, we’re running low on wood,” Jethro cackled, like this was the funniest thing in the world. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“How was Rome?” Roscoe asked, rolling up his shirtsleeves.

My gaze flickered to his forearms and then back to his eyes, stopping myself just before I said, *You are not cutting firewood. You’re still recovering, so you can roll those shirtsleeves back down.*

Fact was, Roscoe was grown. He didn’t need me hovering anymore, double checking his decisions, fixing problems, worrying. I might always see the little boy in him, but now he needed me to treat him like a man.

So I said, “Rome was great.”

“How long will y’all be staying?” Jethro took a swig from his beer. “Sienna couldn’t get a straight answer out of Claire.”

“Just a few days. Thanks for letting us stay at the carriage house.”

“Of course.” My brother smiled at me even as his forehead arranged itself into a frown. “You’re welcome to stay forever.”

“I know.” I peered out over the field, studying the mountain rising before us cloaked in all its various shades of green. “But I think it’s time.”

“What about the mill? When are you going back to work?” Drew pulled a beer bottle from the side pocket of his cargo pants and twisted off the lid.

For the record, it wasn’t a twist-off. The man seemed to be capable of opening anything with his bare hands—beer, bear trap. Also, he often used the pockets of his cargo pants as beer holders. I’d contemplated buying a pair for the weekends just for this purpose.

“I’ll transition back to mill operations next month, but Dolly wants me in Nashville now full time. It works out since state congress will be back in regular session soon. I can run the mill’s national office from there.” What I didn’t tell them was that Scarlet and I had a meeting with a realtor next week to look at houses. Her apartment was nice, but it was just a simple one bedroom, sparsely furnished, with a postage stamp kitchen.

The woman deserved a big kitchen with all the trimmings, and that’s what she would get.

“You’re going back to the mill?” Jethro seemed confused by this information. “Last I heard, you were running for that senate seat.”

I made a short, dissatisfied grunting sound in the back of my throat before I could catch it.

Roscoe answered for me. “No. He withdrew.”

Roscoe knew since we’d been touching base while I’d been in Rome.

The party had tried to change my mind, promising a new campaign liaison, but that ship had sailed. I didn’t want the seat, a fact that had become blatantly obvious when I’d felt nothing but relieved after firing Karl. For a time, Scarlet fretted I’d done it for her. But now she was convinced I did it for myself, which was the truth.

“It might be good that y’all aren’t staying in Green Valley, actually. Probably better if no one in town knows where you are for certain.” Jethro scratched the back of his neck, his expression thoughtful. “The Wraiths are a mess, losing members left and right. Now that the leadership is in jail, no one is around to inflict order. They’re getting into all kinds of messy shit. Best Claire isn’t here.”

Drew frowned at me, then at Jethro. “You mean *instill* order?”

“No. I mean *inflict*.” Jethro gave us a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Razor’s brand of leadership was definitely an affliction.”

My brother spoke the truth. But now, the affliction of Razor Dennings was officially none of my concern.

Shortly after Scarlet and I arrived in Rome, I received a call from Dani Payton, telling me she’d heard through the grapevine—that is, her little sister the FBI agent—that all charges against me had been dropped and the case was closed. Scarlet’s perjury had done the trick and now I was off the hook, scot-free.

I wasn’t quite reconciled to it yet, but I was trying to surrender.

“Hey. By the way, have you asked her to marry you yet?” This question came from Roscoe and earned him a side-eye.

The ring in my pocket suddenly felt heavier.

“Have you asked Simone?” Jethro asked, wearing a shit-eating grin.

Roscoe scowled. “I’d ask today if I thought she’d say yes.”

“Ask not just when the time is right, but also when the moment is right. Don’t rush things just ’cause you’re anxious to make it official. Ideally, you only ask once. Make it count.” Drew said this like he had a wealth of experience on the topic.

“Why don’t you think Simone would say yes?” Not to be deterred, Jethro poked at Roscoe. “Is it because of your beard?”

Roscoe’s hand came to his jaw. “What’s wrong with my beard?”

“Claire has that concert next week? In Texas?” Drew, ever the diplomat, redirected the conversation away from Jethro’s teasing.

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“You’re going, right? Remind me and I’ll give you the name of some good restaurants in Austin.”

“Thanks.” I sent my brother-in-law a grateful look. “I’d appreciate it.”

The last time I’d watched Scarlet sing for an audience other than me had been at the Nashville Music Festival over a month prior. I’d watched from the stage, standing in the wings. Unsurprisingly, she did great. Because she was great. Scarlet was greatness come alive.

At one point in her set I found myself getting a little choked up, thinking back on that day we sang together in the woods behind my family’s house, how she’d looked at my thirty-dollar guitar like it was made of magic. She’d just begun to contemplate dreams. I marveled at her now,

commanding an audience of thousands, holding them in her grip, eating out of the palm of her hand.

Apparently, it's not just for the Billys and goats.

Afterward, I'd hung back as she met with the VIP folks, signing stuff, posing for pictures, smiling and listening to each person, making them feel special. But really, it was her. She was the singularity. She made everything brighter. Other people merely basked in it, glowing by association.

When her security had finally cut off the line and she was ushered away, I saw her turn her head, her gaze searching.

She's looking for you.

My, how times had changed. Used to be, I was the one always searching for her and she was the one hiding in the shadows. But now, as I reflected on it, I decided everything was exactly as it should be. I'd never been comfortable with the spotlight, with attention. Standing in the wings, waiting for Scarlet was one of my favorite places to be.

After chopping wood and drinking beer for an hour, we'd done a brief perimeter check of the property, right up to the tree line, and then made our way back to the house.

