



by
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Winston Brothers book 3

Beard Science

(Winston Brothers, #3)

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DEDICATION

For Cletus.

CHAPTER 1

*“So the unwanting soul
sees what's hidden,
and the ever-wanting soul
sees only what it wants.”*

— Lao Tzu

~Jennifer~

On any given day, I woke up and I baked cake.

If I had to bake cake I preferred not to bake in large batches. That's like batch-raising kids, expecting them to think and behave exactly alike, or trying to swim across every lake in East Tennessee at precisely the same time.

I preferred to focus on one cake. Each and every cake had its own personality. If you ignored a cake's personality the cake would ignore you. It'll be a rude, boring cake.

I avoided making rude cake. These days, I avoided making cake, period. But if I had to do it, I made great cake. Fun cake. Cake with big dreams, difficult to ignore. Special cake.

“Are you finished with the Knoxville order yet?” my momma bellowed from the other room. I hadn't heard her come in. Her tone was sharp and edged with panic, and that made me panic. “And, I swear on your grandma Lilly's fried chicken livers, if you're making one cake at a time again, I'm going to wring your neck.”

I squared my shoulders, swallowing the rush of nervous saliva in my mouth. Grandma Lilly's fried chicken livers were no joke. Not only were they delicious and a closely guarded family recipe—like most of our infamous family recipes—they could also maim if thrown with enough force and deadly intent.

Employing great care, I placed the last of the cakes—the cakes I'd just baked and decorated one at a time—into a bakery box.

That's right. I'd baked one cake at a time. Did that mean I had to wake up at 0-dark-thirty and start baking? Yes, it did. Did I need to admit as much to my momma? No, I did not. Better to wake up at the butt crack of dawn than sell the good people of Barbern boring cakes.

"I'm just finishing up," I called and jumped into action. If she saw my six-quart mixer she'd have a fit. I stuffed the small-batch bowls and measuring tools into a tall cabinet at the back of the large, industrial kitchen. I returned for the six-quart mixer, hoisting it in my arms and stumbling under its weight.

The click of her heels grew closer and I knew I didn't have time to hide the machine like I wanted, so I lowered it to the ground and covered it with my apron, spinning around just as my momma appeared in the doorway.

"Thank goodness." Her hands were on her hips and she looked perfectly put-together, as was her habit.

Her blonde waves resembled a helmet, and in many ways they were. Her makeup was spotless and as thick as a layer of frosting, and as impervious as a hockey mask. A cloud of Chanel No.5, nail polish, and Aqua Net hair spray arrived three seconds after she did.

The way she made herself up was both weapon and armor.

She assessed the state of the kitchen, lingering for a long moment on the large-batch mixer. It was spotless.

"Where is everyone? Who cleaned all this up?"

"I did." I stepped over the smaller mixer, hoping she wouldn't spot it. "I sent the team home early, since it was just the one special order."

Her eyes cut to mine, vexation written on her features. "What are you wearing?"

I glanced down at myself, having forgotten what I had on. "Uh, overalls."

"Oh, *Jennifer!*" She said my name low and rough, as though it were a swear word. "A lady does not wear overalls."

"Nancy Danvish wears overalls." Nancy Danvish supplied our eggs and milk; her hens and cows were very happy, therefore they made the best eggs and milk. Happy eggs and milk make happy cakes.

"Nancy Danvish is a farmer."

“But she’s still a lady.”

“That’s debatable . . .” my mother grumbled, almost rolling her eyes before catching herself. “And, goodness, your hair. And your face, ugh.” Under her breath she added, “You know I wonder what planet you’re from; Lord knows it ain’t this one.”

I pressed my lips together so I wouldn’t say, “Thank you.”

I tried my best to pretend unkind words were actually just erroneously expressed compliments, as it just made everything nicer for everybody. For example, my momma’s latest comment could be rephrased to, *You’re cosmically stellar*.

This habit of purposefully misunderstanding insults has served me well over the course of my life, around town, and at home. I’m sure it would have served me well if I’d gone to public school, but my momma homeschooled us kids instead.

For example, when Rhea Mathis called me “stranger than a vegetarian at a barbeque” during junior choir practice at church, I decided it was her own special way of saying *unique*. And when Timothy King called me a frigid prude outside the jam session when I was fifteen, I thanked him for praising my coolness and modesty. And when two of my fellow baking finalists at the state fair told me I was a no-talent hack, I smiled and accepted their kind remarks about my work ethic.

“Hello? Earth to Jennifer. Stop cotton picking and get a move on.”

“What?”

My momma had retrieved her phone with one hand and was snapping at me with the other. “You have an appointment at the station with Sheriff James.”

“I do?” This was news to me.

“Yes. You do. I ran into him at the Piggly Wiggly parking lot this morning and asked how he and his deputies enjoyed those cupcakes we sent over. And, *of course*, he couldn’t stop talking about how amazing they were. One thing led to another and he agreed to a video testimonial.”

“Oh . . .” I nodded faintly, my throat suddenly dry. I attempted a smile.

“What is wrong with your face? Do you have tummy trouble?”

“No.” I tried harder to paste on a convincing smile. “But, Momma, you know I don’t like doing those recordings.”

“Speak up, Jennifer. You’re low talking again. You know I don’t like it when you low-talk.”

I lifted my voice. “I don’t like doing the recordings. I get nervous and the comments—”

“Don’t read the mean comments, baby. There’s always going to be nasty people, bless their hearts.” She crossed to me and placed her hands on my shoulders, giving me a gentle shake. “Focus on how well the lodge is doing since we launched the social media campaign last year. Focus on how business is booming. Focus on all the money we’re making. Focus on how famous and admired you are all around the world. You’re a star.”

“But it’s so public. And people in town—”

“People in town don’t matter. You and I, we’re meant for bigger things. Come on now, you know you look pretty in those videos, and our subscribers eat it up. The camera loves your face, when you’re wearing your makeup and don’t look like a farmer, of course. Go on and change, there’s a good girl. I told the sheriff you’d be there this afternoon.”

“But can’t you—”

“Jennifer!” My mother’s fingers dug into my arms and she closed her eyes for a long moment before speaking. “You are trying my patience, baby girl. Do you know how many things I need to do today? Do I need to remind you we have investors coming for the lodge at the end of this month? I need you, Jennifer. You are the key. You fail me, everything fails. With your brother gone . . .” My mother’s chin quivered and she glanced up at the ceiling, tears shimmering in her eyes.

Immediately, I was awash with regret for causing her distress. I knew how she struggled with my brother’s defiance. I knew how hurt she had been—and continued to be—when Isaac cut himself out of our lives. My father seemed to get over the loss quickly, but my momma still grieved. My heart ached just thinking about how I missed my brother; I couldn’t imagine how my parents felt.

She exhaled a shaky breath and sniffled, bringing her eyes back to mine. “Just, please, Jenny, please be a help to me. Please don’t fail me.”

I swallowed the last of my protests and rearranged my features such that my clenched jaw resembled a closed-mouth smile.

Her sigh was laced with relief and she cupped my face, giving me a cherishing smile. “Good, good. Go get dressed, get a video of you and the sheriff. Afterward you can spend the rest of the day however you like.” Behind her mask of makeup I perceived her eyes soften with concern. “What time did you get up? You look tired.”

“I’m fine.”

She inspected me for a moment longer with maternal eyes before her watch buzzed; she glanced at it, huffed, and released my shoulders. “I have to get this call. Go see the sheriff. Perhaps write a letter to one of those pen pals of yours, or take a nap.”

Maybe for the ten millionth time in my life I said, “Okay, Momma.”

But she wasn’t listening, she’d already brought the phone to her ear. “Hello? Hello, yes, this is Diane Donner-Sylvester. Yes, thank you for calling . . .” She left the kitchen, her voice diminishing along with the click of her heels.

Like the good girl I was, I did as I was told.

I’m a people watcher.

Partly because people, the things they do and say when they think no one is watching, are truly odd. But mostly, I’m a people watcher because hardly anyone in town talks to me about anything but cake.

“It’s the Banana Cake Queen,” Flo McClure announced in a flat voice. She was manning—er, womanning—the front desk of the police station and her eyes barely moved from the computer screen as I approached. Not looking at me or waiting for me to speak, Flo McClure instructed, “Take a seat, gorgeous. The sheriff is expecting you, but it’ll be a few minutes.”

“Thank you, Miss McClure.”

The older woman’s pine-bark brown eyes crinkled and her polite smile widened just a touch, letting me know she’d heard me but was too busy or disinclined to engage in small talk.

I live in a small town and everybody knows everybody. As an example, Flo—or Florence—McClure is known as the stubborn spinster sister to Carter McClure, the fire chief. People said she never married despite her string of would-be suitors because she didn't want to give up her independence.

I suspected it wasn't her independence she was afraid of losing. After watching her and Nancy Danvish engage in a furtive yet passionate argument at a Fourth of July parade five years ago, my money was on Flo McClure being firmly in the closet.

Anyway, everybody knows everybody, and everybody knows me. I'm the Banana Cake Queen. I make other kinds of cake, but I'm famous for my banana cake. I know this as fact because, when I'm introduced, it's usually like this:

"This is Jennifer Sylvester. You know, the Banana Cake Queen? She's famous for her banana cake."

But I digress.

I turned from Flo McClure and found a seat in the corner of the small lobby of the police station, setting the wrapped zucchini walnut bread I'd brought on my lap. I crossed my legs at the ankles and waited.

I liked the sheriff. He was nice. Despite being a man of few words, he asked after my well-being. His smiles were genuine and kind. I liked that he was a good father and husband. And he cared about the folks under his jurisdiction. He was a good person, so I made him baked goods whenever I knew we'd be crossing paths.

I spent the next fifteen minutes people watching, avoiding the social media notifications on my phone. I wasn't in charge of the accounts, but I still received all the alerts.

Hannah Townsend walked in, stormed to the desk, and argued with Flo about a speeding ticket.

A few moments later, the King brothers exited the big door leading to the main offices, whispering in hushed tones. I stiffened, bracing for an insult or an evocative proposition. It never came.

They looked ragged and maybe a little scared. Luckily, the pair didn't even notice me as they bolted for the exit, paying no mind to Flo and

Hannah either.

I wasn't surprised to see the King brothers at the station. As low-ranking members of the Iron Wraiths—the biggest and most troublesome of the local motorcycle gangs—they were always in and out of jail. Ever since I was a teenager, when they spotted me on my own, I could count on aggressively suggestive remarks.

Not today, apparently. I exhaled my relief.

I turned my attention back to Hannah and Flo, their interaction becoming friendlier as the conversation turned to the subject of Hannah's momma.

Hannah's momma had been a car accident several years ago and Hannah, even though she'd been just seventeen at the time, took care of her. Hannah had been working two jobs since: as a hostess at the local steak house and at the Payton Mills. About two years ago, she'd quit her job at the mill in favor of becoming a stripper at the Pink Pony.

The desk phone rang and Flo held up her finger as she brought the receiver to her ear. "Just a second, Hannah. Let me get this. Yes?" The older woman's eyes darted to me and away as she nodded, saying, "Yep, she's here."

I straightened in my seat because Hannah glanced at me. Her eyes flickered over my form and she stopped just short of rolling her eyes before looking away.

I didn't blame Hannah. I really didn't. We were the same age and in choir together growing up. I understood her scorn.

Outwardly, I was ridiculous: big, wavy bleached-blond hair; acrylic nails always painted pink; high heels. My momma had me in full makeup (inclusive of false eyelashes) at sixteen, younger if you counted the pageants I'd participated in as a child. In public I was always attired in yellow or green—my signature colors since the age of four—and I always wore a knee-length dress and pearls.

I owned one pair of jeans and a pair of overalls, but had been forbidden long ago from stepping outside the house in anything other than Sunday garb. Momma said I was the face of the business, and pedestrian attire was bad for business.

I was a superficial caricature of a southern stereotype, but our customers loved it. They even hired me for parties. I'd stand behind the dessert table and serve cake with a bright smile and shaking hands. Nobody ever noticed my hands.

"Okay, I'll send her back." Flo nodded again, her gaze cutting to mine as she hung up the phone and flicked her wrist toward the door to the main offices. "The sheriff is ready for you."

"Thank you, ma'am."

She didn't respond, instead turning her attention back to Hannah. "Did you see that news crew up at the Winston house?"

"Yes, ma'am, I did," Hannah responded on a whisper easy to overhear. "It's on account of Jethro Winston getting married to that movie star."

Jethro Winston and Sienna Diaz, the Hollywood actress, had met at the beginning of the summer and subsequently become engaged two months ago. He was the oldest of the seven Winston siblings. After Jethro came Billy, next was Cletus, Ashley (the only girl), the twins—Beau and Duane—then Roscoe the youngest. Roscoe was my age and, if I'd attended school, we would have been in the same grade.

"Jethro already marry that lady?"

"No, not yet." Hannah leaned farther over the desk and lowered her voice. "But the rumor is she's already pregnant."

My heart twisted with envy.

It's not that I was jealous of Ms. Diaz. Not at all. I'd had no designs on Jethro Winston. Though he'd seemed nice enough to me, my father always said Jethro was the wrong sort and that I should avoid him.

And by *wrong sort*, my father meant Jethro wasn't ever going to be wealthy. A man was nothing to my father if he wasn't rich or had the potential for notoriety.

The truth was, I was jealous of Sienna *and* Jethro. If the rumors were true, despite meeting just five months ago, they were starting a family. They were having a baby, a little perfect person to love and take care of and cuddle and hold.

More than anything, I wanted that. I wanted a family of my own.

I crossed to the big door, my heels clicking on the linoleum, leaving the two women to their conversation while I fought to subdue my envy. I turned the knob and stepped through to the back office, scanning the space for Sheriff James. It was a busy place today, much busier than typical, and much bigger than what people might expect from a small town station.

The state of Tennessee mandates that each county elect a sheriff to serve for four years. Sheriffs are public servants with full police authority in a particular county. But if the cities have their own police departments, Tennessee sheriffs (and their deputies) usually keep their patrol limited to unincorporated areas of their counties.

Not so with Sheriff James. He and his deputies patrolled the entire county, were responsible for three incorporated cities within the boundaries of the county, plus had shared jurisdiction with the federal warden for the national park on the Tennessee side. He had a big job and a large team.

The administrative staff were huddled around one desk, whispering anxiously. Usually, the majority of the officers were out on the road, on patrol. Not today. I spotted at least five deputies milling about impatiently. The workplace held an unmistakable air of waiting.

“Jennifer Sylvester, always a pleasure.”

I turned from the peppering of uniforms and found the sheriff walking toward me, a friendly and fatherly grin on his features.

“Sheriff James. I brought you zucchini bread.” I held it out between us, pleased when his grin grew into a beaming smile.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he said, though he took the foil-wrapped offering readily enough. “Your momma said something about me recording a statement about your cakes?”

“Yes, sir. That’s right. She’d like me to record you talking about the cupcakes we sent over, if you don’t mind.”

“I see. Are you going to be in it, too?”

I shook my head, even though I knew my momma wanted me to be in the video. But I’d come up with an alternate plan. “No, sir. I’ll record an introduction later, but we’ll get your testimonial now. I won’t be in the shot with you.”

He nodded, bending closer as I spoke as though trying to hear me better. “Ah, okay. Sounds fine. But let’s go back to my office. It’ll be quieter.”

“Okay—”

At that moment, the door behind me burst open followed by a loud *whoop*. I turned just as Jackson James appeared, putting his hands on my hips and squeezing past.

“Excuse me, Jenn,” the deputy said with a wink, stepping between his father and me.

Jackson James was the only son of Sheriff James and his wife, Janet. They also had a daughter named Jessica who, until just recently, had been a mathematics teacher at the high school where my father was the principal.

See? Small town. Everybody knows everybody.

Jackson waved a large manila envelope excitedly. “We got it, sir. I have it right here.”

“That was fast.” The sheriff’s eyes lit and he traded his son the zucchini bread for the envelope, hastily opening it as the other members of the sheriff’s office crowded close. I took a step back and to the side, not wanting to be in the way.

“Judge Payton rushed it through.”

“We just got the evidence this morning.”

“He said the photographs painted a clear picture and he was honored to be the one to sign the warrant.” Jackson flicked the envelope with his fingers and swapped smiles with the other deputies. “So I guess the only question remaining is, who gets to arrest the bastard?”

The sheriff sighed, shaking his head like he couldn’t believe what he was reading. “Call for backup from Merryville before you set out.”

“I think the six of us can handle one scrawny biker,” Jackson scoffed, but kept his tone respectful. “Plus Dale and Evans are already en route.”

Dale and Evans were two other deputies, not currently at the station. At least, not as far as I could see. I took a moment to glance around at those present.

My heart stopped. Skipped. Stuttered.

I took a reflexive step backward. A twisting, uncomfortable heat crawled up my chest and bottomed out my stomach. I spotted a bearded man separate from the crowd, tinkering with a machine. It was a beard I'd recognize anywhere.

Cletus Winston, the third Winston brother.

As usual, he didn't see me.

When folks in town dismissed me, it didn't bother me much. Very few were actually petty, and most of the petty ones were girls my age that I'd grown up with, or their mothers. They'd affix fake smiles in front of my face and rolled their eyes at my back. I was used to this.

Cletus was different. He didn't see me *at all*. It was as though I didn't register on his radar, not even a blip, and this had been true my entire life. I was invisible to him.

But that was fine by me.

Cletus Winston was the sneakiest, most manipulative, most powerful, and—as far as I was concerned—the most dangerous man in East Tennessee. Problem was, virtually no else seemed to realize it. Everyone in town thought he was odd, but mostly harmless.

Meanwhile, he blackmailed them into doing what he wanted, all the while tricking people into thinking it was their idea.

I knew this because I was a people watcher.

Don't get me wrong, watching Cletus was no chore. Was he handsome? Yes, he most certainly was. Like all the Winston boys, he was a looker.

Maybe, to most people, he wasn't nearly as favored as his other brothers with their tidy beards, lean builds, and classic good looks. At first glance you might overlook him because, with Cletus, it was necessary to probe beyond the surface to see the potential underneath.

He was shorter and stockier than his siblings, his frame thicker and more muscular. His beard was bushy and long, long enough to braid, like one of those Vikings. The man evidently didn't subscribe to beard maintenance other than brushing it, oiling it, and letting it grow.

His streaked chestnut hair was long, curly in some spots, wavy in others. It stuck out in all directions, several strands bleached blond by the sun. The locks covered his ears but didn't quite meet the back of his neck due to its

constant state of skewedness. I thought, on anyone else, it would look adorable.

Before I'd realized how cold-blooded he was, I'd itched to tame his wild mane and trim his beard—just a little. Just enough to reveal the handsome man under all that chaos. I'd often wondered how much of his disorderly exterior was purposeful, meant to give him an innocuous, unkempt appearance. Obviously his misdirection worked because folks were fooled by it.

However, his eyes should have given him away. His eyes should have made it obvious to anyone *really looking* that he wasn't odd. He was maniacally clever. They were green or hazel—I wasn't sure which since he never met my gaze and hardly ever stood still for any period of time when I was close by—and were rimmed by ridiculously thick lashes. His lashes were so very pretty.

I think his pretty lashes confused people and made them overlook how his eyes were lit with an unnatural intelligence. He didn't miss much. And he was able to mask his expression and thoughts, misdirect others, because of how he used his eyes.

Regardless, maniacal intelligence and scruffy misdirection notwithstanding, Cletus Winston was remarkably attractive.

Yep. Definitely a looker.

But I didn't care much about that. I wasn't interested in lookers. The King brothers were lookers, too. Just because a person was a looker doesn't mean they're not a psychopath.

At present, Cletus's features were arranged in affable indifference, but his eyes told a different story. They were sharp and attentive. It was clear to me he was splitting his attention between the gathering of officers and the machine in front of him, eavesdropping though appearing oblivious.

While he watched them, I watched him. As my grandmother always used to say, "Best to keep an eye on the viper in a barn full of mice."

Especially if you're a mouse.

"Well, I guess y'all better get going," the sheriff said with reluctance, worry in his voice.

The officers started to move, the air ripe with anticipation as they traded excited glances. Deputy Chris Williams turned, stepping right in front of me then reeling back a bit. He gave me a big smile.

“Oh. Hello, Jenn. Didn’t see you there.”

I nodded at his greeting, my attention moving to Cletus. The third Winston wasn’t looking at Chris and me, *thank goodness*.

Curious, I leaned forward and whispered, “Where y’all going?”

He puffed out his chest proudly. “Oh, no place special. Just off to arrest *Razor*, aka president of the Iron Wraiths MC.”

My lips parted in surprise and I straightened. “Oh my.”

If Cletus Winston was the most dangerous man in East Tennessee, Razor Blade St. Claire was the second. The main difference being Cletus kept clandestine control over his power, while Razor was brazen about most everything.

As the president of the Iron Wraiths motorcycle club, he’d skirted the law for years, always just out of reach. It was generally known and accepted that he was a murderer. And a drug trafficker. And a perpetuator of plenty other sordid crimes, each more unpleasant than the last.

Chris Williams’s grin widened as he walked past. “That’s right. The big dog.”

The big dog . . . *well, that was one way to put it.*

A few of the deputies tipped their heads at me as they passed, but most appeared to be lost to the excitement of bringing in the head of the Iron Wraiths. Once they cleared, Sheriff James stepped forward and gave me a flat, distracted smile. He was still holding the envelope. His worry was completely understandable.

“Do you want to do this some other time?” I suggested, not wanting to impose when his mind was on more important matters.

“No, no. It’s fine. In fact, I’m looking forward to it.” He turned to Marion Davis, one of the administrative staff milling about, and waved her over. “Marion, will you take this to George in evidence for me?”

“Yes, sir.” She smiled brightly, regarding the unsealed envelope with reverence.

The sheriff hesitated for a beat, then passed it over to her waiting hands.

“Come this way.” He grabbed the foil-wrapped zucchini bread from where his son had left it and motioned me forward. I followed, casting furtive glances at Cletus Winston. Cletus’s attention was on the sheriff. And then it was on the mail machine. And then it was on Marion Davis. And then it was on the sheriff again.

He was up to something and I didn’t want to know what.

Once we were in the sheriff’s office, I pushed thoughts of Clandestine Cletus from my mind and prepped the sheriff for the video. I set up the shot, wanting to place his face on one side of the frame so the viewer would see the station beyond.

One of the only things I liked about doing the videos and Instagram promotions were the fundamentals of photography and videography I was learning as a byproduct. Aesthetically, setting the subject to one side was more visually appealing than just a man’s face in the center of the screen.

“Okay, are you ready?” I gave him an encouraging smile.

He returned it, crossing his arms. He uncrossed them and frowned. “What should I do with my arms?”

My grin widened. “Hold your right wrist with your left hand, in front of you. Yes, just like that. It looks very natural.”

He nodded, like this was serious business, and gave me the sign to start recording. So I did.

The sheriff was a natural, which was surprising since he was typically a man of few words. Yet he had no problem talking about my cupcakes, and that warmed my heart. I had what I needed, so I didn’t make him record a second testimonial.

We finished up. I left soon thereafter, noticing with relief that Cletus Winston was also gone. He posed no threat to me, but he still made me nervous. No one person should be allowed to be that pathologically intelligent and oppressively handsome.

After the station, I stopped by the Piggly Wiggly. I picked up my weekly crate of bananas and delivered them to the bakery. It was getting late and I was growing tired, so I carried the crate to the back cabinet of the industrial kitchen.

And that's when I remembered I'd stuck my small-batch baking implements in the cabinet. There was nothing for it; I needed to clean up before I could go home and crawl into bed.

But I was uncomfortable. My feet hurt and the dress I wore hurt my ribs. It had one of those built-in bone bustiers, which made my shape look really nice but also served as a torture device. My mother had confiscated my overalls earlier and everyone else was long gone.

So I stripped off my dress, kicked off my shoes, peeled off my false eyelashes, tied on an apron, and did the dishes in my undies and garter belt. Many might consider cleaning while nearly naked as odd behavior, but I did it often. I was frequently alone after dark (or before dawn) at the bakery.

I was just finishing up, washing the last of the bowls, when my phone rang. It was my mother, likely wondering where I was.

I used my pinky finger to answer the call because my hands were wet. "Hey, Momma. I'm just finishing up at the bakery."

"Are you working on those popovers for tomorrow? Already?"

I fought a groan. I'd forgotten about the big breakfast order. "Uh, no. Not yet. I'm . . . trying out a new recipe." I grimaced at the lie. I didn't like lying. It made me feel hot and sweaty, like I was walking on rocks and eating a chili pepper.

"Oh, that's good. You can tell me all about it later. I'm calling about that video, the one with the sheriff?"

"Yes, I—"

"Well, you're going to have to do it next week. It seems there's been a *big to-do* at the station."

I flipped off the faucet. Whenever my momma said the phrase *big to-do*, it meant she was about to gossip.

"Uh, what do you mean?"

"I guess some important evidence has gone missing, and Sheriff James, the poor man, is furious. Dolly Payton told me that the judge said he'd signed a warrant and everything for that wretched biker, Laser or something."

"Razor. Razor St. Claire." My heart jumped to my throat.

“That’s the one, terrible man. Anyway, Dolly called the station to congratulate the sheriff and see if his boys were interested in a trifle to celebrate and, what do you think happened?”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

“That Flo McClure sassed her on the phone. Dolly finally got ahold of one of the back office secretaries and she told her that the evidence had gone missing and that the place was in an uproar. And well, you know . . .”

My momma was still talking, but I was only half listening because the hairs on the back of my neck were standing straight up. I dried my hands and tapped the touch screen of my phone, navigating away from the call interface as my mother continued her story while on speaker. I clicked on the video I’d recorded earlier that day and scrolled through the frames without pressing play.

My mouth fell open and my heart stopped and my palms started to sweat.

I knew what happened to the evidence—or rather, *who* happened to the evidence. I’d recorded the whole thing.

CHAPTER 2

“Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure.”

— Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

~Cletus~

“**How can a** transmission be so expensive? I don’t got that much money to spend on a new transmission!”

Despite my best intentions, I was going to have to tell Deveron Stokes a falsehood.

“The transmission is only part of the bill. We’ll give you a deal on the transmission, Mr. Stokes. See here? Your muffler needs new bearings. And your tread fluid is running dangerously low, not to mention the undercarriage spark plugs and crank chortle.”

Crank chortle was a new one. I’d just made it up on the spot. Beau was better at this than me, but he wasn’t here. The cretin.

Deveron sighed, blinking rapidly at the bill on the counter between us. His frown intensified. He shook his head. “Well, all right. I mean, I guess the car does need a lot of work. I appreciate the deal on the transmission.”

I nodded somberly. I was good at somber nodding. It was probably my best, most well-received nod. People always felt comforted when I did it, so I employed it liberally.

Mr. Stokes lifted his eyes. “You’re a good friend, Cletus.”

I nodded somberly again, but said nothing. Mr. Stokes wasn’t my friend. Mr. Stokes wasn’t a nice person. He hadn’t paid his child support in six years, but always managed to stay well stocked in whiskey, women, and cigarettes. However, even before I’d discovered this unsavory fact about Mr. Stokes, I hadn’t liked the man.

I don’t like to judge people.

I love it.

Writing people completely off was liberating.

First impressions were typically correct. My first impressions were always correct. This was because I employed a very scientific approach to forming impressions and was born with infallible logic.

I allot ten minutes. If I didn't have ten minutes, I'd put off forming an impression until such a window of time was available. I never deviated from the ten-minute rule. I once put off forming an opinion about our new pastor for six months because I hadn't found the ten minutes required.

My momma hadn't liked that I'd refused to look at the new pastor over those months, but you couldn't bend or distort the scientific method. It's sacred. And ten minutes was all I've ever needed to sum up the character of any given person.

For the first five minutes, I didn't look at him or her. I closed my eyes, or studied my feet, or glanced to one side. In this way I delayed forming an opinion based on outward appearance.

I extended my hand—every single time—saw what kind of grip he or she gave me. Was it limp? Too tight? Tentative?

I listened to her voice and his vocabulary, the lexicon of their thoughts. Was she confident? Learned? Pompous? What subjects did he bring up? Was she interested in talking only about herself? Or did he shy from the spotlight?

After the five minutes of passive listening, I interrupted the conversation to ask what kind of car he or she drove. Then (and only then) did I look at the person. It's not the car that matters. It's how he *talked* about the car. You could tell a lot by how a person talked about his car. Proud? Embarrassed? Ambivalent?

The answer to this question typically took anywhere between ten seconds and five minutes. By the end of this motoring monologue I've made up my mind.

Of course I *loved my neighbor*. My momma brought me up right. I certainly saw the wisdom in loving neighbors, and doing unto others, and being nice for the sake of being nice. I just preferred to love my neighbors from afar. I subscribed to long-distance relationships, where speaking and listening didn't occur with any frequency.

I only had time for twenty-four people (tops) in my life, and I already had six siblings. Twenty-four people was an average of two birthdays a month. Ain't nobody got time for more than two birthday celebrations a month. That's a lot of cake, and I'm particular about my cake.

But back to Deveron Stokes and his transmission.

He was rubbing his neck, frowning at the bill. "The thing is, Cletus. I, uh, I don't have the money at present to pay for all this work."

I nodded, more thoughtfully than somberly this time. "Well now, Deveron, you have two options. You can tow the car out of the parking lot at your own expense until you *do* have the money. Or maybe we could work out some sort of agreement."

I was not surprised. In fact, I was counting on him reneging on payment.

The bell over the door chimed as it opened, announcing the entrance of a new customer. I tilted to the side, looking around Deveron to see who'd entered.

It was Jethro, my oldest brother. Next to him was a tall woman I didn't recognize. I made a point to avert my eyes before I could comprehend too much of her exterior.

"What kind of agreement?" Deveron asked, looking mighty shift.

"Oh, nothing untoward, Mr. Stokes." That was another falsehood.

Mr. Stokes was a presser at the dry cleaners and a waiter at The Front Porch, though he was paid under the table and wasn't technically on staff—another way to avoid child support. Later, much later, I would explain that the first of my favors would require Mr. Stokes to place itching powder in Jackson James's starched police uniform. Officer James had made the mistake of pulling me over last week for no reason when I was not in the mood to be pulled over.

A small number of plagues would befall the sheriff's deputy over the coming weeks. I'd considered leprosy via an armadillo infestation, but decided against it. Maybe next time.

Mr. Stokes swallowed nervously. "Well . . . I guess. I mean, sure. Anything you need, Cletus."

I grabbed a set of keys from behind the counter along with rental car paperwork, and placed them between us. "Good. I have a few favors in

mind. We'll work out the details later, but I'll need them done before we start work on your truck. In the meantime, I'll be happy to offer you one of the shop's cars as a loaner at the rate of ten dollars a day, paid up front in cash."

Deveron Stokes nodded nervously. He wasn't a nice man, but he wasn't devoid of brain cells either. He withdrew his wallet, handed me over a hundred-dollar bill—like I said, well stocked in whiskey, women, and cigarettes—and grabbed the key and the paperwork. He turned to one of the chairs scattered around the small sitting area and began scribbling on the sheet.

All of our loaner cars were 1990s Dodge Neon sedans. I kept a fleet of them standing by and in good working order for customers like Deveron Stokes. We had a lot of customers like Deveron Stokes.

Without a glance, I motioned my brother and the tall woman forward as I busied myself writing notes on Mr. Stokes's repair quote. "Greetings, Jethro. What brings you to our humble shop of auto fixery?"

"Hey, Cletus. I wanted to introduce you to Shelly Sullivan. She's new in town and looking for work as an auto mechanic."

My frown was automatic—not because I was displeased, but because I was surprised. I barely controlled the urge to take a visual assessment of this woman mechanic. They were a few and far between breed.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Sullivan," I said to the counter.

"Mr. Winston."

My frowned deepened because her voice was . . . well, truth be told, it was odd. Direct, husky, like she wasn't used to speaking and disliked doing so. She was from up north. I decided Boston. But her accent was light, near imperceptible.

I made a show of checking through the work order in front of me. "Tell me about yourself, Miss Sullivan."

I didn't need to glance up to know Jethro was grinning. He was used to my *modus operandi*, often found it amusing. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd prepared Miss Sullivan for the process because she didn't seem to be offended by my lack of eye contact.

“I’ve been welding since fourteen and fixing up cars since about the same time. Everything I know is self-taught, based on trial and error, or research. And I’m very good at it.”

I lifted my eyebrows, waiting for her to continue. She did not.

“Anything else?” I prompted.

“Nothing relevant,” she responded.

Despite my tendency to keep a sharp rein on all outward expression, I smiled. I liked her use of the word *relevant*. It meant she considered relevancy before volunteering information. You can’t teach people how to do that.

Jethro cut in, “Do you remember Quinn Sullivan? Ashley’s friend Janie’s husband? The real pretty redhead?”

“Quinn isn’t a pretty redhead. As I recall he has a real pretty brown head.”

“No, dummy,” Jethro grumbled. “Janie was the pretty redhead, not Quinn. Shelly here is his sister.”

“Ah.” I nodded, my eyes still downcast. I didn’t mind nepotism as long as it was deeply entrenched in meritocracy. Quinn was a practical sort, short on words, big on actions. I liked him just fine. If he’d lived nearby, I might have gone to his birthday party.

Now was the time to shake her hand, so I extended mine and she slid her palm against it. Her hand was big—for a woman—long fingers roughened with callouses. Her grip was firm, succinct, and self-assured. But I only noticed these details peripherally because an enigmatic shock of something passed up my arm as our skin made contact.

I broke my sacred scientific rules because I was startled.

I looked up.

I looked at Miss Shelly Sullivan.

And, by Tesla’s steam oscillator! The woman was beautiful.

“**Why is your** face like that?” Jethro waved his index finger in front of my eyes.

I didn’t like it. I grabbed the finger and twisted it away.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re constipated and angry. I know you’re not constipated. You drink that gross coffee every morning with apple cider vinegar and maple syrup.”

“It’s not maple syrup.”

“Honey then.” He shrugged.

“It’s blackstrap molasses. Nothing similar about honey and blackstrap molasses other than their viscosity.”

“Whatever.” He shrugged again. “Why’re you making that face?”

“Because I’m irritated, obviously,” I grumbled. I didn’t grumble in public if I could help it, only in front of my family because I trusted my family . . . mostly.

“Why’re you irritated?” Jethro continued his poking and I heard the grin in his words. “Don’t you like Ms. Sullivan?”