It was at the tree line that an idea had formed, a notion, and I made a plan. What I had in mind was a surprise and I figured the tricky part would be talking her into leaving without telling her why.

However, as soon as we walked in the back door we were met with the sounds of chaos. The ladies were laughing, Beau—who I didn't see—was yelling, and a cluster of bodies stood between Scarlet and the twin, as though to protect her.

Upon seeing me, Scarlet darted over, grabbed my hand, and yanked me back outside, saying, "Go, go, go!"

Bewildered, I let her drag me halfway across the wildflower field still in late summer bloom before I brought her to a stop. "What is going on?"

She glanced quickly at the house, a gleeful smile on her face as a few giggles escaped her. "Payback for Venice."

"Payback?" I studied her bright eyes, her happy expression, and then looked at the back porch, half expecting an enraged Beau to charge out of the house. "What did you do?"

Scarlet laughed in earnest, the sound a little sinister. "After getting the okay from Sienna and Jet, I put a bucket of vegetable oil over the entrance to the kitchen and called Beau inside."

I reared back. “And then it dumped on his head?”

She covered her mouth, still laughing. “But then—oh my God, Billy. The feathers.” She doubled over, holding her stomach, her shoulders shaking.

Since her merriment was contagious, I also laughed, shaking my head and trying to follow. “Feathers?”

“Sent him upstairs—bathroom—” She pointed up at the sky. “Feathers—” Now she made a raining motion with her hand. “Another bucket—and the—they—they—his face! His beard!” She snorted, which only made her laugh harder, tears of hilarity in her eyes.

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed her hand and tugged her across the remainder of the field, making a mental note never to play a prank on my beloved.

After a long while, her laughter diminished to a few brief giggles and she seemed to realize I was taking her somewhere specific. “Where are we going?” She sniffed, wiping at the dampness beneath her eyes.

“You’ll see,” I said, smiling slightly and fighting a strange bout of nerves.

She sighed, it sounded happy, and she followed.

A few seconds later, she jogged a few steps so that we were walking side by side and asked, “So, why a goat?”

I glanced at her. “Pardon?”

“Why is your tattoo a goat? I keep meaning to ask.”

I chuckled, glancing away and rolling my eyes at my younger self. “It’s—it’s kind of funny now, in retrospect.”

“Tell me.” She tugged on my arm. “Nothing can be as funny as seeing Beau covered in feathers.”

“You remember that night I came to your house and demanded you leave with me?” It was bizarre to bring this up without the accompanying flare of longing, or irritation, or desolation.

“Yes. I remember,” she responded quietly, perhaps having similar thoughts.

“Do you remember what you said? After I kissed you and we made out? But then I stopped and you got angry.”

“Uh . . .” Her eyes moved up and to the right, and then suddenly came back to mine, wide with realization. “You got a goat tattoo because I said I’d rather sleep with a goat than you?”

Chuckling again, I nodded. “Yeah. I got drunk and got a goat tattoo. That’s what happened.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I was crazy in love with you, and maybe a little overly dramatic. And literal.”

Scarlet was quiet for a moment as we approached the tree line, then asked, “Do you regret it? Do you ever wish you’d gotten something else?”

“No. I don’t.” I stopped at the first tree, searching the forest within, working to find my bearings.

“Huh.”

“It was a reminder,” I said distractedly, deciding to pull her a few paces west and hoping I’d find the path.

“A reminder of what? Don’t get drunk and then go shopping for tattoos?”

“No. It was a reminder of you, and me, and who I wanted to be, which was someone who deserved you.” I brought us to a stop again, finding the two trees I recognized, and then turned to face her.

She was peering at me through narrowed eyes. “Because I deserve a goat?”

I smiled at her, bent my head to give her a kiss on her neck, and then whispered in her ear, “Baaa.”

She laughed, smacking my arm and leaning away. “You are a nut.”

“I thought I was a goat.”

“You are.” Her fingers stroked my beard. “You’re my Billy Goat Gruff.”

Oddly, I liked the sound of that, so I decided to keep it.

“Okay, come on.” I took a step into the forest and once again she followed.

However, after a few feet, she chuckled.

“What?” I asked, glancing at her over my shoulder.

“Oh, I just can’t believe you’re walking in here willingly and I was just thinking I better take note so I can lead us out before supper.”

“You’re real funny.” I gave her a flat look.

“I know.” She grinned, looking cute and smug.

We walked on for a bit, slowly, picking through the fallen branches and shrubs.

A minute later, I felt her hand in mine twitch, squeeze, and then release as her steps slowed. “Billy. Where are we going?”

“I want to show you something.” I didn’t look back at her this time. Those nerves had returned, making it hard to swallow, and I gave my pants pocket an automatic pat. *The box is still there.*

I knew the moment she spotted the cabin because her breath caught and she stopped walking. I gave her a minute, and then I pulled on her hand, guiding her forward the rest of the way.

We crested the slight hill together and I made sure to go slowly, giving her time to adjust to what she was seeing and only looking back at her when we made it to the base of the steps.

“Billy.” Her eyes were on the door and the frame, the log walls, the stone steps and foundation. And then they were on me, full of wonder. “What did you do?”

I brought her hand to my lips and kissed the back of it. “Let me show you the inside.”

We climbed the steps and I pushed open the door, revealing the small but tidy interior. It wasn’t well lit from the windows. Leaving her just inside, I crossed to the kerosene lamp on the table and struck a match. When the space was filled with light, I turned back to study her.

This time, she was looking at me. “You built this?”