Against my will, my eyes moved to where the tall woman and my younger brother Duane were bent over the hood of a Ford Focus. I studied her. Her expression was thoughtful as she listened to him, her demeanor confident and unaffected. She was all business.

Yep. Still perfect.

“Course I like Miss. Sullivan.”

“How much do you like her?”

“A lot.” I grimaced. I didn’t grimace in public either.

I’d been grumbling and grimacing since she’d arrived. Now was not a convenient time to have met my life partner. I had too much to do, too many irons in the fire. Some examples:

1. I had a shuffle board rematch with Judge Payton on Saturday.
2. I had a talent show in Nashville in October, and I hadn’t yet rehearsed.
3. I had Jethro and Sienna’s wedding in November.
4. I had a trip to Texas coming up around Thanksgiving; my wild boar sausage reserves were running precariously low.

5. I had a criminal organization to dismantle and annihilate by Christmas with the help of the King brothers . . . they just didn't know they were helping.

6. I had to make spaghetti sauce on Sunday.

Jethro chuckled and placed an obnoxious hand on my shoulder. "Well, I'll be."

"You'll be a baboon with dysentery."

He laughed harder. "I never thought I'd see the day. You're smitten."

"Yep," I admitted easily, because it was the truth. I was as smitten as I was capable of being. No use denying it. If one considered the facts, Shelly Sullivan and I were perfectly suited. It was a matter of science.

She was an auto mechanic. She was straightforward. She was smart. She was capable. She didn't seem to have any feelings to hurt. She was clearly discerning about with whom she *associated*.

Plus, bonus, when I'd prematurely glanced up earlier upon our first meeting and met her eyes, the next words—so prosaically spoken—out of her mouth were, "This is weird. How can all you Winstons be so good-looking?"

See? Straightforward.

I liked the look of her and she liked the look of me. It was only a matter of time. We would be perfectly pragmatic together.

"If you're smitten, why're you irritated?"

"Because I'm never wrong. And that means Shelly Sullivan is the one. And now ain't a good time for me to be meeting the one."

Jethro's smile flattened and he almost rolled his eyes. Almost. But he stopped himself, likely because he knew I didn't tolerate eye-rolling.

"Oh brother. Can't you just have a healthy interest in a woman without her being the one?"

"Nope."

"That's bull, Cletus. You've been with other women and none of them were the one."

I glared at him, not willing to explain the obvious. Clearly my brother didn't understand the concept of research: the value of gathering data, the necessity of testing theories, and the importance of post-coital analysis. Not everything could be discovered in a laboratory environment. Knowing something in theory is meaningless if you have no experience with real-life application.

"Maybe she isn't the one," he suggested, likely growing weary of my silent glare. "Maybe you're just attracted to an exceptionally pretty lady. Have you thought of that?"

"Nope. She's the one."

"Momma always used to say that you have a fixation problem. You get a thought in your head and you can't let it go. One of these days, making up your mind too fast is going to land you in a heap of trouble."

I gave him a non-committal grunt in response. Our mother had frequently said I was a "fixator." She was right. I was a fixator. I fixated. I focused. It was a good personality trait in that I never had difficulty achieving a goal, once I set my mind to it. But it was a bad personality trait in that sometimes I couldn't stop focusing on something, even when I wanted to.

"Why does everything have to be black and white?" Jethro continued to press. "Why does every person have to be a zero or a ten on your worthwhile scale? Maybe she's a seven or a four."

I shrugged. "I don't have time for fours and sevens, I have too much to do. If someone isn't a ten, they're a zero."

He sighed loudly, like a deflating inner tube. It was not a healthy sound. "Well, whatever. You do what you want. You always do anyway."

"I will. Now what is it that you want?"

He lifted an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"I know you're not loitering around here for your health. You want to ask me a favor."

The eyebrow lowered and now he was squinting, which meant I was right.

"How do you know these things?"

"I know everything. So ask. I'm busy."

"Already planning the wedding?" Jethro teased.

I narrowed my eyes on him, not liking his teasing. “Something like that.”

He took the hint and changed the subject. “Fine. So, Sienna—”

“You mean, your fiancée.”

“Yeah. Sienna—”

“You should call her your fiancée.”

“What? Why?”

“‘Cause that’s who she is to you. I’m your brother, you say, ‘My brother.’ Sienna is your fiancée and has earned that title in your life. She puts up with your ugly face and bad manners, the least you can do is address her properly.”

Jethro whistled low before saying, “I guess you really are irritated.”

“Just earning my title as your brother. Now, back to your fiancée.”

“Fine, crusty britches. So, *my fiancée* and I, we’re moving into the carriage house when she gets home next week.”

“She doesn’t like living with us?” I was disappointed. I liked Sienna. She made me laugh and often surprised me with her shenanigans and tomfooleries. Very few people ever surprised me. “Is it the bathroom schedule? She doesn’t like the idea of it?”

“No. She likes it just fine. In fact, she wanted to add her name to the schedule.”

I grinned. “That’s funny.”

Jethro scowled. “No. It’s not funny. And don’t repeat it either. I don’t like living with Sie—” He broke off, huffing when I lifted my eyebrows at him, and began anew. “I don’t like living with my fiancée and my five brothers—each of whom have more than earned their title in my life. So we’re moving to the carriage house.”

“You’re not living with five brothers. Roscoe is gone, off to horse school.”

“You mean veterinary school.”

I nodded once. “That’s what I said, didn’t I? And Duane and Jessica leave before Thanksgiving for Italy. Who knows when they’ll return? So it would only be three of your brothers.”

He ignored this detail. “Back to the carriage house, I can do the big stuff, finish the framing and such. But I need your help with the details, doing the

drywall, running the electrical. I wouldn't ask if I had more time."

I waved away his explanation. "Why not move into Claire's place? Didn't she offer it to you before she left town?"

Claire McClure was an overall high-quality person, definitely a ten. It took some convincing, but I'd tricked her into performing with me at a talent show in Nashville next month. She'd sing and I'd play the banjo. I didn't want to win the talent show, but I did want to buy a car from one of the judges.

It was a perfect twin of a car I already owned and I wanted it. The car did not blend, everyone knew it was mine, and therefore owning two would give me the ability to be in two places at once.

Unfortunately, the judge didn't know she wanted to sell it to me yet.

Claire was also a good friend of Jethro's, but had recently moved to Nashville to accept a teaching position, but that was only part of the reason. The real reason she left town was to avoid my brother Billy. That story is too long to tell and too depressing.

"Yeah, Claire offered her house. But I don't like the idea of leaving the homestead completely. After all, it is my home. Momma left it to me. And I want our kids to live there from birth."

"You planning on having some kids next week?"

Jethro's eyes cut away and he shifted on his feet, a pleased and guilty looking smile mounting itself on his face.

And I knew.

"Wait a minute . . ."

Jethro pressed a finger to his lips. "Shhh—"

"Sienna is pregnant!"

"Hush!" Jethro clamped his obnoxious hand over my mouth, pairing the action with a stern look. "Shut your mouth."

"Erfrenmafma," I said. It was nonsense, of course. His hand covering my mouth meant I could speak.

He squinted a silent warning and dropped his hand. "What was that?"

"It's about time you impregnated that woman."

"Cletus. We've only been engaged two months."

“I know. I’ve been counting. Well . . .” I rubbed my hands together; this was great news. This was the best news. “When do we start on the carriage house? Tonight? We’ll add a nursery. Yellow is a nice color. Maybe this’ll get Drew and Ashley moving. I’ll be the godfather, of course. Cletus is a nice name.”

Now he did roll his eyes, but he also smiled. I gave him a free pass on the eye-roll because he’d just created a Winston progeny. “You’re so anxious for babies, why don’t you go make some of your own?”

My good humor deflated. Not a complete annihilation of my happiness, just a slight tempering.

“Oh, I’ll never have kids,” I responded; but before he could think too hard or too long about what I’d said, I added with a meaningful grin, “But that don’t mean I can’t spoil yours.”

CHAPTER 3

"If he be Mr. Hyde," he had thought, "I shall be Mr. Seek."

— Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

~Jennifer~

"I have some great news."

My mother's announcement startled me. She had this habit of suddenly appearing and making a loud proclamation. I wasn't a loud person, and her hollering usually caught me off guard.

"What is it, peanut?" My father glanced up from his newspaper, a tolerant smile on his features. He was very indulgent of my mother ever since the lodge started turning a sizeable profit.

My grandmother said he was an enabler, and it was a good thing my momma wasn't an alcoholic because he would've been pouring her drinks.

"I just got off the phone with Jacqueline Freeman." My momma glanced between my father and me.

We were sitting at the kitchen table. It was an early Sunday morning and I'd just sat down after spending the last four hours making goodies for the bakery. Sunday was a busy day because of the church crowd.

When we continued to regard her blankly, she huffed, shaking her head at us. "Jacqueline Freeman? You know, the talent agent? In New York?"

"Oh." My father jumped in his seat. "That's right, I remember you talking about her last month. How exciting. This is certain to bring in a lot of revenue for the business. It's about time I upgraded the boat."

I scrunched my face, not quite following the conversation. "Why would you be talking to a talent agent?"

"Jennifer, don't make that face. It'll give you premature wrinkles."

I rolled my eyes. This earned me a stern look from both my parents.

"Jennifer Anne Sylvester," my mother began, scowling, "you know I don't like it when you are disrespectful."

"Listen to your mother, Jennifer," my father added unnecessarily.

“Sorry,” I offered wearily, an instinctive spike of guilt blooming in my chest. I shook my head. “Sorry, I’m just tired.”

I was tired. I hadn’t been sleeping well since recording the incident at the police station earlier in the week. I didn’t know what to do, and I had no one to talk to about it.

My momma didn’t realize I’d already gone to the station and recorded the testimonial, so she wasn’t asking for the video. All the charges against Razor had been dropped. Apparently, he’d been arrested for a misdemeanor drug charge, nothing too serious, but enough to place him in jail for a few months.

Without the missing evidence, they were unable to hold him in custody.

The decision to turn in Cletus should have been cut and dry. He’d taken the evidence, I’d recorded it, so I should have contacted the sheriff and showed him the video immediately. But I didn’t. Every time I thought about making the call, I thought of an excuse: too tired, too busy, too comfortable under my covers.

I didn’t want to think about the real reason I hadn’t turned him in, because the real reason made me a terrible person.

So I fretted and baked.

“It’s all right. Now, let’s see. I think I forgot to tell you.” My momma waved her hands in the air excitedly. “Well, here it is: Jacqueline Freeman is a talent agent in New York City—like I just said—and she got a call out of the blue from the Chiquita Banana folks about you. She has a relationship with the Kraft food people and—well, never mind. That’s not important.”

I was trying to follow but having difficulty making sense of her disjointed explanation. “So, some lady in New York—”

“Jacqueline Freeman, talent agent extraordinaire.”

“Ms. Freeman got a call from the people at Chiquita Banana about me?”

“That’s right.”

“Why would they call her?”

“Because that’s how this stuff works.”

“What stuff? Why did they call at all?”

“Isn’t it obvious? They want you to be their spokesperson. They want you in commercials, you and your cakes.” She clapped her hands together and addressed her next statement to my father. “Oh, this is going to make things so much easier with the lodge investors. Once they find out about this, the deal is as good as done. Lord, this takes a load off my mind.”

Meanwhile, my stomach churned. I felt like I was going to be sick.

“Commercials?” I asked weakly.

“That’s right. TV commercials to start, and Jacqueline mentioned a cooking show in the future. But you’d begin with some guest spots on the Food Network first. Jennifer, I don’t think I need to tell you how important this is, baby. This is it, this is what we’ve been hoping for.”

My heart thumped sluggishly between my ears before taking off at a gallop. The room tilted. I broke out into a sweat. My throat and mouth were as dry as a desert.

TV? Cooking show?

“Jenn?” My momma said, she sounded far away. “Honey, are you okay?”

I don’t want this. I don’t want this.

“I don’t . . . can I . . .” I tried to swallow but I couldn’t. The room was spinning. “Can I have some water?”

“Baby girl, you don’t look so good.”

Blackness crept in at the edges of my vision and I flattened my palms on the top of the table for balance. It was too late.

The last thing I saw before succumbing to the darkness was my mother’s face hovering over me, frantic with worry.

I woke up in an ambulance.

At the ER in Knoxville, they did tons of tests. The doctors finally decided I’d suffered from dehydration and exhaustion. Fluids were administered and I was sent home with strict orders to rest. By the time I left the hospital I felt more like a pin cushion than a person, and I’d decided what to do about Cletus Winston.

When my brother left home to join the army years ago, I moved into his old room even though it was smaller than mine. My mother didn’t

understand why I wanted the smaller room on the first floor that had a window overlooking the porch when I could have the larger room on the second floor with a window overlooking the mountains.

She didn't understand I needed an escape hatch. I didn't make a habit of sneaking out. I'd only done it twice before and I made sure I wouldn't be caught. But just knowing I could leave, if I wanted to, made the reality of each day feel less overwhelming.

I liked that I could, at any time, pack a bag and disappear. I liked knowing I could vanish, leave onerous expectations behind. I would never do it, I could never live with myself if I hurt my parents that way—especially my momma—but I liked knowing I could.

The first time I snuck out was when I was seventeen. A pen pal of mine was in Knoxville and my father refused to let me see him. Determined, I'd climbed out the window, donned a baseball hat, and met Oliver Müller and his parents at Daisy's Nut house for decaf coffee and day-old pie. Oliver and his family were really nice. He was just one year older than me and has since gone to the University of Berlin and graduated with a degree in electrical engineering.

The second time I'd been twenty. An artist I liked had been playing a concert in Knoxville and my momma didn't want me to go. She said it was too close to the state fair baking competition. Determined, I'd used the window again, borrowed my momma's car, and went to the concert all on my own and had THE BEST time. I hadn't been afraid. I'd wanted to see that concert and so I went.

Tonight I was using my escape hatch to drive over to the Winston place and confront Cletus Winston.

I was terrified.

But I was determined.

As soon as night fell, I slipped on my contraband jeans, sneakers, and baseball hat, stuffed my bed with pillows, and climbed out of the first-floor window. My car was at the end of the drive and, thank the Lord, was the new model BMW electric. It was quiet as a whisper.

I was careful not to switch on the lights until I'd turned onto the main road. The Winston place wasn't far, just a few miles up Moth Run Road,

and was set back on a large lot of several acres. No one would see my car from the main thoroughfare, but just to be safe, I pulled to the side of the house where a large pear tree was heavy with fruit.

I didn't dawdle, because if I paused to think about the intelligence of my actions I would change my mind. My actions were about as intelligent as poking a bear with a stick.

But I was desperate.

If anyone could help me, it was Cletus Winston—even if I had to blackmail him to do it.

I shut the car door as quietly as possible and quickly maneuvered to the front porch, climbing the steps two at a time, and rushing to the door. I knocked. Loudly. Several times. And then I waited.

My heart was lodged in my throat so I tried to swallow past it. I couldn't show weakness. I needed to be tough.

I can be tough. I nodded, shifting from one foot to the other. *I can be real tough. You can't be a sissy and make fifty loaves of bread in a day. That's a lot of kneading. I'm tough as nails. I'm basically the Rocky Balboa of bakers. I'm unstoppable! Aint nobody gunna—*

The door swung open. I jumped back a half step. My voice failed me.

It was Cletus. He stood in the doorway, a half-apron around his hips and a wooden spoon in his hand. He looked perturbed.

His eyes did a quick pass of my person and he said, "I don't know you."

I blinked at him, surprised by his patently false statement. We'd never spoken to each other, but we certainly did *know* of each other. The fact that he was looking at me and didn't recognize me did wonders to conquer my fear.

Placing my hands on my hips, I stuck my chin out. "You most certainly do know me. Your momma used to read me stories on Tuesdays at the library and I went to Sunday school with your youngest brother."

Cletus's eyebrows ticked up at my claim, but no other sign of surprise was visible on his face. "The Banana Cake Queen," he said flatly. "What do you want?"

Again, his greeting could not have been any more effective in pissing me off. For a moment, I forgot who he was. I forgot to be afraid. I forgot that I was bad at talking to people—especially men.

For a moment, my desperation and irritation superseded everything else I knew about myself.

So I demanded, “I need to speak with you.”

He scowled. “Can’t. Busy. Bye.”

Cletus moved to shut the door. I stuck my foot in its path and braced my palm against the solid wood. “Make time. What I have to say is important.”

His eyebrows lifted again, higher this time. “I seriously doubt that.”

“Do you want to go to jail?” I challenged.

“For what? Not talking to you? Now I know you think highly of yourself, but you do know you’re not a real queen, right?”

I leaned in close, whispering through gritted teeth, “If you don’t talk to me, I’m going to call the sheriff and show him a very interesting video of you from last week.”

Cletus blinked and his eyes moved between mine, searching. I clenched my jaw and met his gaze, though my resolve weakened a little because he smelled like Italian food. He smelled like lasagna and lasagna was my favorite, and I wasn’t allowed to eat lasagna. My momma never let me have it. She said it was too fattening.

My stomach growled. He didn’t appear to hear it.

“Fine,” he said suddenly, turning and dropping his spoon someplace unseen. Clearly irritated, he stepped forward and into my space, forcing me to back up as he closed the door behind him. “Let’s go.”

Cletus strolled past me, not waiting to see if I followed, and down the porch steps. I watched him walk to his car and open the driver’s side door.

Without looking up, he called, “Get a move on, your majesty. I don’t have all night.”

I hesitated just a split second, then followed in his footsteps to his car, opened the passenger door, and slid inside.

Cletus usually drove an early 1990s Geo Prizm painted primer gray. Sometimes he drove a vintage Buick, but very rarely.

He was waiting for me in the Geo, his arms crossed, his eyes staring out the windshield. The small car made him look huge and imposing. He'd turned on the dome light and the forward reading lights. I closed my door, as he had done with his. A brief silence followed, during which the reality of my present situation crashed over me.

I was alone. I was alone with Cletus Winston. I was alone with Cletus Winston and no one knew where I was.

Oh. Shit.

"Well?" he barked, breaking the silence and making me jump. "Why am I sitting here with you when I should be inside tending to my tomato sauce?"

"I saw what you did," I announced.

"You saw what I did," he repeated flatly, apparently bored with the conversation and me. His eyes were on the rearview mirror.

But I would not be ignored or bullied. Not this time.

"That's right."

"You're going to have to be more specific. I do a lot of things."

Gathering every ounce of courage within me, I said, "I saw what you did, last week, with the Iron Wraiths evidence. You took it. And now they can't find it, and now they're dropping the case against Razor."

Finally, *finally* Cletus looked at me. To my astonishment, the eyes I'd assumed were green were instead a fiery blue and he snapped, "You saw no such thing."

"I did." I nodded at my assertion. "In fact, I have a video of you doing it."

He blinked. His expression and his voice, usually so controlled, both cracked with surprise. "You did what?"

"I recorded it on my phone." I swallowed three times for no reason.

His gaze sharpened in such a way that startled me, as though clouds or an illusionary mist parted and revealed a slight glimpse of the real Cletus Winston beneath. These new eyes flickered over my person.

"Prove it." His demand was sharp and quick, like a whip, and made my heart jump then gallop in my chest.

I pulled my phone from my pocket with trembling fingers. I knew why I was shaking. I wasn't used to confrontation. I always figured I was a natural

pacifist, preferring peace to sass. But desperate times called for desperate measures.

He snatched my cell once I'd unlocked it and tapped through the series of screens until he reached my videos. He found the one dated last week, the one I'd taken of Sheriff James talking about my cupcakes and hit play. As Cletus watched, a touch of color drained from his cheeks. He was seeing what I'd spotted last week when I reviewed the recording. One half of the screen was the sheriff. The other half of the screen was Cletus in the background, pocketing the evidence, looking around, then walking away.

Cletus made a strangled noise that sounded both frustrated and enraged. I eyed the door next to me, considering and immediately dismissing an escape. Meanwhile, he watched the recording again. When it ended for a second time, silence took its place, hard and heavy between us. I inspected him, endeavoring to parse his thoughts.

Cletus's expression was blank, which—I abruptly realized—was highly unusual. He always wore an expression. Thoughtful, concerned, patient, bored, interested, somber, perturbed. How odd, for a person to always have an expression.

Unless that person wore emotions like a mask, meant to misdirect the true nature of his thoughts.

“You made a copy?” His tone, laden with ice and granite, made me shiver.

He didn't sound at all like the bumbling but affable Cletus Winston who'd pulled the wool over everyone's eyes. He sounded dangerous.

I cleared my throat before I could speak. “I did. I made a few. Saved in a few places.”

The side of his mouth ticked up, but his eyes lacked humor as he turned them back to me. “That was smart. Otherwise I would have smashed your phone into a quantity of tiny pieces. Then it would have been your word against mine.”

“That's right,” I said the words on a breath, the good sense of fear wrestling with determination.

But, damn it, I needed his help. And it had to be him. It just had to. He could make anything happen. Everyone in town and the surrounding areas

owed him a favor. I'd heard the rumors. I'd paid attention. I'd put the puzzle pieces together.

And now I had the most powerful man in East Tennessee right where I needed him.

CHAPTER 4

“The greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who don't believe in magic will never find it.”

— Roald Dahl

~Cletus~

I needed a minute.

During the minute, I made various and sundry lists. Lists upon lists.

Jennifer Sylvester seemed to understand I was not yet inclined to talk, so she gave me the minute I needed. I appreciated her silence. Eventually, my pulse slowed to a nice, normal range, and the red spots of rage clouding my vision receded. I wasn't going to lose my temper.

“Well . . .” I cleared my throat, adopting as calm an air as possible given the fact that this feeble puppet was threatening to single-handedly derail months of fastidious—not to mention risky—efforts.

“Well,” she squeaked, also clearing her throat, but then said nothing else. Her eyes were on her long, pink nails, which were digging into the knees of her jeans.

I scrutinized her. She was clearly nervous, afraid even. Her earlier backbone appeared to be disintegrating. The show of confidence had been completely out of character for meek and docile Jennifer Sylvester.

Granted, I didn't know her very well. I didn't need to. She was a weak person. Like most who were acquainted with her parents, I felt a degree of pity for her, yet thoroughly enjoyed her banana cake. She also made great sourdough bread, zucchini muffins, and quiche.

Actually, everything she baked—that I'd tried to date—was profoundly delicious. She had a gift. Her multiple blue ribbons and large trophies awarded at the state fair were warranted. But she was also a pushover. She was under the thumb of her ambitious momma and zealously irrational father. Her upbringing plus her frail temperament meant she was a tool, a means to an end.

And that was sad.

It was also none of my business.

How she lived her life—or allowed others to live it for her—was none of my affair. I'd hung up my cape; I'd sworn off rescuing lost causes. People didn't want to be saved. All my meddling efforts were now focused on my family and their happiness, whether they liked it or not.

Which brought me back to now and the skittish Jennifer Sylvester. Her uneasiness was good news for me.

I prepared to unleash my somber nod. "You know, Jenn, I don't think you want to do this."

Her fingers flexed on her legs, she lifted her chin, then she spoke through clenched teeth. "Don't tell me what I want."

Okay. Wrong approach.

I tried something else, lowering my voice and making myself sound sinister. "If you give me your word you'll delete the video, we can forget all about this."

Two unhappy lines appeared between her eyebrows. "It's too late for that." I got the sense she wasn't talking to me. "And, besides, I don't trust you to forgive and forget. You'll take revenge sooner or later, it's what you do. No . . . I'm going to see this through."

I stared at her, likely gaping. I was flummoxed.

You'll take revenge sooner or later, it's what you do

How could she know that?

I sat back in my seat and stared out the windshield, much of what I knew about the order of the universe rearranging itself. Perhaps Jennifer Sylvester wasn't feeble after all. Perhaps Jennifer Sylvester was fierce.

That makes no sense. Nobody is that good at playing possum. Well . . . nobody but me.

I'd often thought in the past that she resembled a neglected puppy, eager to please. This made how her kin treated her difficult to watch. I'd stopped watching.

My eyes slid to the side and I examined her anew. Jennifer's jaw was clenched with determination, the little point of her chin made sharp by the

set of her resolve. Her face was usually sad or shy.

A touch of guilt flared, like an old wound. I quickly extinguished it, suddenly anxious to finish this peculiar conversation and return to a world that made sense.

“All right, what is it that you want?” I asked plainly, dropping all pretense. “Why am I out here? Why did you record the video, and what are you going to do with it?”

She released an unsteady breath and then looked at me. Her eyes were in shadow due to the rim of her hat. Vaguely, I recalled Beau once saying her irises were purple. I’d dismissed this claim because, unless Jennifer was an albino—which she wasn’t—her eyeballs could not be purple.

Regardless, I’d never noticed before, but the shape of her eyes was surprisingly attractive. Now, forced to reassess my knowledge of this woman, I found myself trying to discover the color of her irises as she spoke.

“I didn’t record it on purpose. I was there to record the sheriff for a—well, that doesn’t matter. But I didn’t record you on purpose. When I reviewed the video later, after hearing about what happened at the station, that’s when I realized you were in the video.”

“Okay, fine. I believe you. You didn’t record me on purpose. Now what?”

“I need your help,” she said, her voice softer, timid; her eyes large and hopeful.

This was the Jennifer Sylvester I knew, not the one with grit and granite.

“Hmm . . .” I squinted, disliking the possibility that there could be two sides to this woman. As a rule, I don’t believe in hidden depths, where *hidden depths* were defined as admirable but previously unnoticed qualities. I noticed everything.

Manufactured depths? Yes.

Disguised depths? Perhaps.

But not hidden depths.

Jennifer swallowed fretfully under my examination. I caught the slight tremor of her hands before she balled them into fists.

“What do you want?” I asked, no use beating around the bush.

She gathered a large amount of air into her lungs, closed her eyes, and then bellowed, “I want a husband.”

I frowned.

She opened one eye.

I blinked.

She opened the other eye.

I parted my lips to request clarification, but then thought better of it and snapped my mouth shut.

“Hmm . . .” I nodded, quite somberly.

Again, she’d taken me by surprise. Jennifer Sylvester wasn’t fierce. She was nuttier than a pecan pie.

“Right.” I continued nodding, turning my attention to the darkness beyond my windshield, then repeated, “Right.”

“You think I’m crazy,” she said in a rush, her hands grabbing my arm and holding on like I was a life preserver.

“Yes. Yes I do.”

A sound of desperation escaped her throat, then she said, “I want a baby.”

Oh good Lord!

I closed my eyes, scrunching my face and shaking my head. “This is a joke, right? Jethro set this up? He’s seeking revenge because I made him tell the Tanner twins story at Christmas.”

“No. This is not a joke. I know I sound crazy, I know I do. I mean, I’m twenty-two and I live at home with my parents. Look at me. I’m a joke. I’m the Banana Cake lady. No one wants to marry the Banana Cake lady. But Cletus, I work seventy hours a week *at least*. When would I meet anybody I don’t already know? Someone who doesn’t think of me as a joke? Plus my father would never let me leave the house if he knew I was going on a date.” Jennifer’s voice cracked with emotion.

Crap.

She’s going to cry.

This was a situation that required neutralizing. I placed my hand over hers and gave her a squeeze.

“There, there.” *Fruit cake.* “Calm down—”

“Don’t tell me to calm down,” she screeched, wrenching her hands away. “I’m always calm. I always do as I’m told. I just want this one thing, this *one thing* for myself. Doesn’t everybody want to find someone? I don’t need love, just respect would do. And don’t most people want a family? Then why is it wrong when I want it? Why does that make me crazy?”

“It’s not the wanting part that makes you crazy. It’s the blackmailing-me-into-marrying-you-and-giving-you-a-baby that brings your mental health into question.”

Jennifer straightened her spine, her full lips parting in what looked like confusion at first, then horror. “Oh no, Cletus. No, no. I don’t want to marry *you*. No, not you. You misunderstand, I want you to find me a husband. I would never marry you.”

Uncertain if the situation called for relief or resentment, I stared at Ms. Jennifer Sylvester in abject bewilderment.

She huffed a tired laugh and buried her face in her hands. “I’m sorry, that came out all wrong.”

“No, it came out right. I wouldn’t want to marry me either.”

She laughed again, this time sounding a touch hysterical. “You know, you’ve always been really funny.”

“How would you know?” I gave her the side-eye. It was a serious question. “As far as I can recall, we’ve never spoken to each other directly before now.”

“Yes, but I listen.” Her response was muffled from behind her fingers. “No one talks to me, so I listen.”

“Jennifer, you’re not helping your case here, unless you’re trying to come across as a crazy creeper.”

She laughed again, less hysterical but maybe more desperate, her head falling back to the headrest. “Maybe I am a crazy creeper. Maybe it’ll never happen. Maybe I’m a lost cause. And if that’s the case, that’s fine. But I need to try.”

Jennifer brought her eyes back to mine; even under the shadow of her hat, the depth of sadness and resolve there startled me. “And you’re going to help me do it.”

CHAPTER 5

“I slip back many times, I fall, I stand still, I run against the edge of hidden obstacles, I lose my temper and find it again and keep it better . . .”

— Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life*

~Cletus~

“I don’t like her.” Beau’s announcement was punctuated by the office door clattering against the wall. He’d just burst through it.

I surmised my brother expected me to react to his declaration. I did not react. I was too busy booking a trade through eTrade Pro and had just ten seconds to finalize it.

“Cletus? Did you hear me? I don’t like her. She can’t work here.”

I confirmed the limit order, waited for the verification screen to load, then grudgingly presented Beau with my attention. “It doesn’t matter if you like her or not, Beau. What matters is whether Shelly Sullivan is a good mechanic. She is a good mechanic. Furthermore, thus, as such, vis-à-vis, and so forth. Fill in the blank.”

He’d caught me on the wrong day. Actually, the wrong week. I wasn’t inclined to field complaints. Though it was Thursday, four days after my uncomfortable encounter with Jennifer Sylvester, I was still fixating on it. I’d been distracted since Sunday.

The morning after Jennifer had made her demands, I’d neglected to introduce Beau—who’d returned from a work trip to Nashville that same morning—to our newest mechanic. He’d walked into the shop, they’d spoken, and he’d instantly disliked her. Akin to today, in an atypical exhibition of anger, Beau had stormed into the shop’s office, demanding she be let go.

I didn’t know what had passed between them. I didn’t care. I wasn’t firing her.

“She might be a decent mechanic, I’ll give you that. But she’s as prickly as a porcupine.”

“No, Beau. She’s not a decent mechanic. She’s a great mechanic.” Beau opened his mouth to protest, I spoke over him. “Duane is leaving before Thanksgiving. We have too much work as it is. We need the help. Now leave me be. I need to finish this up before my meeting with Drew.”

Things decided, I returned my attention to the laptop and scrolled through the stats of the principle trading account.

Meanwhile, my younger brother was attempting to drill a hole into the side of my head with his eyeballs.

“I’ll kindly ask you to stop trying to penetrate my brain with those laser beams you call eyes.”

“I’m not done talking about this.”

These stubborn people and their demands were like cracker crumbs in my beard: irritating and flaky.

I exhaled, frustrated, and twisted the swivel chair to face my brother. “Why don’t we talk about something else, like the preparations for Jethro’s bachelor party? Did you finish the scavenger hunt?”

“Yes, I did. Two weeks ago. Stop changing the subject.”

“Fine then.” I gritted my teeth. “Go ahead and talk about Shelly.”

“She’s rude. Not just to me. She’s rude to the customers.”

“Why’s she talking to customers? That’s your job.”

“What do you want me to do? Hide her under a car? She’s impossible to miss, Cletus. She looks like one of those- those . . . those models from the magazines.”

“Which magazines are these?”

Beau only read two kinds of magazines. Both had pictures of headlights. Only one was about cars.

He threw his hands in the air before bringing them to his hips. “You know what I mean. People catch sight of her, they want to talk to her.”

“You mean *men* catch sight of her and want to talk to her.”

“Fine. Yes. Men. Men want to talk to her. And then she insults them. Do you really think that’s a good business strategy? Hiring a gorgeous woman to insult our male customers?”

“No. No, I do not,” I said solemnly, but my mouth twitched before I could stop myself. It wasn’t good business, but it was amusing.

“Oh, is this funny?”

My shoulders shook because I was laughing.

“Are you *laughing*?”

“Nope,” I said through my laughter.

Beau made a sound of disgust and frustration. Then he knocked a cupful of pencils and pens, a stack of invoices, and the incoming mail off the file cabinet with an angry swipe. I ceased laughing.

“You’re going to pick that mess up, Beau Fitzgerald Winston.”

His laser-beam eyes narrowed into slits and he pointed his index finger at the mess. “I will pick it up when I’m good and ready to pick it up.”

Beau turned, slammed the door, and stomped down the stairs.

I stared at the spot he’d vacated, then I stared at the untidiness he’d left. If it had been any other week, I’d already be cooking up a quality idea for revenge. Something to both piss him off and make him laugh. I liked to keep my family on their toes, as it’s what they expected of me.

But not today.

Today I was tired. I was fixating. And I was tired of fixating.

It wasn’t the blackmail setting me on edge, not at all. I’d already neutralized the video—or rather, I’d already taken steps to neutralize the video.

I have very few friends. But one of my friends, who shall remain nameless, was an exceptionally talented hacker. He lived in Chicago and we corresponded every Sunday via the classified section of the *Chicago Tribune*. We’d been playing a chess match for three months using coded messages in the newspaper.

This week, I’d changed my usual message from a chess move to a request for assistance instead: he would hack into Jennifer’s computer, phone, and cloud account (or anywhere else she might be harboring the video), remove it, and leave no trace.

Thankfully, this friend shared my view of the law. He wasn’t the sort who believed in strict adherence. I just had to wait until Sunday. I would then

schedule a rendezvous with the misguided young baker woman and explain that she was no longer in possession of the video.

And then I will . . .

Hmm.

Well, darn.

I didn't know what to do. Which was why I'd been discombobulated all week.

"What happened in here?"

My attention refocused outward. Drew hovered in the doorway, having opened the door without my hearing. He donned civilian clothes rather than his federal ranger attire. This was odd because it was the middle of the week.

"Beau had a temper tantrum."

"Beau?"

I nodded once.

Drew's eyebrows lifted high on his forehead; he stepped inside and closed the door. "That's unlike him. What's got him worked up?"

"Our new hire."

The big man's mouth curved briefly, his smile elusive. "Shelly? Quinn's sister?"

"Yes. He doesn't like her."

"Sure he doesn't. Anyway, why're we meeting?"