I nodded, glancing around, my eyes lingering on the quilt covering the bed. It was the same quilt she’d used when this spot had been her campsite. “I tried to start construction on it the fall after I was discharged from the rehab facility, that year after you left. But then it quickly became clear I didn’t know what the heck I was doing.” Again, I laughed at my former self. “I didn’t know the first thing about building a cabin. So we put it off.”

“We?”

“Duane and I built it together.”

“When did you build it?” She crossed to the fireplace, inspecting the stones inlaid at the floor and I wondered if she recognized them. They were the very same stones we’d gathered in the stream that weekend after Thanksgiving, the ones that surrounded her firepit.

“I started it right after you married Ben.”

“So you spent that summer building a cabin.”

It wasn’t a question, so I didn’t answer it. Instead, I watched her stand there, her gaze still wide with wonder. She then moved from place to place, touching the hearth, the walls, the little table, the chairs. She even touched

the fire stick in the corner, a bubble of laughter leaving her as she met my eyes.

“Is this the fire stick?”

I nodded, not wishing to speak. Perhaps it was habit that kept me silent. When I was building it and later on, when I’d come to visit on my own to feel close to her, I never spoke. There’d been no one to talk to.

Finished making her rounds, Scarlet paused in front of the bed and then she turned and sat on it, bouncing up and down as though to test the mattress.

“This bed sure is comfy.” She’d lowered her voice to say this, which—after spending all that time with her in Rome—I now knew meant she had certain activities on the mind.

I twisted my lips to the side, watching her watch me. “Is it?”

She stopped bouncing. “What? You never slept on it?”

“No. I haven’t.”

My answer seemed to confuse her. “Did you spend much time here?”

“I did. Especially in the winter. November, every year, I spent time here.”

Lying on her side and propping herself up on her elbow, her gaze drifted over me. “Did you have any plans?”

“Plans?”

A saucy smile claimed her lips. “If I had ever come here, with you, what were your plans?”

I huffed a laugh. “Well, that seemed so completely out of the realm of possibility—”

“No, but you had plans.” She rolled onto her back, her eyes still on me. “I can tell.”

Now my gaze drifted over her, the slopes and curves of her body, her hair fanned out on the quilt, the alluring sparkle in her eyes. “You’re right,” I said gruffly, recognizing the now familiar response in my own body at the sight of her looking at me like she was.

But first, I wanted to tell her the truth. “At first, I had these plans I was going to offer it to you, as a safe place. To show you there was more than one. Somewhere that had once been your safe place could be again. But then—” I pushed away from the wall and moved to the edge of the bed, kneeling next to where she lay “—as things progressed between us in Italy . . .”

“Yes?”

Lifting my hand to her forehead, I slid my fingers into her hair. “I saw that you’d found your safe place on your own, and you didn’t need it anymore. And that was good.”

Her gaze turned questioning. “That was good?”

“Yes,” I whispered, my eyes now affixed to her lips, my favorite color. “It opened up other possibilities for its use.”

Her mouth curved. “Such as?”

I stood slowly, unhurriedly toeing off my shoes, pulling off my shirt, and then reaching for my belt to unfasten it.

She swallowed, her smile fading as she watched me watch her.

“You’re not going to tell me?” she asked, her voice a little breathless as I unzipped my fly.

“Take off your clothes.” I slipped my hand in my pocket, gripping the velvet box.

Her lashes fluttered. “Why?”

“Because I prefer to show you.”

A flare of heat ignited behind her eyes and she complied, biting her lip while removing her shirt and bra first, and then slipping off her pants. I surrendered to my desire, to look at her, to watch her undress, to hold her gaze and not look away. For so long, I hadn’t been allowed even a look. But now she was spread before me like an offering, her beautiful, seductive body completely bare on the bed.

Hunger for her on my tongue, I whispered, “Scarlet, has it been over twenty-four hours since we made love?”

Her nose wrinkled just slightly, her gaze losing none of its heat. “You’re right, it’s been too long.”

She didn’t understand what I was asking, so I lowered to my knees in front of her, pulling out the box. She’d turned her head to watch me, but when I put the box between us and opened it, she didn’t seem to see it. Her eyes were fastened unwaveringly to mine.

“Scarlet,” I whispered.

“Yes?” she whispered back.

I plucked the ring from the box and lifted it between us until her eyes refocused on my offering.

“Will you marry me?”

I don't know why this was the moment. I don't know why none of the others that came before would do. Maybe because I hadn't shown her our cabin yet? Or because I simply wanted us to be here, where it had all started and I'd fallen irrevocably in love with her.

But I did know my suspicions in Tuscany had been proven right. Every moment with this woman felt like an indulgence, especially the moment when her surprised eyes returned to mine and she cried, telling me that—yes—she would be my wife.

Scarlet was still the color of my soul. But now that we were finally together, she also painted my days and nights in the exquisite spectrum and uncontainable brilliance of her spirit.

EPILOGUE

SCARLET

“You can kiss your family and friends good-bye and put miles between you, but at the same time you carry them with you in your heart, your mind, your stomach, because you do not just live in a world but a world lives in you.”

— FREDERICK BUECHNER

“**T**iberius Monroe Winston, you pull your pants up right now.” I struggled to look angry and keep the laughter out of my voice. “If you must go, walk yourself to the bathroom in the camper. You do not just stop wherever you are and water the plants.”

“He did the same thing at Tommy Weller’s house, when we went to that pool party,” Bea leaned in to whisper. “Just walked to the edge of the screen and pulled down his swim shorts. It was horrifying.”

At ten years old, Bea seemed to be horrified by everything her little brothers did. On the one hand, I didn’t exactly blame her. They were adorably horrifying most of the time. On the other hand, she was a bigger rascal than all her other siblings combined.

Struggling with my lips to form a firm line, I made a note to send Hank Weller’s wife a letter of apology as I called to our third child, “Marcus, will you please escort your little brother to the bathroom?”

As much as possible, we did our best to encourage the two older boys, Marcus and Trajan, to take responsibility for the two younger boys, Constantine and Tiberius. Billy was adamant that Beatrice and Dulcinea be spared the kind of teasing that his sister had endured from her brothers.

However, sometimes I worried the pendulum swung too far in the other direction. Our twin girls had inherited more than just their uncles' red hair and summer sky blue eyes.

"But he's already finished." Marcus, wearing his typical broody expression and currently setting up the tent with Dulci and Constantine, gestured to where three-year-old Tiberius was indeed finishing up. "Can't we just—"

"Marcus Cash, please do as your mother says," Billy's voice interrupted and I turned, searching for my husband while our oldest son immediately complied.

"Y'all are back already?" I set my hand on my hip, glancing between the grocery bags Billy carried and Trajan running to catch up. "That was fast."

Usually, whenever we camped behind the Winston house, Billy and whatever kids went along were gone for several hours at the store. This day in particular, the Friday of our annual Labor Day weekend camping trip, always seemed to be a mess at the Piggly Wiggly.

"They opened a new market down the road, where the Corner Shoppe used to be. Cut the driving time in half. Also, I ran into Patty. She says hi." Wearing his barely-there smile, Billy stopped in front of me for a kiss, as was his habit. We always greeted each other with a kiss.

"Hi beautiful," he said quietly, Tuscan glacial blue irises moving between mine.

"Hi handsome." I couldn't stop my smile. But then, why would I want to?

"Constantine! Get back here and help," Dulci called to her little brother.

"Did you get the marshmallows?" Constantine was peeking in the bags and had apparently abandoned the tent.

"Yeah, we got all the s'mores stuff." Trajan set down a cloth sack, pulled out a box of graham crackers, and gave me a smile missing three teeth. "Can we make them now?"

"No, we cannot." Dulci grabbed the box from his hands and stuffed it back in the sack. "Only one of the tents is set up. Aunt Simone and Uncle Roscoe will be here any minute and I don't want to be setting up tents when they arrive."

Dulci was enamored with her Aunt Simone and wanted to become a forensic scientist just like Trajan was enamored with his Uncle Roscoe and

wanted to become a veterinarian. Whenever we visited them in Washington, DC, Dulci and Trajan would stay a few days longer and Roscoe would fly them home.

It was so interesting to me how these one-off suggestions and events quickly became family traditions. Two years ago, Simone suggested Dulci and Trajan stay three extra days, and now that's what they did every time. This Labor Day camping trip was suggested by Sienna seven years ago to ensure the family spent quality time together outside of the hectic Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons. Now it's what we did every year and it was always the same.

Each family arrived when they could on Friday or Saturday. The kids ran around like wild animals in the forest, swimming in the stream, making forts, and finally showering on either Sunday night or Monday just before we left. Meanwhile, the adults socialized and cooked.

After dinner on the last night, the kids would roast marshmallows around their campfire while the adults gathered around a second campfire. Also on the last night, all the cousins older than six would tent camp with Cletus and Jenn, whereas all the littles would stay at the big house with their parents.

Well, all the littles except our Tiberius and Constantine, and Jenn and Cletus's little boy, Linus. Our two youngest liked to stay with Beau and Shelley at their place on the lake. I suspected it made them feel special. Tiberius in particular had developed a special bond with Shelly and her parrot. Linus stayed with his parents and all the big kids.

Presently, I followed Billy around the table and batted his hands away as he started to unload the groceries. "Let Bea and me do this. Will you help with the tents?"

"Yep." Stealing another quick kiss as well as a stealthy stroke, grab, and smack of my backside, Billy marched over to the tents with our kids trailing after, leaving me chuckling at his boldness. I'd pay him back later.

"This is all refrigerator stuff. I'll take it to the coolers." Bea peeked inside one of the bags, tucking her long, red hair behind an ear. "Uh oh. Daddy bought hot dogs. I thought Uncle Cletus was coming?"

"He is." I pulled out the s'mores stuff, intending to put it somewhere out of little hands' reach. "Hide the hot dogs under the ice so your uncle doesn't see them. Or, better yet, put them in the camper fridge back at the cabin."

“When do they get here?” Bea began consolidating all the perishables into two bags. “And when are Ben, Andy, and Pedro coming?”

“Uh, Cletus is coming just before dinner. And Ben, Andy, and Pedro are still in school until three. They didn’t have off today. But your Uncle Jethro should be showing up with firewood any minute.”

“And Uncle Beau and Aunt Shelly?” Bea picked up the two bags. “What about Uncle Duane, Aunt Jess, and Liam?”

“I think around four or five. They’re all visiting with the Wellers, I think. Will you please also bring me the marshmallow roasting sticks from the camper on your way back?”

“Yes, Momma.” Bea knelt in front of one of the coolers.

Meanwhile, I spun in a half circle, ensuring all the picnic tables had tablecloths, paper plates, silverware, napkins, and the like.

“Hey Ash, Bethany,” I hollered to my sister-in-law and niece on the far side of the clearing. The area had been cleared out of trees six summers ago so we could have a big campground. “Do you have everything for those tables? I have plenty of paper plates.”

“We’re good.” Ashley lifted a thumb in the air. “But once Marcus gets back, send him over here. Zander needs help.”

“I do not need help!” My nephew’s stubborn growl erupted from somewhere behind a wonky-looking tent near Ashley’s side.

Even fifty feet away, I caught Ash’s amused glance.