I liked this about Drew: always to the point when talking about business, but always philosophical when talking about life. Attending his birthday party had been a priority since I met him four years ago.

I turned to the computer screen and pulled up QuickBooks. "Momma's accounts. I'm making changes you should know about."

When my mother passed last year, she'd left the management of her family's money to Drew as he was a good family friend. She didn't want our malefactor of a father to get his hands on it.

Drew had asked me to help manage the primary investment; he'd been impressed with my day-trading returns. I obliged. Each of my siblings would receive their portion of the inheritance upon reaching their thirty-first

birthday. So far, only Jethro was eligible to cash out and he'd opted to leave his money where it was, having no present use for it.

Drew grabbed a chair and turned it backward, straddling it with his arms resting on the back. He was too tall for most chairs. His legs were too long. Consequently, he was always straddling them.

"Cletus, you don't need to give me any updates."

"Nonsense. Momma appointed you as the executor of her estate and the trustee for our accounts. This is your business."

He shifted in his seat, looking uncomfortable, and not because the chair was too small. "You know why she did that, and I was happy to help. But you're better at fund management than I am."

Drew Runous might not have been related to us by blood, but I considered him a brother. We all did. Except my sister, Ashley, of course. They'd been together since last Christmas and we were expecting a proposal any day now.

Any day now.

Any. Day.

I glanced at him, saw his eyes were squinted as he read the totals. He read them again, then flinched back, his mouth agape. I smiled because I'd never seen Drew gape before.

"Catching flies, Drew?"

He snapped his mouth shut, swallowed, and then pointed at the screen. "What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what did you do? How'd you do that? That's got to be a return of, what, ten times the original investment?"

"Just about." I steepled my fingers and leaned back in the swivel chair. "You know I've been dabbling in futures and forecasting for years. You can't expect this kind of return often, and the original figure was just enough to piggyback on a hedge fund I follow."

Some might consider my venture strategy risky. It wasn't. I don't take risks. The market had made atypical gains over the last ten months, just as I'd forecasted. We were due for a slowdown.

I pointed to the new accounts and the calculated forecast for the next four quarters. “But—see here—I transferred everything to a money market today and for the foreseeable future. Best to hold steady at three percent than take a gamble.”

Drew glared at the screen, clearly having difficulty accepting the figures, then moved his eyes to me. “Does anyone else know about this?”

“Just Jethro. But you know how he is about money.”

“Yeah, I know. It doesn’t interest him much.” Drew scratched his beard. “You’re going to arrange things so none of your siblings will have to work. You’ll be a family of means and leisure.”

“Oh, I doubt that. I think we’d turn bad if we didn’t exercise or exorcise our demons with gainful endeavors.”

Drew’s eyes, which were silver in color, flicked over me. I was being assessed.

Apropos of nothing, he said, “Talk to me about the shop.”

“What about it?”

“Well, with these numbers, I guess I have a few questions about when you plan to buy me out.”

Drew had fronted the original capital for the Winston Brothers Auto Shop, so Duane, Beau, and I could open our own business. He’d astonished me at the time; his leap of faith had been the first time anyone other than our momma had believed in us boys. Drew had since earned my utmost respect and admiration, and was the only man alive worthy of my sister.

So his question surprised me. “You want me to buy you out?”

“Not at all, it’s been a good investment in more ways than one, supporting y’all. But you don’t need the capital anymore. You could close up at thirty with this kind of inheritance coming your way, open that dulcimer and pie shop you’re always talking about.”

I considered this, because I’d always wanted to open a dulcimer and pie shop, but then rejected it. “No. I don’t have anyone to bake the pies. You know I bake crap pies. My strength is sausage and Italian food, as I’m the savory sort. Besides, what would Beau do without me to oversee things? No. Shop stays open.”

“Really?” he pressed, his eyes still assessing, “even with Duane leaving?”

“Yeah. This is what we do. We fix things. We’re tinker-ers. If we didn’t tinker with cars, we’d tinker with people.”

Drew flashed a rare grin. “You already tinker with people, Cletus.”

“You are correct,” I sat straighter in my seat, ready to defend myself, “but only my family. And y’all deserve my tinkering.”

“Don’t get me wrong. You’re good at tinkering. Aside from those revenge plots, people are lucky to have you interfering in their lives.”

I narrowed my eyes on Drew. “Speaking of which, when are you going to ask Ash to marry you? What are y’all waiting for?”

His grin grew wider and he chuckled. “You’ve been asking me that since we became official.”

“That’s right.” I nodded once, leaning back in the chair and peering over my steepled fingers again. “Just what are your intentions toward my sister?”

His smile grew softer, and his eyes lost focus over my shoulder. He was quiet for several seconds, then said, “You’ll know one day, Cletus. You’ll discover what it’s like to find the other part of yourself. You’ll know it’s her, only her, always her. Maybe not right away, but eventually you’ll know. She’ll be your beginning, middle, and end. And your intentions won’t matter. Love brings its own intentions, and all other plans, hopes, and dreams fade to insignificance in the face of love.”

Friday night was my favorite night of the week.

Every Friday evening in Green Valley musicians far and wide assembled. We jammed together at the community center, an old rehabilitated school converted into a general purpose meeting space. I always participated by playing either the banjo, guitar, fiddle, violin, or dulcimer.

I’ve never tried playing a bass or cello, but I’m confident I could if I practiced.

Of the instruments, I prefer the banjo. It’s the most obnoxious of the strings, and can only be played tolerably by a person who’s set his or her mind to tame it. I derived a certain satisfaction in taming wild things or bending them to my will. Instruments, forests, people . . .

Which brings me to why the jam session was my favorite night of the week. I held court at the community center every Friday night. Townsfolk from all over would come to hear the musicians play—a different variation of bluegrass in each of the converted classrooms—while settling business and swapping gossip.

I got more accomplished in a half hour at the Friday night jam session than I did during the whole of the week prior.

“Officer Evans, Officer Dale, just the men I’ve been looking for.” I tipped my head in deference at the two sheriff deputies and sat across from them, shaking each of their outstretched hands in turn. I’d found them in the cafeteria, both with giant piles of coleslaw on their plates. My brother Duane would’ve been irritated as the coleslaw was his favorite. “I hope you boys have been enjoying my sausage.”

Officer Evans nodded, swallowing a bite of the coveted coleslaw. “Yes, sir. That’s some quality meat, Cletus. Do you really go boar hunting with Indians in Texas? And use spears?”

“No, not with Indians. I go with Native Americans,” I corrected. I don’t mind the use of labels, so long as they’re properly applied.

I’d confused Evans with my statement. He blinked and appeared to be deep in thought.

Before he’d recovered, I got to the crux of the reason I’d approached them this evening; lowering my voice, I asked, “How’s our mutual friend doing these days?”

Dale glanced over his shoulder to make sure we weren’t being overheard. Satisfied we weren’t, he took a small bite of coleslaw and shrugged. “He’s healthy, unless you need him not to be.”

I pulled on the tip of my beard, stroking the hair with my thumb and forefinger. It had been a while since I’d asked about Darrell Winston, the man who was technically my father. Puzzle pieces I’d been crafting for years were finally snapping together. The time for action was drawing near . . . but not yet.

“Oh, I don’t mind if he’s healthy. For now.”

Dale gave me a grim smile. “You just say the word, Cletus.”

I tried to mirror his expression. “You know how much I appreciate that, Dale.”

He shook his head. “We both owe you, big time.”

I waved away his words in a show of affability, but he was right. They both owed me, and I was grateful for the favor; it had paid dividends in more ways than one. Dale had tipped me off some months ago that the King brothers had been passing Iron Wraith’s evidence to the sheriff’s office for the last year, which had been the seed for my latest grand scheme.

Evans chimed in, “We’re happy to help, and that bastard has it coming to him—uh, whenever you decide the time is right.”

I’d just released my somber nod and achieved two head bobs when I felt a tentative tap on my shoulder. Dale and Evans glanced at the newcomer, and their expressions softened. One might even say they grew hazy.

“I am so sorry,” a gentle, unmistakably feminine voice interrupted.

I stiffened, knowing exactly who the voice belonged to, and consequently why Dale and Evans had adopted their hazy faces.

“It’s not an interruption.” Dale shook his head, standing.

“Not at all.” Evans also stood, his smile was small and hopeful, his voice coaxing as though she were a skittish animal.

I knew better. Where these two yokels saw a weak, sensitive flower—an angelic pushover, ripe for the pushing—I saw an opportunist in banana-cake clothing. Let the record show, I did not roll my eyes.

Schooling my expression, I glanced over my shoulder, prepared to give the interloper a terse nod. But this plan went awry almost immediately and I executed an involuntary double take.

Jennifer Sylvester’s eyes were purple.

Not blue.

Not green.

Not gray.

Purple.

And that was impossible.

So I frowned.

The slight smile she was aiming at me fell and she winced, just a touch. Her hand dropped from my shoulder and she backed up a step, lifting her chin.

“Cletus, I need to speak with you.” Her words were loud for her—so a normal volume for everyone else—and deliberate.

I narrowed my eyes, leveling her with a glare. I considered saying no. I considered it. The leash Jennifer thought she wielded chafed and inspired raw thoughts.

Instead I stood.

“Gentlemen.” I tipped my head toward Dale and Evans, though I never removed my eyes from Jennifer Sylvester. Then, in an exaggerated show of manners, I swept my hand in front of me. “After you, Miss Sylvester.”

She swallowed unsteadily, her purple eyes wide and assessing under unnaturally thick and long black lashes. The lashes were fake. *But that eye color . . .*

She nodded curtly, turned on her heel, and walked swiftly toward the cafeteria exit. I followed, careful to wipe my expression and keep a distance between us. No reason for folks to know we were linked in any capacity.

Jennifer’s stride was impressively quick for a short woman in high heels, and she was short. Even for a woman she was short. My gaze carefully disinterested, I scrutinized this short woman.

She wore a yellow dress, a “housedress” I believed they were called in the 1950s and ’60s. It hugged her torso to her waist then circled out over her hips. She had big hips. Or a small waist. Or both. Hard to tell when the garment she wore served to accentuate both the smallness of her middle and the thickness of her sub-middle.

The yellow dress swished over her calves as she walked. She had nice legs—what I could see of them, at any rate—but the fabric swishing had me redirecting my attention. It was an angry, violent swishing and was getting on my nerves.

A quick turn to the left had me stepping double-time to keep up and comprehension dawned. I knew where we were going, where she was leading me. We’d gone a roundabout way and I was surprised she knew that

the nondescript, unlabeled door led to the backstage area at the front of the cafeteria.

No one would see us. A thick, heavy curtain separated the stage from the tables crowded with townsfolk, eating their coleslaw, fried pie, and drinking lemonade. No one would hear us. The constant buzz of chatter beyond the curtain made this a perfect spot for a clandestine assignation, so long as neither of us felt the urge to shout.

I slipped through the door, searched the large space, and found Jennifer with her back and palms pressed against the cinderblock wall a few feet away. She stood rigid and straight, and judging by the rise and fall of her chest, she was out of breath.

I stuffed my hands in the pockets of my coveralls and waited. Likely, I could see better than she could. Us Winston boys could see in the dark, more or less. Our momma had told us that we had Yuchi ancestry, a fact I'd confirmed unbeknownst to my siblings. Legend was, the Yuchi tribesmen could see just fine, even on the blackest of nights.

Even so, the lack of light cast everything in grays and shadows, including her unsettling purple eyes.

Those have to be contacts.

"Thank you," she said, breaking the silence and surprising me.

I'd expected demands, not gratitude.

"I haven't done anything."

Her posture relaxed just a smidge. "You have," she contradicted. Her eyes were wide and I could tell she was trying to see me better.

"What've I done?" I challenged, wanting to be irritated but instead finding myself curious.

"You've made this week more bearable." She laughed lightly and it was a pleasing, musical sound. But then she swallowed her laughter and her expression grew exceedingly earnest. "You gave me hope."

Well . . . darn.

I stared at her—at this short woman, at her pointed chin and her uncommonly pretty eyes framed by ugly fake lashes—and reviewed the facts:

One, Jennifer Sylvester was desperate.

Two, she was not a bad person.

Three, she thought she wanted a husband.

Jennifer leaned away from the wall, twisting her fingers in front of her and tilting her head to one side then the other. She laughed again, but this time it sounded nervous.

“You know, I can’t see you at all. But I get the feeling you can see me just fine.”

Four, Jennifer Sylvester was surprisingly observant.

I stepped forward into a swath of light provided by a tall window. It wasn’t yet dusk, but night was quickly approaching.

“Is that better?” I asked, my voice gentler than I’d intended.

“Yes.” She shivered and her eyes moved over my face, dawdling for a moment on my beard, then fell to the floor. “That’s better. Thank you.”

Five, Jennifer Sylvester didn’t need a husband. She might’ve wanted a husband, likely because she was equating marriage with escape and freedom, but she didn’t need one. What she needed was a backbone.

“What are we doing here?” I asked after we’d stood in silence for a full minute.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“Why’d you want to talk to me?”

She firmed her lips, then lifted her eyes to mine. “I wanted to see if you’ve made any progress yet.”

“Progress?”

“Yes. Formulated a plan, for me, and my situation.”

“I see . . .” I examined her posture. *How does one grow a backbone?*

“Well?” she prompted.

“Well, what?”

Now her eyes narrowed and she pushed away from the wall, crossing her arms. “Cletus Winston, do not play games with me.”

There it is. She had a backbone, but just didn’t use it much.

I tried not to smile. Tried and failed. But she wouldn't see it. First of all, it was too dark for her non-Yuchi eyes. And second, my beard would hide it.

Now, how does one make a backbone permanent?

"I might be crazy," she continued, her voice edged with steel, "but this is what I want. This is what I've always wanted."

"A husband?" I sought to clarify.

"Yes . . . and no." The steel leached from her voice as her arms fell. Once again she was twisting her fingers. "Here's the honest truth, Cletus: I'm not a romantic. I'm not looking for someone to sweep me off my feet. Knights in shining armor do not exist. I don't even need him to be particularly clever or handsome. I just want a good person, a . . . a gentle person. I want someone with a good heart, someone steady, reliable, and kind. Someone who would make a good father."

I lifted an eyebrow at the depressingly pragmatic listing of her desires while arguing with myself. I wanted to help her—because I could—and I didn't want to help her—because I'd sworn an oath to myself that I wouldn't go off chasing windmills anymore.

She's not your problem.

I wasn't accustomed to arguing with myself, so I quietly stared at her. I quietly stared for longer than was proper.

"Cletus?"

I blinked and my attention refocused outward. She'd moved. She was now standing directly in front of me, her chin angled upward so she'd trapped me with her eyes.

"So . . ." Jennifer took a breath, her tongue darting out to wet her lips, then whispered, "so, you are going to help me, right?"

CHAPTER 6

“A tree says: A kernel is hidden in me, a spark, a thought, I am life from eternal life.”

—Hermann Hesse, *Bäume. Betrachtungen und Gedichte*

~Jennifer~

Cletus stared at me for several minutes, but I didn’t mind. The distant quality behind his gaze meant he wasn’t really looking *at* me. Cletus was thinking. And if he was thinking with such abundant focus, then he hadn’t made up his mind yet about helping.

I debated reminding him of the video evidence still in my possession, but quickly dismissed the idea. I’d threatened him last Sunday; if nearly a week of knowledge of said threat hadn’t decided things, it would only serve to aggravate him now.

I hadn’t been lying when I told him I’d saved it in multiple places, even though all those *places* were thumb drives. Maybe I was being paranoid, or giving Cletus too much credit, but I didn’t think so.

Also, I couldn’t risk the video being discovered by my parents. This meant it was no longer on my phone and I’d never placed it on my laptop. My father randomly reviewed my pictures, videos, notes, documents, and search history. His years of being a high school principal had made him fussy about my habits and behavior. Ultimately, it didn’t matter. I never had anything to hide.

Until now.

The file had been deleted from the phone after I showed it to Cletus, as much as a file can be deleted in this day and age. I’d used one of the computers at the library to transfer it to five different thumb drives and they were hidden in various places around my industrial kitchen at the bakery. Neither of my parents spent any real time in my baking space, so it was the safest location for my secret.

But back to Cletus and his staring. His staring meant he was considering, and his considering meant he hadn’t decided what to do about me yet.

Given the way his eyes burned with annoyance when I'd interrupted him earlier in the cafeteria, and everything I knew about Cletus as a covert conniver, I figured he didn't much appreciate being at a disadvantage. This was a man who preferred to be in complete control.

For as long as I'd been watching, Cletus controlled how the world perceived him, wearing the mask of a bumbling simpleton at times, or the affable auto mechanic, or the harmless banjo-playing hermit. And he was always in control of himself, never losing his temper, never displaying anything but premeditated emotion.

Control was his comfort zone.

I needed to adapt to his comfort zone, otherwise he wouldn't help me. Sure, he might fake it for a while, but it wouldn't be real.

I stepped forward, closing the distance between us until I hovered just three feet away. At this distance I had to angle my chin. I was in heels, but he was still tall.

"Cletus."

I swallowed as the full weight and intensity of his chaotically handsome gaze rested on mine. Gathering my courage close, because—honestly, he still frightened me—I prepared to risk what was left of my pride and hand over control.

"So," I started, licking my lips because they were dry, "so, you will help me, right?"