“Give Marcus a chance to help, Zander. You know how he looks up to you,” Billy’s voice, though not raised, was loud and commanding enough to be heard across the clearing.

“Oh. Okay. Sure thing, Uncle Billy,” Zander replied, sounding significantly less frustrated, and both Ashley and I rolled our lips between our teeth in unison.

Marcus and Zander had been born just one week apart, with Zander being older. I’d figured out from watching how Billy interacted with Zander that the best way to get our nephew to do the right thing was to remind him how others were counting on him, looked up to him, needed him.

This was one of my husband’s special gifts. He never raised his voice with our kids or our nieces and nephews. He simply plucked the string within each person that made them want to be their best.

Suddenly, the sound of a voice sliced through the air, proclaiming, “I’ve arrived!”

All the kids stopped what they were doing at the announcement, their heads whipping around. And then they were off, making a crazy ruckus as they stampeded to the tree line.

Billy leaned around the half-assembled tent and we shared a look. “You’d think he was Santa Claus with the way they act.” He walked over to the tent pole Constantine had dropped in his haste to greet his Uncle Cletus. “I thought he was coming later?”

“I thought so too. Jenn had that thing in Louisville, I thought they’d be here for dinner.”

Billy abruptly dropped the tent pole, quick-walking over to me. “Where is that bag with the hot dogs?”

“Should be over by the cooler. Bea was going to put it in the camper.”

“I’ll do it.” Billy grabbed the bag and took off.

“Don’t get lost!” I called after him.

“I won’t get lost, woman!” he called back.

Now I chuckled and so did Ashley. Through some unspoken agreement, we walked toward each other as the sound of Cletus plus the kids approaching grew louder.

“The first words out of his mouth will be about either panic or sausage.” Ashley rolled her eyes, but her tone was loving.

“Or blueberries,” I leaned in to whisper since Cletus and his group of admirers had almost made it back to the campsite.

My kids all had special relationships with each of their aunts and uncles, and I’d like to think I had a special relationship with each of my nieces and nephews. That said, Cletus and Jenn were on a different level. If each of the seven Winston siblings and their significant other was a day of the week, Cletus and Jenn were Saturday.

Upon seeing Ashley and I, Cletus halted and held up a giant cooler bag with one hand. “You can stop panicking. I brought my sausage—” he held up a paper bag with his other hand “—and Jenn’s blueberry pancake muffins.”

“He ate most of them in the car on the way over.” This dry statement of fact came from his daughter Viola, standing between Roscoe and Simone and holding both their hands while Pavlov—Cletus and Jenn’s aging dog—panted tiredly just in front of them, like he was guarding the little miss.

Cletus made a face at his six-year-old, clearly trying to hide his smile by narrowing his eyes. “Snitch.”

Roscoe laughed, picking up Viola and setting her on his hip. “Leave my Viola alone.”

Meanwhile, Ashley and I stepped forward to get in line behind Dulci to greet and hug a laughing Simone.

“She has him wrapped around her finger.” Simone’s brown eyes sparkled. “I’d be jealous if she didn’t also have me wrapped around her finger.”

Viola placed her hands on either side of Roscoe’s beard and gazed down at him. “I love you, Uncle Roscoe.”

“I know you do. And I love you,” he said softly, nuzzling her nose and giving her a cherishing grin while Cletus watched the exchange with a distracted smile.

“Come on, Cletus. Better hand over that sausage.” After embracing Simone, I walked over to my friend and took the cooler bag from his grip, nearly dropping it. “Goodness, this bag is heavy.”

“Of course it’s heavy.” Cletus’s expression turned suddenly stern. “My sausage is famous for many of its attributes, not the least of which is its substantial length and—”

“Density?” I supplied flatly.

He made a face like my response disappointed him. “I was going to say girth, obviously.”

Roscoe rolled his eyes, as did Ashley, and Simone fought a laugh. Luckily, none of Sienna and Jethro’s older boys were here, so Cletus’s statement went over all the kids’ heads.

Turning from my brother-in-law, I called over my shoulder, “Well then, I’ll put it in the cooler, see if we can’t get some shrinkage.”

“Shrinkage?!” Cletus seemed to sputter before choking on the word.

I sealed my lips shut as Ashley told her brother to *calm his farm*, and then he said something about an affront to his meat curing skills. Then Roscoe asked why the meat needed to be cured in the first place and made some reference to diseased wieners, which made the kids bust out laughing because, *wieners*.

It was going to be a long weekend.

And I was looking forward to every minute of it.

* * *

The next few days were predictably crazy.

Other than the typical cousin chaos, Duane, Jess, and their kids were still a little jetlagged even though they'd been in town since Wednesday. Beau and Shelly often traveled to see them wherever they were, as did Jethro and his family. We'd met them twice—once in Peru and once in Canada—but world travel was difficult for our big family, what with the kids in school and sports and music and camps over the summer.

Their oldest impressed his cousins by speaking pretty good Japanese. And then later, Jenn arrived and impressed everyone by speaking better Japanese.

As predicted, the kids played, made messes, dunked each other in the stream, built stick forts, and the adults chewed the fat, swapped stories—both old and new. It was remarkable, having everyone all in one place. This weekend always felt like a miracle to me and it always went by too fast.

After dinner on the last night, we set the kids up around their own firepit, putting Ben and Bethany in charge of the fire, and Andy and Liam in charge of the s'mores. The rule was, no more than two s'mores per kid, which meant most of them would get three or four if the older boys didn't eat everything first.

"I never thought I'd say this, and don't take this as permission for future usurping of my glorious sausages, but I'm glad you bought those hot dogs." Cletus took the seat next to Billy and me, turning to Jethro and Sienna on his other side. "Don't you ever feed your children?"