Cletus frowned, his eyes sharpening, analyzing me. He'd done this in the car, once he realized I could see through the sweet, innocuous routine. He'd been openly examining me since. Perhaps Cletus figured he didn't have to obscure himself behind a mask; there was no point because I saw him clearly, so he held nothing back.

All his brutal cleverness was on display and it made meeting his eyes—then and now—extremely difficult. I felt like I was being dissected.

He inhaled slowly and I got the sense he wanted to say no. In fact, my heart was already on its way to my feet, when he said, "Tell me about yourself."

I blinked. "Pardon?"

"Tell me about yourself. What do you do, other than bake and wear costumes?"

My hands pressed against my stomach self-consciously and I peered down at my dress. "You think I look like I'm in a costume?"

"Aren't you?"

He was right . . . of course. It was a costume. But I had a hard time admitting the truth out loud.

"The makeup, the hair, those fuzzy caterpillars on your eyelids. You dress like a stage performer all the time. Is this something you enjoy?"

"No," I answered immediately. "No. It's not. But I don't see what this has to do with—"

"With finding you a husband who is going to give you babies?"

"Well, yes. What does how I dress—"

"Everything. Because who you represent yourself to be on the outside, what people see, forms their first impression of you. For marriageable men who like women, this means you'll immediately fall into one of three categories: marriage potential, one-time amorous congress, or forgettable."

I grimaced. "So, you're saying I'm forgettable." Of course he would. *He'd* never noticed me.

He chuckled, and I couldn't help but enjoy the way it brightened and softened his eyes. "No, Jenn. You're not forgettable. But being a caricature doesn't make you very accessible either. A woman usually needs to be accessible in order to fall into the marriage category."

I tried to hide my delighted surprise at Cletus calling me *Jenn* instead of *Jennifer*, and instead attempted to focus on his disconcerting evaluation of my category. "So that just leaves—"

"That's right." He nodded solemnly, reminding me of my grandfather Sylvester, or Judge Payton. "Most men—especially young men—are simple creatures. But the good news is, men can and do change their minds."

"This is a distressing conversation." I rubbed my forehead, feeling a little nauseous.

"Am I alarming your delicate sensibilities?"

"No. It's not that. I just feel sorry for men now. It must be frustrating to be so feeble and limited."

Cletus's eyes widened dramatically just before he barked a laugh. "Feeble and limited? Is that how you would describe men?"

"No. But apparently that's how you would describe them."

The side of his mouth hitched in what was clearly a distracted and reluctant smile, his gaze losing a bit more of its hard edge. "As I was saying, women move between the three categories all the time. Attiring yourself thus," he waved his hand over my dress, "may encourage folks to think of you as crazy, and if a woman is crazy, then she might move from bandicooting to the forget category."

"Bandicooting? Isn't bandicoot a type of potato?"

"Yes. But as a verb, it's also a euphemism for sexual congress."

"I like to do that, where you can just add an *I N G* to something and decide it's a verb." I grinned, clearly forgetting to whom I was speaking. But this was one of my favorite things to do in letters to my pen pals and I'd never discussed it with anyone before.

"It's called 'verbing.'" Cletus turned his head a touch to the side and narrowed his eyes. "What are some of your favorites?"

"Um, let's see . . ." I moved my attention to the darkness over his shoulder, thinking about the last letter I wrote. "'Truthing' is a good one. I define it as trying to make something true, even when it's not, or when it's only true to you. Or 'capering' as an alternative to adventuring. It's a subtle difference, but I like the feel of it."

I brought my smile back to Cletus and found him watching me with a peculiar look. My grin waned as we studied each other and I braced myself for whatever that peculiar look meant.

Unable to withstand his inscrutable expression, I pressed, "What? What's wrong?"

"I'm not going to harm you," he said matter-of-factly, as though *harming* me had been on the table, but now *not harming* me was something he'd just decided.

I felt my eyebrows lift high on my forehead.

“Oh?” I croaked, a shiver of fear racing down my spine. “Well, that's nice of you.”

Cletus's slight smile was warm, truly disarming, and didn't look practiced or measured. It ignited a blossoming warmth in my chest despite his most recent statement, and that confused the ever-living heck out of me.

“You mistake my meaning. I'll acknowledge, *harm* wasn't the best word choice. I would never do you physical harm, and I'm saddened that we live in a society where I have to explicitly state that. You must know, my father . . .” His words trailed off and he blinked, his eyebrows pulling together.

Meanwhile, I held my breath. I was shocked Cletus brought up his father. Everyone in town knew Darrell Winston—ne'er-do-well and father of the Winston brood—used to beat his wife and kids. My momma gossiped about it to her friends in hushed tones. Growing up, I'd eavesdropped on more than one conversation about the topic.

“Well, anyway.” He shook his head as though to derail his current train of thought, grimaced, then continued. “All I'm saying is, I won't harm you, physical or otherwise. But as you observed last Sunday, I'm the vengeful sort. Any person endeavoring to blackmail me typically wouldn't emerge from the attempt unscathed.”

He paused, his eyes no longer sharp as they moved over my face, yet his gaze felt no less unsettling.

“But, you will. You will emerge unscathed.” Cletus's voice was quietly contemplative as he finally finished his thought. “You surprise me, and I am not accustomed to being surprised.”

I held very still beneath his steady perusal, though my pulse raced tellingly between my ears. I understood that he'd meant the words to be calming, but they had the opposite effect.

Cletus Winston didn't bluff. He didn't exaggerate. He was quietly methodical, with stony focus and drive. He was dangerous. And, apparently, by some random unknown magic, I'd just managed to escape a future reckoning.

Thank. God.

“But back to the task at hand,” he said suddenly, making me jump, now all business. If he noticed my reaction, he made no sign, instead plowing ahead

with his thoughts. "You want me to help you find a husband. I maintain helping you with this endeavor is impossible unless you become your true self, and that means something other than the Banana Cake Queen, and all the yellow that entails. Consequently, here is your first homework assignment: make a list of things you like to do."

"Homework?" I repeated dumbly.

Cletus nodded once and then turned.

Unthinkingly, I grabbed hold of his arm and held him in place. "Wait, what? Make a list of things I like to do?"

"That's right. And we'll have to schedule a time to meet once a week for lessons."

"Lessons?" I reared back.

"Yes. Lessons. You need lessons."

"What kind of lessons?"

"How to be Jennifer Sylvester lessons."

What?

I lifted my chin. "I know how to be myself."

"No, you don't." He covered my hand with his and pried it from his arm, letting it drop.

"That's ridicu—"

"Fridays are obviously out of the question, and I'd prefer a weeknight over a weekend. In a pinch we could meet during the day on Sunday. What days do you have off from the bakery?"

I gaped, blindsided by the direction of this conversation, and therefore could only answer his question with plain honesty. "I don't have a day off."

"What? What do you mean you don't have a day off?"

"Just that. I start baking at three AM most mornings, and then if I don't have any special orders, I go home and sleep for a while. But I usually have special orders. And then we have parties most Fridays and Saturdays in the city."

"You mean Knoxville?"

"Yes, or Nashville."

“Why do you have to be there? Doesn't your momma have staff who can help?”

“Well, yes. But she likes me to—”

“Never mind. Don't answer that.” He waved away my response, frowning again, looking and sounding dreadfully grumpy. “If you don't have a day off, which day is slowest? When do you usually have a little free time?”

“Monday.”

“Okay. Monday. We'll meet every other Monday, in the afternoon at Cooper's field.” He turned to leave again.

I caught his arm again. “No. That's not going to work. I can't go to Cooper's field. Someone will recognize my car and word will get back to my parents. I can't deviate from my normal schedule or else it'll raise suspicion.”

Once more, he pried my hand from his arm, still looking and sounding cranky. “Where and when do you suggest we meet?”

“At the bakery, Monday or Tuesday nights. Sometimes I stay late and try out new recipes. No one else will be there.”

“Fine.” He gave me a curt nod and turned toward the door, the darkness swallowing him. “I'll see you on Monday.”

“Does this mean you're going to help me?” I asked hopefully, addressing my question to the inky blackness.

He didn't answer. Several feet away, the door to the backstage opened and his tall form was outlined in light as he passed through it. And then it closed.

He was gone.

CHAPTER 7

“Her heart was a secret garden and the walls were very high.”

— William Goldman, *The Princess Bride*

~Cletus~

“**It looks real** nice, Jethro.” Beau inspected the crown molding Jethro had installed yesterday. “I can’t believe you routed this yourself.”

“Yeah. And it was Cletus’s idea to run the wiring through the molding, so we have surround sound. See the speakers here and here?” Jethro pointed to the inset speakers along the living room wall. My brothers squinted at the spots where Jethro pointed.

“I don’t see anything.” Drew stepped closer to the wall and inspected it. “Cletus, you sure are good at hiding things in plain sight.”

Jethro clapped a hand on my shoulder and grinned; he gave me an affectionate shake. “It’s his gift.”

“Among other things,” I conceded, checking my watch.

The truth was, I’d spent more time on hiding the speakers than was prudent. But I was determined they be invisible. I called it superior work ethic. Jethro said I was fixating again.

Jethro, Beau, Duane, Drew, and I had just finished the final touches on the carriage house. We were standing in the new kitchen, the wood glue wasn’t yet dry, and the entire house smelled of paint and sawdust, but we’d done it. The space was finished and ready for Jethro, Sienna, and to be determined Winston Progeny #1.

Sienna was due back home in two days and I was still the only one who knew they were pregnant. Meanwhile, Duane and his woman Jessica would be leaving for Italy soon. Their tickets were of the one-way variety.

It was a time of change. I avoided change or did my utmost to discourage it, mostly. This was the good kind of change. I knew that. Still, even good change made me antsy.

“Billy helped,” Jethro said, his voice held hesitation.

“Billy?” Duane didn’t try to mask his surprise; he and Beau stared at each other, communicating for several seconds without talking. The twins’ ability to impart thoughts through a look had always been frustrating. I didn’t like being left out of a conversation.

“Yes. Billy. Billy helped,” I confirmed irritably. “And will you two cease discussing with your eyeballs. There are several other people in the room who can’t brain-link.”

Duane lifted an eyebrow, his eyes darting from me to Beau and then quickly to the floor. “Fine, Cletus. Cool your engine.”

I grunted, but said nothing. I didn’t want to pick a fight with Duane. I only had a few more weeks of him hanging around and the thought depressed me. He was a grumpy, brooding little bastard who had the habit of only speaking when spoken to—and sometimes not even then. I was going to miss him.

“Where is Billy now?” Drew asked, still squinting at the wall and looking for the inset speakers.

“He’s at work,” Beau answered, then to me asked, “you still going fishing with us tomorrow, Cletus?”

“Are Drill and Catfish still going?” I asked.

Beau shrugged. “As far as I know.”

“Then I’ll be there.”

“Why do you want to go fishing with those Iron Wraiths?” Duane’s tone told me he didn’t approve, but he didn’t give me a chance to respond before turning to Beau. “I can’t believe you’re still friendly with them, after what happened with Jess.”

Jess was Jessica James, Duane’s lady love. Last fall she’d been caught in the middle of some nasty business with the Iron Wraiths motorcycle club. Long story short, higher ups in the club tried to blackmail Duane and Beau into running their chop-shop. Since the unpleasantness, Duane had joined my brother Billy in his unconditional loathing of each and every member. Drill and Catfish were members; they weren’t responsible for the situation with Jess or the attempted blackmail, but they didn’t do anything to stop it either.

“Drill isn’t bad people,” Beau said, attempting to defend the man.

Duane's glare intensified. "They're all evil assholes and should burn in hell."

Drew's eyebrows jumped, but he said nothing. Meanwhile, Jethro—who'd once come close to becoming a full-fledged member of the Iron Wraiths—studied the label of his beer. The room fell into a complex silence; complex because our family's history with the motorcycle club was multifaceted and complicated.

Our father was a member. He'd been a captain. We grew up with a number of fellas who were now members. Personally, I didn't consider each and every one of their rank to be evil assholes, but I did recognize the Wraiths were a disease.

I was going to destroy them, but not for any reason as altruistic as eradicating Green Valley of evildoers. My reasons were far more self-serving.

"Uh, Cletus, you want a beer?" Drew held out a longneck, breaking the tense silence.

I shook my head. "I can't, I have an appointment after this."

"Anyway," Beau—clearly eager to change the subject—pointed down the hall, "let's talk about the color Jethro decided to paint the second bedroom."

"What's wrong with green?" Jethro grinned slyly. His poker face had always sucked.

"Nothing is wrong with green, but that's a very odd shade of green. What was it called again?"

"Sweet pea," Duane supplied flatly for his twin. "It was called sweet pea and I believe it was labeled as *nursery paint*."

"Nursery paint, huh? You have something to tell us, Jethro?" Beau teased, mirroring Jethro's grin. "No news to share? No big bombshell to drop?"

Jethro glanced at me. "I can't believe you didn't tell them yet."

"Why would I? I'm good at keeping secrets." I shoved my hands in my pockets, making sure I looked innocent. "And I'm not the one who's pregnant."

"I knew it!" Beau attacked Jethro, pulling him into a quick man-hug.

Jethro's grin widened to as large as I've ever seen it. "How could you possibly know?"

Duane clapped Jethro on the back as soon as Beau released him. "Because you've always wanted kids, and weren't one to futz around once you made up your mind."

"You should have painted it vomit green, to disguise all the baby vomit you're going to have to deal with," Beau suggested.

"And shit brown," Duane added. "Don't forget about the shit."

"Y'all are the best." Jethro placed his hands over his chest. "You warm my heart."

"Make sure the floor is waterproof." Beau grabbed a beer and uncapped it.

"Don't tell me, to catch the vomit and poop?"

"No," Beau wagged his eyebrows, "because of all the crying you're going to do when you can't sleep through the night or make love to your woman anymore."

"Ah, yes. Infant-interruptus is a real condition. No cure for it either." Duane nodded and it was a fairly good imitation of my somber nod. In fact, how he sounded was a fairly good imitation of me.

"You sound like Cletus." Drew laughed, obviously catching on.

Duane slid his eyes to mine and gave me a small smile.

I lifted an eyebrow at my brother to disguise the fact that I thought his impression was funny. "Y'all need to lay off. Babies are the best. Think of all the cuddling. This is great news."

"It is great news." Beau held his beer out to clink it with Jethro's and added sincerely, "It's the best news."

"I can't wait." Duane also tapped his beer against Jethro's. "Jess and I will come home once the bundle of joy arrives. And I'll teach Duanita how to race cars."

"Duanita?"

"That'll be her name, of course." Duane took a long pull of his beer, nodding as though the matter was settled.

"I don't know." Drew shook his head thoughtfully, scratching the back of his neck. "Andy has a nice ring to it. And it could work for a girl or a boy."

“Short for Andrew, of course.” Beau rolled his eyes.

“Or Andrea.” Drew shrugged, hiding his grin by taking another swallow of beer.

“Y’all forget, I’m not the only one naming this baby. Sienna has more than a say in the matter and veto rights.”

“So what you’re telling us is, we need to butter up Sienna?” Beau interpreted.

Jethro laughed, and so did everyone else. I didn’t.

I mustered a smile through my inexplicable melancholy while the urge to take my leave gripped me with a sudden ferocity.

I felt Duane’s eyeballs on me, so I gave him a flat smile, then glanced at my watch. “Well, it’s been fun, but I must take my leave.”

“Yeah, I need to go, too.” Drew placed his empty beer bottle in the new recycling containers; he turned to Jethro and shook his hand. “Congratulations, Jethro. Happy for you.”

“Thanks, Drew.”

The two men stared at each other and something passed between them, an understanding of some sort.

“Oh great, now Drew and Jethro can mind-meld. I’m getting out of here.” I turned from the group and their chuckles.

“Come on, Cletus. Stick around. I’ll gaze longingly into your eyes. Us single guys need to stick together,” Beau called after me.

“Cletus won’t be single for long,” Jethro said, likely hoping to get a rise out of me. It didn’t work. I didn’t want to be late for my first lesson with Jennifer Sylvester. We had a lot of work to do.

“What do you mean? Cletus got himself a girlfriend we don’t know about?” Beau sounded positively elated.

I was almost to the door when I heard Jethro say, “It’s not my place to tell.”

“That’s not nice, Jethro. You know Beau won’t rest until he figures out who it is,” Drew counseled, his tone half-serious.

“Who is she?” Duane asked, sounding interested, and I was surprised; typically he stayed out of the gossip.

“I bid you good evening, charlatans.” I waved over my shoulder and let the door shut behind me, blocking out their voices and strolling purposefully to my car.

I hadn’t been thinking on Shelly Sullivan’s suitability as a life partner recently, not since I’d met her a few weeks ago. I had no reason to rush things, no cause to instigate additional changes at present. We, as a family, were already dealing with enough disruption, no reason to add to it.

When the time was right, when things settled down to a routine, I’d ask her out for steak. We would discuss the future, draft a pro-con list, and then come to a mutually advantageous agreement. Once I’d dismantled the Iron Wraiths, finished teaching Jackson James a lesson, and helped Jennifer Sylvester find her backbone, then I’d get around to things with Shelly.

I was glad for Jennifer Sylvester. Helping her would be a good project; a nice, easy, manageable distraction.

“**Jennifer, you can** stop being afraid of me now.”

“Okay.” She nodded, not looking at me.

I stood facing her, on the other side of an immense counter in the Donner Bakery kitchen. Donner was Jennifer’s momma’s maiden name. The bakery and adjoining lodge had been in her family for three generations.