Presently, as was our tradition on the last night, the adults were sitting around a second firepit not far from the kids. Most of us were sharing camping chairs except Roscoe and Simone who were sitting together on a blanket, and Jenn and Cletus as little Linus was asleep in Jenn's arms.

Jethro sighed while Sienna laughed. "You'll find out, Cletus, when Linus turns twelve or thirteen. Teenage boys eat their weight daily."

"It's scientific fact," Beau chimed in, his tone completely serious. "I think I read somewhere teenage boys eat up to twice their weight every day."

"You did not read that, Beauford." Cletus sent my brother an unimpressed look, which only made the redhead laugh.

"I remember my brother eating all our leftovers when he was a teenager," Simone said from her spot, lying between Roscoe's legs, her

back against his chest. “My mother told me she had to double every recipe until he was out of the house.”

“I can’t imagine what our momma’s grocery bill was every week, if that’s the case.” Roscoe turned his lips against Simone’s temple, giving her a kiss.

“It wasn’t so bad. She had creative ways of supplementing the store-bought groceries, which cut down on the total,” Billy said, and I studied him as his gaze seemed to turn inward.

For a long time, he’d struggled to reconcile his memory of Bethany with the woman who’d asked me to leave her son alone. I hated that, by sharing this secret, I’d tainted his view of his wonderful mother.

But one night when Jethro was visiting us in Nashville, the older Winston had quoted one of Bethany’s sayings: *Don’t toss out a painting because you dislike one of the brushstrokes.*

Bethany wasn’t perfect, but neither was I. Neither was Billy. I’d reminded him of the saying later that night, encouraging him to reevaluate how he’d been permitting this one, single, solitary decision of his mother’s to blemish a lifetime of love. That, at last, seemed to make a difference. It had allowed him to make peace.

“That’s right.” Duane pointed at Billy, nodding. “Didn’t she trade with the Hills? Deer meat for tutoring their kids?”

“Yeah. She had a similar deal with Mr. Badcock and his chickens and eggs,” Cletus said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“Poor Mr. Badcock,” Jenn muttered, and I saw she and Cletus share a look across the fire.

“She traded with Mr. Badcock until we got our own chickens,” Ashley added softly from where she sat on Drew’s lap, absentmindedly twirling her husband’s long, blond hair around a finger.

“And the firewood trade with both Nancy Danvish and Old Man Blout for vegetables and the like,” Jethro said. “I remember cutting three cords of firewood one summer just to find out in the fall that she’d traded them for vegetables.”

“And then she made you eat the vegetables?” Sienna asked, amusement in her voice.

“That’s right. I thought for sure I’d be able to get out of eating those green beans, seeing as how I’d cut the wood.”

“Don’t forget the yellow squash,” Billy said.

“Ugh. I *hate* yellow squash.” Jethro made a face that reminded me so much of Constantine when I served him yellow squash, I almost lost my breath.

“What is it with you and yellow foods? Bananas, squash, corn.” Cletus poked at Jethro.

I felt Billy’s shoulders shake and I looked at him. He gave me his eyes as his laughter faded, leaving behind a happy smile.

The oldest Winston brother shrugged, his gaze moving to his wife, a slow spreading grin taking over his features. “I like papaya.”

“Isn’t that green on the outside and orange on the inside?” Roscoe asked.

“When it’s ripe, it turns yellow on the outside, and it’s my favorite,” Jethro went on, his eyes locked with Sienna’s.

“On that note—” Sienna stood, grabbing her husband’s hand to pull him up “—we should go round up the little ones and take them back to the house. It’s getting late.”

I could feel the reluctance to disband as everyone moved to do so, stretching and picking up their drinks. I watched from my place on Billy’s lap as each of the Winstons paired off with their mate.

Drew pulled Ashley close for a tender kiss, looking at her like she was responsible for everything beautiful in the world. Jessica walked backward, tugging Duane along with her, a sassy smile on her lips. Jethro and Sienna strolled out of the fire ring, hand in hand. Cletus walked over to Jenn and picked up their sleeping son, cradling him while Jenn stood and placed a kiss on Linus’s cheek first, then Cletus’s. Beau toyed with Shelly’s braid and she smiled her breathtaking smile, lifting a hand to cup his jaw. Once they were standing, Roscoe bent to whisper something in Simone’s ear and she laughed, reaching around to pinch his backside.

It was always at this point every year that I choked up a little and had to swallow against the lump of emotion in my throat. All this love, all these good people, I couldn’t believe I belonged among them. I’d been alone for so much of my life. As grateful as I was to be here, as much as I treasured these moments and this family, part of me feared these blessings wouldn’t last.

“Hey.” Billy’s rumbly voice pulled me from my conflicting reflections, and his hand slid up my leg. “You ready for bed?”

Instead of standing, I faced him and pressed our foreheads together. “I love you, Billy Winston.”

I sensed him smile. “I love you, Scarlet Winston.”

His statement made me smile. It had been my idea to change my legal name to Scarlet Claire Winston before we married and keep my stage name as Claire McClure. The separation between my professional life and my personal life had been a godsend over the years. I’d never felt more like myself than when the officiant had asked: *Do you, Scarlet Claire Winston, take William Shakespeare Winston to be your husband?*

“You want to check on the kids?” I lifted my fingers to his beard, lightly scratching his jaw with my nails. “Will you get Constantine and Tiberius ready for Beau and Shelly while I get the cabin ready?”

He nodded, lifting his chin for a gentle kiss, but then he whispered, “I expect you to be naked by the time I arrive.”

His teasing yet commanding tone chased away any residual melancholy I might’ve been feeling and I stood, stretched, and stepped away before taunting, “Yeah, we’ll see about that.”

“Scarlet—”

Grinning, I darted out of his grip before he could grab for me again and jogged into the darkness before he could follow. I then listened to the sounds of the camp fade, slowing to a walk and not bothering to pull out my flashlight.

Whenever we were in Green Valley, which was usually just once a year during this camping weekend, we always made a point to spend a night together in our place, where our story began. I knew every tree and bush along the way. I knew just where the steps started, how many to climb, and—once inside—where the matches were on the mantle.

Lighting the kerosene lamp on the little table, I turned to the mattress and pulled off the dust cover. We kept the blankets and sheets in a small cedar chest, and I set to work preparing the space—sweeping the floor, dusting the mantle, starting a small fire, making the bed.

Over the years, Billy and Jethro had added on a bathroom, working together to dig a well, run the pipes, add the septic. Billy had also offered to add a kitchen at the same time, but I’d vetoed the idea. I liked the simplicity of our cabin. I liked the way it preserved the past while allowing us to celebrate our present.

Everything done, I tugged off my shoes, set them by the door, and then removed all my clothes *except* my underwear. A small act of rebellion, but probably not an unexpected one. If I ever complied with all my husband's wishes, he'd probably have my head examined.

Smiling at the thought, I slipped under the fresh covers, rested my cheek on the pillow facing the door, and I sang.

I sang all the love songs I'd written for him over the years starting with my first album. I sang until he walked in the door, a big old grin—well, big for Billy Winston—on his face, his eyes twinkly, bright, and happy.

I sang as he undressed and prepared for bed. I sang as he blew out the lamp and joined me, as his hands found my body in the flickering firelight from the hearth, and as he chuckled when he discovered I wasn't quite naked.

I sang and laughed as he removed my underwear, down my hips and legs, as he returned to me once more and gathered me in his arms. And then my heart sang when he kissed me, and touched me, and made me his.

When I was young, I lived to survive. I'd shunned hopes and dreams, content in the safety of survival.

But now I knew better. Nothing lasts forever. Not a song, not happiness, not misery. Mere survival was no safer than living for hopes and dreams. At the end, there will always be the end.

So why not dream? Why not hope? Why not live life with wild faith and abandon? Why not take the risk? Otherwise, all these moments—small or significant, heaven on earth—would be lost to fear.

I wasn't afraid. Not anymore. And never again.

-The End-

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Liberty was taken with the location of Michelangelo's hidden sketches. They're actually in a room in the basement of Basilica di San Lorenzo in Florence, not in the basement of Accademia Gallery. I wanted the scene with *David* to take place right before Scarlet and Billy were trapped together the first time, and so I created an alternate reality/dimension where what I wanted to be true was true.

A reader asked me about the abuse Scarlet suffered at the hands of her father and whether she was based on anyone I knew. Unfortunately, the answer is yes. Growing up we lived down the street from what was referred to as a "Charlie House," a group foster home for children who'd been abused (in all the various ways that's possible). Scarlet's abuse was based on those kids (siblings with a similar experience).

Other readers have asked me if Green Valley is based on a real place, and that answer is also yes (sorta). It's a combination of places. Right outside of Maryville, TN is a small cluster of homes (Happy Valley, Tennessee) at the base of one of the mountains. Further up the mountain is a community called Top of the World. It's an unincorporated hamlet in rural Blount County set around a lake that used to be a gold mine. A little farther north is a town by the name of Townsend, with a cute downtown, shops, and restaurants. If you take the Parkway over the mountain to Walland, you'll find the real Rocky Branch Community Center (and Friday night jam sessions) I used as inspiration for the books.

I hope you've enjoyed the Winston Brothers series. It's been difficult to contemplate that my time with this family is at an end. On behalf of Ashley, Duane, Jethro, Cletus, Beau, Roscoe, and Billy, thank you for reading.

-Penny

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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1. A sneak peek of *Engagement and Espionage*, Book #1 in the Handcrafted Mystery Series
2. Penny's Booklist

SNEAK PEEK: ENGAGEMENT AND ESPIONAGE,
HANDCRAFTED MYSTERIES BOOK #1

CLETUS

Why must people always talk?

“What’s wrong?” Drew leaned toward me as folks closest to our make-shift 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, or a mime routine, or an interpretive dance—I wouldn’t have cared. Mylar balloons with tidy messages were an underutilized 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 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 was in response to the frown affixed to my features.

I should have been pleased.

I was not pleased.

Drew was on guitar, I was on banjo, Grady was on fiddle, and I’d talked my brother Billy into singing—a rare achievement as Billy hardly ever

agreed to lend his pipes to our Friday night improvising at the Green Valley jam session.

But 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 looked at it ten times. "I need to make a call."

Drew's stare turned probing. Abruptly, his expression cleared, and then 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, side stepping and almost knocking my banjo with his knee in his eagerness to reach my brother 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 him 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 Ph.D. 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.*

Good lord.

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.

Damnit.

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, his attention coming back to me.

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

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

"Apparently." I said under my breath, It wasn't my place to say anything to Diane Donner-Sylvester (soon to be ex-Sylvester) 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 knot of unease twisted in my stomach, adding a heaping helping of restlessness on top of my frustration.

Over Thanksgiving, we'd—

Well, I'd—

Damnit.

The truth was, we'd discussed marriage. I'd asked her while we'd been informal. She'd said yes. That was that. If or when she needed help planning the wedding, I surmised she would ask me.

But now it was January, and she hadn't deigned to mention the wedding, or marriage. And 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? Good lord.