I’d received confirmation from my friend in Chicago that both Jenn’s computer and cell phone were video free. If she had any idea that I’d deleted the video from her devices, she hadn’t said a thing. More likely, she had no idea I’d had a professional hacker break into her laptop and mobile phone.

Her knowing or not knowing didn’t really matter in the long run, but—for now—I decided it would be best to keep this information to myself. She was already jumpy enough.

Jenn was currently spooning cookie dough onto a tray and not making eye contact. She hadn’t looked directly at me since letting me in the kitchen back door some minutes ago, and she’d been silent in a way that resembled anxiety and impatience. If she discovered her leverage was gone, I prophesied she would faint from distress.

“I meant what I said, I have no plans for revenge.” I was using my most harmless and innocent of voices.

“Okay.”

I examined her and waited. She was still in one of her costumes—a yellow housedress—but she’d scrubbed all the makeup from her face, was barefoot, and had her hair in a ponytail. A baseball hat sat on her head and a Smash-Girl superhero apron was tied around her waist. I’d never seen her look so normal before, so much like a real person. I could work with this.

And I could wait her out. I could be patient if I wanted to be and the situation warranted patience. Or I could try disarming and distracting her into submission.

“I won’t send any Navy SEAL strippergrams to the workplace, or file any health code complaints against the bakery.”

Her movements stilled and she stared at the cookie sheet. “Is that what you were going to do to me? Was that your revenge? For me blackmailing you?”

“Yes,” I lied. “One or the other. I was leaning toward the stripper, though. I have an acquaintance in Nashville that would’ve put on a good show for your Sunday morning customers. I imagine the after-church crowd would rile up nicely post sugar and coffee. Plus, bonus, he’s an actual Navy SEAL, retired in 1975.”

The side of her mouth tugged to one side, but her eyes remained studiously focused on the bowl of raw cookie dough.

I watched her carefully, adding, “I still might do it, for your birthday instead, but only if you’re really nice to me between now and then.”

Her hand trembled slightly where it held the spoon. She was still uneasy.

“Moral of the story, Jenn: you’re getting a free pass, so try to loosen up.”

“Okay.” She nodded, still didn’t glance my way, and dug the spoon into the cookie dough, moving it around to no purpose.

She’d mellowed, just not enough.

Curious, I asked, “Why do I scare you so much?”

“You don’t scare me,” she responded immediately, sounding defensive.

“Then why are your hands shaking?”

Jennifer let the spoon fall into the batter bowl and leaned against the counter, her eyes lifting for the briefest of seconds. “You don’t scare me, I’m just . . . I’m just nervous.”

“Why’re you nervous?”

“Because . . . because . . . because you’re dangerous. And I have a hard time believing your revenge plan involved anything as benign as a male stripper.”

“Make no mistake, George is not benign. He is an eighty-five-year-old committed professional and brings his gun. Well, he brings both his guns.”

She huffed and fought her smile admirably, her cheeks staining with a hint of pink. Jenn’s eyes finally lifted and held mine. “I see what you’re doing, you’re trying to get me to let my guard down.”

“Yes. Yes, I am. How am I supposed to help you if you don’t trust me?”

“How am I supposed to trust you when you have a long, established record of underhanded dealings and manipulations?”

Astute woman is . . . very astute. But I was running thin on patience.

“Listen, woman. Do you want my help or not? Because, as far as your well-being is concerned, I’m as gentle as a toothless, blind bunny rabbit.”

“You are no such thing,” she contradicted, chuckling in spite of herself—like she was both amused and frustrated—and I noted her hands were finally steady. “You know things about everybody. *Everybody*. You’ve gathered information and held it over people’s heads, forcing them do what you’ve wanted for years. In fact, I bet you know something about my family that could tear our world apart.”

I was careful to keep my expression even, because Jennifer was completely correct.

Her daddy had been having an affair with Elena Wilkinson, the high school secretary, for years. I’d had suspicions for a time, so I’d audited the advanced placement calculus class as a cover, until I could confirm the sordid truth. Kip Sylvester was a heartless and vapid excuse for a human being who only cared about himself.

Whether his wife realized this or not, I couldn’t say. But I did know that if Diane Donner-Sylvester ever found out about her husband’s cheating, she’d

divorce him in a heartbeat. And he'd lose everything, because that woman made more money in a month than he made in a year.

I had no current plans to leverage the information, but I probably would. Eventually.

Jennifer wasn't finished. "You'll keep it a secret, so long as it serves your purpose. And that makes you dangerous, like a viper ready to strike. I think my caution is justified."

"Fine. I'm dangerous. I know things." I shrugged. "But you need to trust that I'm not dangerous to you. I can't help you if you're going to be jumpy Jennifer all the time."

She hesitated, picked up the spoon again, and then said, "You're right. I can't be jumpy Jennifer and I'll have to find a way to relax around you."

The way she said "relax" made it sound like a herculean task.

"Jenn—"

"I'll work on it." She frowned, tilted her chin up, looking harassed and strangely cute.

Yes, cute. Jennifer looked cute. The woman's features were aesthetically pleasing, especially without those fuzzy caterpillars on her eyelids. I would rate her as very pretty at present. I could toss her to the likes of officers Dale and Evans. Clearly, both men had been enchanted with her at the jam session. But very pretty wasn't going to help much or take her very far without a backbone.

"Fine. You work on it, and I'll work on you."

Her cheeks colored a deeper shade of pink and she nibbled on her bottom lip. Eventually, she cleared her throat and dipped her chin to her chest.

I leaned forward on the counter, resting my weight on my elbows and forearms so I could see her face. When she dipped her chin, the rim of the hat hid her features. I would need to take it off.

"Did you do your homework?" I asked, noticing that her hat had Japanese characters on it.

"I did." Abandoning her spoon and wiping her hands on the apron, she crossed to a burlap bag resting on a shelf by the back door. Jenn withdrew a

folded piece of paper and turned toward me. She held it outstretched between us.

I glanced from her to the list, then back, endeavoring to ignore the compulsion to examine her odd irises. I wanted her to relax, not feel self-conscious.

But they provoked me. Scientifically speaking, her eye color was an impossibility.

They're contact lenses.

Despite my intentions to the contrary, I held her eyes just a hair's breadth too long, searching for the telltale ridges of her contacts. I saw none. Just violet eyes that shouldn't have been possible.

She studied me, looking worried; the hand holding the paper dropped. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I frowned, disliking how this woman's eye color upset the natural order of the universe. "You read the list."

"Okay." Her gaze moved between mine before dropping to the paper. She unfolded it, cleared her throat, then read, "Um, number one: gardening in overalls."

"Gardening in overalls."

"That's right." She nodded jerkily, lifting her chin and crossing her arms over her chest, like she expected me to argue.

"Why in overalls?"

"I like all the pockets."

"I like pockets, too," I thought and said in unison. "And gardening, flowers or vegetables?"

"Both. Vegetables for cooking, but flowers too. They bring in the pollinators and keep away the pests. Marigolds and lavender are good for that. I also press for essential oils."

"You press for essential oils?"

"Yes. Lavender, geranium, and rose mostly."

"Hmm. Interesting." I glanced at her hands. I couldn't examine them while she had them tucked under her arms, so I reached for one.

She flinched away. "What are you doing?"

“I’d like to see your hand.”

“Why?”

“I’m curious. Do you have farmer hands?”

Her expression relaxed, like she hoped she did have farmer hands, and she held one palm up between us. “What do you mean? Like Nancy Danvish?”

I peered at her fingers and what I found was surprising. She had callouses, and her fingers weren’t fine and ladylike, but strong and long. Yes, her nails were painted perfect pink, but she had the hands of someone who engaged in manual labor often.

“Do you play any instruments?” I asked, apropos of nothing. Or maybe I asked because her fingers were so long, especially for a short person, that it would be a shame if she didn’t play something.

“I did. I played the piano growing up. All girls had to have a talent, during the pageants, so I sang and played the piano.”

I nodded thoughtfully, recalling a conversation I’d overheard years ago between my mother and Naomi Winters. The two women lamented how Diane Donner-Sylvester forced her only daughter—whom they both considered exceptionally sweet and shy—to participate in the pageant circuit. They’d also lamented that Diane had started dyeing her daughter’s pretty dark hair yellow at such a young age.

I eyeballed her blonde hair, or what I could see of it, then refocused my attention back to the list; I grabbed her hand and turned the paper toward me so I could read it. “Let’s see . . .”

Gardening in overalls

Writing letters at a well-lit desk

Reading a book while it rains

Teaching the troops how to bake

“What’s this one? ‘Teaching the troops how to bake.’ What’s that?”

“The Cub Scouts and Brownies—”

“Brownies being the little-kid Girl Scouts?”

“That’s right. I teach the merit badge for baking.”

“Once a year?”

“Oh no, whenever they need it. Sometimes I have a big group of kids, sometimes it’s just one-on-one.”

“Does your boss allow this?” I wasn’t ready to invoke the name of her mother, but the question needed asking.

She fidgeted, twisting her fingers and placing the list on the counter. “Eventually, she let me do it. Once I pointed out how nice the pictures would look on social media and had the parents sign photo waivers.”

“You like teaching the kids? How to bake?”

She grinned and nodded enthusiastically. “Oh, yes. It’s one of my favorite things to do. Baking is fundamentally chemistry, and I try to bring it back to that. I do a demonstration with emulsifiers first, because baking is all about turning something water soluble into something that’s oil soluble.”

“What kind of demonstration?”

“I use milk, food dye, and dish detergent.”

“And the dish detergent breaks down the fats.”

“Yes, and the dye saturates what’s left.”

I nodded somberly. In truth, I nodded somberly to disguise that fact that Jennifer Sylvester had once again surprised me.

“Any other chemistry experiments? With the kids?”

“I do lots, but it depends on their age.” Her purple eyes brightened, becoming almost lavender. “The one that’s the biggest hit is when I have them write their recipe down using a toothpick and petroleum jelly.”

I stared at her upturned face, trying to figure out why in tarnation she would have them do that. “Okay, I give up. Why would you have them write their recipe down using a toothpick and petroleum jelly?”

Her grin was huge and showcased a quantity of pearly white teeth. “Because then it’s a secret recipe, one that can only be viewed under a black light. It teaches them about—”

“Fluorescence,” I supplied, squinting at this closet chemist by the name of Jennifer Sylvester.

No wonder she was so good at baking. Baking is a precise science and was—as she said—fundamentally the application of chemistry. She

should've been going to school for chemistry, not chained to an electric mixer in this state-of-the art industrial kitchen dungeon.

She was, as ever, surprising. I studied her: the warm smile, the bright violet eyes, the pointed chin, and the baseball hat. Making up my mind a split second before I did it, I snatched her hat and hid it behind my back.

Jennifer's hands went to her head and her mouth fell open. Clearly, I'd caught her off guard.

"Why'd you take my hat?"

"You have very dark eyebrows." I studied her eyebrows, but my attention instinctively moved lower. The woman's eyes were unreasonably pretty, truly remarkable, and I needed to stop staring at them.

She crossed her arms again, lifting her chin and looking unhappy. "How long are you going to keep my hat?"

"When did your momma start dyeing your hair? How old were you?"

Her preposterously pretty eyes—pretty in both color and shape—lost focus for a split second. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Do you like your hair color?"

She didn't answer, and that was answer enough.

"Would you ever consider going back to your natural color? Or something else of your choosing? Red, maybe?"

She gawked, a perplexed line between her eyebrows. "Do you think that would help?"

I understood her question perfectly and why she'd asked it. Would it help her get a husband if her hair were a different color? Yes. But not for the reason she thought.

Taking control of her appearance, well, that was the first step toward taking control of her life.

So I answered a version of her question. "Yes. I think it will make a big difference if you decide what hair color you like, and then make your hair that color."

Her frown intensified and her eyes lowered to my chest where she stared without seeing. She appeared to be torn.

"I don't think my momma would like that."

I opened my mouth to respond, but then stopped myself, because the question I was about to ask was a critical one. I needed to use just the right tone. I needed to employ exactly the right expression.

I shuffled a step closer, placing a hand on the counter to my left, and softened my voice. “Are you always going to do everything your mother likes?”

Her gaze lifted to mine, and it was sharp, sharper than I’d thought possible coming from Jennifer Sylvester. Gorgeous eyes, hot with anger; stern, pointed chin; silent accusations cutting me with unsaid words. All this added up to a potent mixture. The combination made the fine hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

It was a scathing look.

And I was impressed.

But before I could compliment the impressiveness of her scathing look, she turned and said softly, “I think the lesson is over. You should leave out the back,” and exited the kitchen through the entrance to the main bakery.

I stared after her for a full minute, not because I expected her to come back, but because I was listening. I was listening for footsteps, or any sign that she was moving around the main bakery. But I heard no sound. That meant she’d fled to the front and was hiding, doing nothing, and listening for signs of my departure.

That was fine. I’d rattled her cage. I understood her desire to flee.

I checked my watch; I still had six hours until my next appointment, enough time to catch a nap. I gathered my belongings, just a red and black checkered coat and my hat, and glanced back at the kitchen. She’d left the folded piece of paper, the list of things she liked to do, on the counter. I tucked it into my pocket and left out the back door.

Our next lesson wasn’t for two weeks. Two weeks would give Jennifer plenty of time to marinate on my question and make a decision. *Who* was she living her life for? Herself or her mother?

Hank Weller was good at two things: making money and fishing.

As the owner of the local strip club, Hank frequently treated customers to fishing excursions on his big boat. I was not a customer. Nevertheless, he

did take me fishing from time to time, if I asked. This was because Beau and Hank were close friends and had been since childhood. Beau was my *in*.

It was a nice morning for fishing. Not too cold. Water vapor rose over the lake, making the surface hazy, like it was covered in gauze. Since it was late September, the lake was surrounded on all sides by trees doing their best impressions of autumn fireworks. Birds were complaining about their breakfast, otherwise the only sound was water lazily lapping against the shore.

I liked nature just fine, yet I didn't like to fish. But far be it from me to pass up a convenient opportunity to cross a to-do item off my to-do list.

"Long time no see, Cletus." Catfish lifted his chin in greeting as he boarded Hank's big boat. "What you been up to?"

Catfish, which was not his Christian name, was a captain in the Iron Wraiths motorcycle club. So not the bottom of the barrel, but not a decision-maker either. He was a good soldier.

"A bit of this and that," I responded easily.

"How's that sister of yours?" This question came from Drill, who was the next to board the boat.

"Easy." Hank came to stand next to me, crossing his arms. "No talk of family. Let's keep this nice."

"Just asking." Drill shrugged his boulder-like shoulders and grinned. The rising sun glinted off his bald head. To my mind he resembled a steroidal version of Mr. Clean, if Mr. Clean wore black leather from head to toe and smelled like lube.

I eyeballed the third person in their party and put my hand on Hank's shoulder. "No, no. It's fine. Ash is great, thanks for asking, Drill. Just got her double black belt in Kenjutsu—you know, that's the martial art where they use those sharp knives? Since she's a nurse, she knows just where to stab a person. You should see her skin a rabbit. We're pretty proud."

This, of course, was complete bullshit—except for the part about her being a nurse and skinning rabbits, because she was real good at skinning rabbits. But Drill widened his eyes, looking a little piqued, and let the subject drop.

“Hey, Twilight,” I welcomed the third member of their party by extending my hand for a shake. He looked at it, then at me, then at my hand again. Finally he shook it.

Isaac Sylvester, AKA Twilight, who also happened to be Jennifer Sylvester’s brother, wasn’t yet a member of the Wraiths. He was what’s called a “prospect.” Jethro had been a prospect about five years ago, but left before he’d been made a full member. Thank God.

“Cletus,” he said, meeting my eye. I inspected his and discovered Isaac’s were plain blue. I frowned.

Where did she get those purple eyes?

“Speaking of sisters,” I adopted as harmless an air as possible and gave Isaac a cheerful grin, “how’s your sister doing?”

His jaw ticked and his plain blue eyes narrowed and darted to the side, like he was wincing and didn’t want me to see.

“I don’t have a sister,” he mumbled, his mouth pinched.

“Sure you do.” I widened my grin, playing the well-meaning buffoon. “She bakes cakes, don’t she?”

“You know how it is, Cletus.” Catfish spoke up, waiting for me to give him my full attention before continuing. “Once a man joins the Wraiths he ain’t got no other family. Twilight has only brothers now.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “Ah, yes. I forgot about that detail.” I moved my eyes back to Twilight, wanting to see his reaction when I added, “Must be hard on the sisters, though.”

Isaac looked out over the lake, but I doubt he saw it. He appeared to be absent, wading through weighty thoughts.

Meanwhile, I felt sorry for Jennifer Sylvester all over again. She’d lost her brother; at least he was lost to her. I considered how it might’ve been for us if Jethro had disowned us in favor of the Wraiths. The thought was not a nice one. I quickly banished it.

“Are we waiting for anybody?” Catfish grabbed a beer from the cooler and took one of the cushioned seats on the big deck.

“Just Beau,” I said, glancing at my phone. He didn’t like to be late, but I’d instructed Beau to be late. I needed the delay. In return I’d promised I

would make sausage for dinner on my assigned night this coming week. Unsurprisingly, my sausage was his favorite. “Let me call him and see where he’s at.”