Then again, in her defense, marriage wasn't the only thing on her mind as of late. Jenn's busiest season was between Thanksgiving and New

Year's, and on top of that, her momma was going through a tough time, seeing as how Diane Donner-Sylvester's soon-to-be ex-husband—and Jennifer's daddy—Kip Sylvester was a real pain in the ass.

I'd hardly seen her for going on six weeks. When I did see her, it was either a Winston family affair where we had no privacy, or me showing up after work at the Donner Bakery. We'd fooled around a little—a *very* little—but mostly, Jenn had been exhausted.

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

That's right. No expectations. Merely a heckvalot of hopes. Unfulfilled hopes meant I may have been frustrated by the lack of Jenn's time and attention, but I wasn't allowing myself to dwell on it. I looked to the future, to a time when Jenn's momma was less dependent, and folks hadn't yet cheated on their New Year's diets with baked goods.

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 now, the time was night. New Year's was last week. I'd gathered all my hopes, stacked them in a pile, and stapled them to today's date on the calendar. Tonight was the night, our night. Finally. She was supposed to leave work on 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 sour 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'm making that call and I can jump back in when I'm done.” Standing, I placed my banjo in its case and then

leaned it 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 have dropped *my* chances of being an unwilling messenger precipitously.

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 easily, 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 of the Green Valley community center, aiming for the front door 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 passers-by 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 woman sounded like Jenn, and twisted toward the voice, anticipation filling my lungs before I could quell the instinct.

And there she was.

Well, more precisely, there was a version of her. She wore a blonde wig on her head, a yellow dress on her person with a brown collar and trim, and pearls around her neck.

Frustration grabbed a shovel and dug a deeper well within me.

Jenn rushed 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 and I sighed quietly.

She jogged to me in high heels.

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—widened unnaturally and she said, “Hey, there you are.”

“Here I am.” I stuffed my hands in my pants pockets.

She stopped abruptly 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, both a literal barrier as well as a figurative representation of what separated us.

A second ticked by. 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. But then I remembered Drew's request, and I relented.

“Drew says hi,” I said.

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.

Damn it.

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

“Please don't be mad.” The hope in her features had been entirely eclipsed by guilt. “I am so sorry. I would have been on time, but Mr. Badcock sold all my eggs to somebody. And then he was treating 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?

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'd only sell me eggs with an advance 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 egg-tale while keeping an eye out for any passer-bys or hangers-on. I didn't need folks following us or asking me about 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. You know, he wants half the hotel and the bakery, so he was threatening her with that again."

I grimaced. I was aware of Kip Sylvester's reprehensible behavior: he'd popped up again this last week after being mostly gone for just about 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. We were enveloped in dark, which meant she couldn't see at all, and I—like all my siblings—could see tolerably well.

"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 finished with an agitated exhale, allowing me to lead her through the darkness.

I took the infernal bakery box, set it on a nearby crate, and then brought her near a corner, placing her back 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. Apparently, most folks had moved to 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 him."

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

It was a great idea, so of course it was Jenn's idea. Mrs. Diane Donner-Sylvester, Jenn's dragon-lady mother, was one of the most powerful business persons in the region. A visit from Diane was a big deal indeed. As well, Diane clearly needed a distraction from her divorce woes.

"Yes." She whispered, her eyes searching for mine, but seemingly unable to settle on the right spot—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. *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 and abruptly, the flood of disappointment from the deep well of frustration rose to my throat. I swallowed, stepping away from her searching hands as I stuffed mine back in my pockets.

“Jenn—”

“I am so, so sorry, Cletus. I know I promised I’d be here on time, and I wasn’t, 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 eager and content. Her lips brushed lightly over my neck. I tensed. Her hot tongue coming out to lick a path to my ear had me jumping, 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 tear 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 possessiveness.

Jennifer pressed herself 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 my incredulity. If she didn't know how much I wanted her, then I'd been doing something very wrong.

"You're asking me foolish questions," I ground out, catching both her hands and holding them hostage between us to force her to back away a step. "And you're not foolish."

I needed a minute.

"Then what's the problem?" She pressed forward. Jenn didn't fight my hold, but she did feel 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 of words, I settled on whispering the truth, "I'd like nothing more than rip off your underwear and—"

"No need, I'm not wearing underwear." 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 good 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, God Cletus, I just want you so—oh!"

Unceremoniously, 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 sources. Sunlight, lamps, spotlights, I wanted to see every part of her.

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, and I couldn't get enough. I was 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 full-fledged frenzy. She moaned, a sound I took as encouragement.

Jenn's nails scratched down my shirt, her fingers shaking as they found my belt, tugging and pulling frantically while I nipped and licked and kissed her jaw and neck, stopping at her breast to place a wet, biting kiss at the center, all the while working her 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, and then spread her wide for my tongue and mouth and pleasure.

But then, her phone rang; Reba McEntire's, 'I'm a Survivor;' that was her mother's ring tone. The woman had recently programmed it into Jenn's phone.

She squeaked, fumbling for the device. Her face briefly illuminated just before quickly rejecting the call.

"Don't stop." She reached for my belt again, this time deftly undoing it, the button of my pants, and my zipper while I stoked her.

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 and 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 that man of yours, I need his help too. Please.*

Momma: *ALL THE CHICKENS AND ROOSTERS ARE DEAD! PICK UP YUR 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 brain gears. My gaze dropped to the wet patch on the front of her dress, where I'd had my mouth seconds prior, and my erection throbbed.

So we're . . . not having sex?

"Why? Why would they do it?" She took 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 blindly toward the direction of the hall door. "This is crazy. Poor Mr. Badcock. And those poor chickens." A sound of mournful 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.*

-END SNEAK PEEK-

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