I stepped off the boat and strolled the length of the dock, up to Hank’s cabin and beyond, to where Catfish had parked their truck. I knew this truck. Five years ago I’d installed traps in this truck.

Traps are secret compartments used to traffic drugs and the like in order to evade police detection. I’d installed them at the time in order to help Jethro extract himself from the Wraiths.

Using the traps now—as a means to bring the entire Iron Wraiths organization down—was a happy bonus.

Contrary to popular belief, installing traps is perfectly legal. It’s legal just as long as the engineer responsible informs local law enforcement about the installation. I’d informed local law enforcement. And then I’d made certain the certified letter never saw the light of day. It was buried in their evidence storage, misfiled. But I knew where it was and would make certain the letter became found on Sheriff James’s desk when the time was right.

Slipping on gloves from my pocket, I opened the truck’s door—which wasn’t locked, because these guys obviously considered themselves to be untouchable—and released the trap under the driver’s seat. I pulled the evidence I’d taken two weeks ago out of my coveralls, evidence handed over to the sheriff by the King brothers, and placed it in the bottom of the trap along with a bogus list of dates and places.

By “bogus”, I meant real. The only thing bogus about the list was that I’d drafted it after the fact, after watching Wraith activity for the last eight months. The list of dates, names, and places just made their inefficient chaos appear more organized.

And organization was the point. The appearance of pre-meditation and planning was my goal, and this list achieved it.

Seeing everything set to rights, I closed the door just as Beau pulled up in his red 1967 Pontiac GTO.

I admired the line of the hood. It was a pretty car, but too flashy for me. As Drew had noted yesterday, I preferred hiding in plain sight.

It was my talent.

CHAPTER 8

“Life has its own hidden forces which you can only discover by living.”

— Søren Kierkegaard

~Jennifer~

Are you always going to do everything your mother likes?

I was making pie.

I didn't usually make pie, but I was waiting for the bread to rise so I could knead it again. I'd woken up with a thirst for violence. Cutting the butter into the flour for pie crust was almost as good as kneading bread.

Are you always going to do everything your mother likes?

I set my teeth, stabbing the frozen butter, while Cletus's question looped in my head. The question had been on repeat because I didn't know the answer.

Are you always going to do everything your mother likes?

The last seven days had been wearisome, made even more so because of Cletus's question bouncing around my brain.

My momma had scheduled us a flight to New York in November to meet with Jacqueline Freeman and the Food Network folks. As such, she'd put me on a diet.

“I don't want you to be thick for the cameras,” she'd said.

The hotel investment group my momma had been frantic about for the last several months were visiting our lodge this week. They were staying for two days. Usually, I was in charge of the bakery menu. It was my job to finalize the list of weekly offerings.

The morning after my “lesson” with Cletus, she'd handed me two sheets of paper. “This is what you'll be baking this week and next,” she'd said. “And I've left out the clothes I want you to wear and written out instructions for your hair and makeup.”

I stared at her lists, unable to find my voice. I didn't realize how much I'd enjoyed planning the menu, this small amount of autonomy, until it had

been taken away.

I thought things couldn't get any worse. I was wrong.

As soon as the investors arrived I'd been paraded out like a show pony. One would think I'd be used to it by now, but I wasn't. And with Cletus's question running through my mind, their eyes made my skin crawl. Especially the youngest of the bunch, a crispily tanned investor from Las Vegas by the name of Allen Northumberland.

"Are you almost ready?" My mother's anxious question pulled my attention away from the violent butter stabbing. "They'll be here any minute."

"Yes, Momma."

"Oh, good. You're wearing your pearls. You know I like it when you wear your pearls."

Are you always going to do everything your mother likes?

I sighed quietly and turned to the large refrigerator, placing the half-cut pie crust inside and removing the dark chocolate cake, egg whites, and freshly shredded coconut I'd prepped earlier in the day.

"Make sure you wear the yellow gingham apron I like." She was checking her reflection in the stainless steel mixing bowl I'd set out for the demonstration.

Are you always going to do everything your mother likes?

"Yes, Momma." I arranged the items on the counter, bypassed the Smash-Girl apron I preferred, and selected the yellow gingham instead.

"Also, Jennifer." She rushed to my side, glancing behind her as though to make sure no one was about sneak up and listen in. "I think that Alan fellow fancies you," she whispered.

I tried not to shudder in revulsion, but something in my expression must've given me away.

She huffed. "Now don't be like that. He's plenty handsome, don't pretend like you haven't noticed."

He was handsome; he was a looker. He also made my skin crawl. "I have no interest in Mr. Northumberland."

She continued like I hadn't spoken. "His uncle owns two of those big hotels on the Vegas strip."

"So?" I asked impatiently before I could stop myself. Honestly, it just slipped out.

"Sooo . . ." She widened her eyes at me and pressed her lips together, as though her reason for bringing up Allen Northumberland was obvious.

When I continued to look at her blankly, she made a low, growling sound in the back of her throat. "Don't play dumb, Jennifer. I know you've got brains in there. So I think it would be great if you were nice to Allen. He's the sort your daddy would approve of. Pay special attention to him during the demonstration."

I frowned at her. Then I shook my head. Then opened my mouth to say *I'm not going to do that.*

But before I could, my mother—infusing her words with pointed meaning—said, "I would very much *like* it if you would pay Alan Northumberland special attention."

My mouth snapped shut and I stared at my mother, at her raised eyebrows, at the way her lips were pinched together in frustration, and I wondered what would happen—what was *the worst thing* that would happen—if I said no.

She will be disappointed.

My heart kicked up at the thought.

She will be disappointed in you.

Now my heart was racing.

Can you live with that? Can you live with disappointing her?

I didn't want to disappoint her. I didn't want to hurt my parents, like my brother had hurt them. I never wanted to be that person. Loyalty was important to me. I loved them and honoring my parents influenced every decision I made.

But then an image of Cletus from last week appeared in my mind's eye, asking, *Are you always going to do everything your mother likes?*

No.

I can't.

The answer rang through me like a bell, right and true.

Gathering a deep breath and holding on to the kitchen counter, I looked at my mother, met her stare straight on, and forced myself to say, “No.”

She flinched, her long, black lashes fluttering rapidly as she blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“No,” I said with more volume. My hands were sweating and my galloping heart lodged in my throat. “No. I will not pay Mr. Northumberland special attention. He makes me uncomfortable and I don’t like him, so the answer is no.”

My momma gaped. I held her stare. Clouds of sorrow and disappointment pierced her shock and gathered behind her eyes. But before she could give voice to it, our guests arrived for my demonstration.

Her eyes flickered to the arriving party. She faltered for a moment before successfully donning her mask. Stepping away from me, she held her hand out to Ms. Kirkland, an investment banker from Boston.

Meanwhile, I continued gripping the edge of the counter and stared at the shredded coconut, my blood pumping loudly between my ears, realizing with no small amount of wonder that I’d just said *no* to my mother for the first time since I was a teenager.

I said no. And I survived.

I didn’t know how to feel—relieved or miserable—because one of us was going to be disappointed. And that meant one of us was going to be hurt.

I didn’t want to go home.

With a butternut squash pie, two loaves of sourdough bread, and a dark chocolate cake with chocolate coconut meringue frosting in my front seat, I’d been driving around the mountain for two hours. It was now almost 8:30 PM and my momma would be finishing up dinner with the investors soon. I didn’t want to be home when she got there.

I didn’t want a confrontation.

My original plan for the cake, when I’d baked it earlier in the day, was to drop it off at the Winston place. Today was the one-year anniversary of their mother’s death. I knew their momma, but every kid who went to the local

library knew Bethany Winston. She used to read the books at story time and she'd do all the voices. She was amazing and kind and everything I wanted to be when—or if—I became a mother.

I couldn't imagine how they must've mourned her passing. Cake wouldn't make things better, but sometimes it helped add some sweet and softness to the sting.

Problem was, once I dropped off the cake, I had nowhere to go. So I drove and listened to talk radio. Finally, around 8:45, I realized I couldn't wait any longer. Calling in on people after 9:00 PM was just plain rude.

Resolute, I took the turn onto Moth Run Road and navigated to the Winston place. As I approached the main house, my eyebrows arched at the number of cars parked in the drive.

Ten. There were ten cars.

I parked next to Cletus's Geo but didn't cut the engine, uncertain how to proceed.

Ten cars meant they had company. I didn't want to impose or interrupt. And who was I anyway? I was no one. They didn't know me.

I studied the big, old wraparound porch, the line of rocking chairs, and the large wooden bench swing hanging from the rafters. It was a fine old house and obviously had been recently renovated with great care.

My eye caught on a small pedestal table next to the front door. Inspired by a sudden idea, I jumped out of my car, jogged to the passenger side door and opened it. I tucked a loaf of bread under each arm, grabbed the pie with one hand and balanced the cake in the other.

As quietly as possible, I tiptoed up the porch steps and approached the pedestal, noting with relief that there was enough room for all of my offerings, if I stacked them. I could leave the items on the table, knock, and make a run for it. Basically, a baker's version of ding-dong-ditch.

At least, that was my plan.

I was just setting the first loaf on top of the pie box when the front door opened quite suddenly and forcefully, surprising the tar out of me. An inelegant gasp escaped my lungs and I jumped a step back, clutching both loaves of sourdough to my chest.

"Jumpy Jennifer," Cletus's gaze moved down, then up, "you're in jeans."

I closed my eyes, releasing a shaky breath. “Heavens, you frightened me.”

“Moi? The blind, toothless rabbit?”

I opened my eyes but couldn’t catch my smile before it bloomed over my face. “Here, Peter. These are for you.” I held out the loaves.

“Peter? Peter Rabbit wasn’t blind or toothless.” Cletus plucked the bread from my hands. “But he did take unnecessary risks based on the whims of his stomach. Consequently, I accept the comparison.”

I watched him smell one and then the other, his expression thoughtful. He lifted a single eyebrow. “These are sourdough.”

“Yes. I hope that’s—”

“Sourdough is my favorite. And what’s this?” Cletus turned to the table and inspected the dessert boxes.

“That one is butternut squash pie.”

He stiffened, his eyes darting between the box and me. “I’ve never heard of that, but it sounds delicious.”

“I don’t actually know. It’s something new I tried, just today, with what I had on hand.”

“What’s in it? Other than butternut squash.”

“Uh, sweet potatoes, eggs, nutmeg—”

“Stop right there. You had me at nutmeg. I accept your pie. And what’s that?” Cletus gathered the pie and indicated with his chin to the largest box.

“Oh that. Well, it’s compassion cake. At least, that’s what I call it.”

Cletus was silent for a beat, his expression inscrutable, his eyes dimming just a touch. “Compassion, huh?” he asked softly, his gaze clouding with grief.

“Uh, I just thought, well, you know. You might be having a hard time of it.”

“You baked me a cake for the anniversary of my mother’s death,” he guessed, his voice so achingly gentle I felt like crying.

“Yes. I did.” I lifted my chin, owning my actions, and resolved not to cry like a crazy person. “It’s a dark chocolate cake with dark chocolate coconut meringue frosting.”

“Dark chocolate with dark chocolate coconut meringue frosting? That sounds very dark.” The side of his mouth hitched, just a little, but his eyes still held sorrow.

“It is. Today is a sad day. Your momma was the sweetest lady and I just wanted to . . .” I shuffled a step forward, overcome by the urge to hug him, hug someone associated with Bethany Winston. But instead I stuffed my hands into my jeans pockets and shrugged. “I just wanted to say I’m—”

“Oh, hey. Jennifer. What are you doing here?” Beau Winston appeared behind Cletus, opening the door wider and giving me a cheerful, welcoming grin.

Now, Beau Winston was a looker. And he knew it. His hair and beard were red, neatly trimmed and expertly styled; his eyes were sky blue and utterly devastating, and his grin was legendary. He was extremely friendly and easy-going. Half the ladies within five years of my age were in love with him. The other half just wanted to do naughty things to him.

I never made the blunder of mistaking his friendliness for interest. But many women did, and were subsequently forced to nurse dashed hopes and broken hearts.

Cletus answered for me. “Bringing us sad cake, apparently.”

“It won’t make you sad,” I explained, “it’ll make you nostalgic. That’s how I made it. It’s a nostalgia cake.”

“Nostalgia sounds nice.” Beau’s eyes twinkled; the effect paired with his tender smile made me a little fuzzy headed. But then a hint of devilry entered his gaze as he glanced between Cletus and me. “Anyway, you want to come inside? Cletus made dinner tonight. I’m sure he’d love to slide you his sausage.”

“I made sausage.” Cletus stepped in front of Beau. “That’s what Beau means. My sausage was for dinner and people ate it.”

“Yes.” Beau stepped forward again, bumping Cletus with his shoulder, adding with a smirk, “Cletus’s famous sausage is famous.”

Cletus’s eyes cut to the side and he glared at his younger brother. “You are exceedingly irksome.”

I shook my head, taking a step back and tossing my thumb over my shoulder. “No thanks. I don’t want to impose. My car is still running.”

“I turned it off.” This statement came from behind me.

I twisted at the waist and found Billy Winston walking up the porch steps. My heart jumped to my throat and I stumbled back a step.

Oh no!

I pressed my lips together and stared at him, because that’s all I could do without making an idiot of myself.

Don’t say anything. Don’t speak. Don’t even breathe.

He held out my keys and his handsome mouth curved in a slight, quizzical smile. “You left your driver’s side door open.”

“Planning to make a quick getaway?” Beau asked with a laugh.

I glanced dumbly between Billy and my keys. I stared for so long Billy’s smile morphed into a confused frown.

“Take your keys,” Cletus said sharply.

So I did. I snatched my keys from Billy’s hand and lowered my eyes to the porch. Good Lord, this was the worst.

A moment of excruciatingly uncomfortable silence passed, during which I stared at my tennis shoes. I felt Cletus’s eyes on me, burning into the side of my face.

“Well,” I croaked, “enjoy your sad cake.” I grimaced, shaking my head and covering my eyes with a hand. “I mean, don’t enjoy it. Just, eat it. Or don’t eat it. It goes well with milk.”

Another suffocating moment passed and I wanted to die. Instead, I turned awkwardly toward the steps and muttered, “I’ll just be going now.”

“No, wait,” Cletus said.

I turned and saw him unload the baked goods into Beau’s arms. “Take these and go inside. Billy, grab the sad cake. We’ll be in soon.”

Billy gave me a weird smile, like he was a little afraid of me, and I can’t say I blamed him. Meanwhile, Beau winked in my direction and disappeared into the house with a grin.

As soon as the door closed, Cletus turned, his hands on his hips, his eyes large and watchful. “Tell me what just happened.”

“What do you mean?”

“With Billy. What just happened with Billy? What was that?”

I covered my face with my hands. "It was really terrible, wasn't it?"

"Not terrible . . ." he started, but didn't finish.

"Right. Not terrible compared to a plane crash."

He was silent for a moment. And then I heard laughter.

I peeked at him from between my fingers. Sure enough, Cletus was laughing.

My hands dropped and I couldn't help my smile or my chuckle. His laughter was contagious. Bright eyes captivated me, made even brighter by his pretty lashes, and an exceedingly pleasing mouth full of straight, white teeth. Cletus's laughter sent a warm and rich something pumping through my veins; it made me think of Swiss chocolate, semi-sweetened, and whipped with cream into a thick, dark, luscious ganache.

"Yeah," he wiped at his eyes and shook his head, "you're right. That was pretty terrible."

I sighed, still smiling because he was still smiling. "I'm sorry."

"No, no. It's fine. You fancy Billy." He shrugged. "You wouldn't be the first."

I frowned and shook my head. "No. No, no. That's not it at all. I don't fancy Billy."

Cletus straightened, his eyebrows bouncing high on his forehead. "Are you sure? Because that was—"

"No. I don't. I mean, I'm sure he's very nice. But that's not why I can't form sentences around him."

He considered me for a moment, then scratched his jaw. "Okay. Enlighten me. Why do you lose motor function around Billy?"

"It's not just Billy. It's anyone my father approves of. I . . . I can't help it. I get nervous, hoping to make a good impression, and end up speaking nonsense."

"Your father approves of my brother Billy?"

I nodded once.

Cletus gave me a thoughtful frown and appeared to be confused. "You're going to have to spell this out for me. I don't understand. How do you mean your daddy approves of Billy?"

“I mean my father has identified a number of men in the area and, well,” I inhaled a magnitude of air, suddenly feeling out of breath, “he’s indicated to me that they’re appropriate, should they show interest. Men with whom I should try to . . . make . . . a good impression.”

My father had told me on more than one occasion how important it was for me to marry well. Growing up, he used to say things like, *You aren’t too bright, but luckily you’re pretty enough to catch a rich husband. Just keep your mouth shut and smile.* Being pretty and having a nice smile weren’t bad things, but I always found it difficult to reimagine my father’s insults as compliments.

Cletus was back to scrutinizing me; his eyes were clear, sharp and assessing. “Is that so?”

I nodded and rolled my lips between my teeth, feeling like a fool for some reason. My face grew hot beneath his gaze.

“This is fascinating.” He sounded truly fascinated. “Who else is on the list?”

I glanced over Cletus’s shoulder as I tried to recall the names my father had mentioned over the years. “Well, Billy comes up the most. That’s probably why I’m at my worst whenever he’s around. He also mentioned Hank Weller—”

“Hank Weller?” Cletus looked surprised, but not disapproving. “Well now, I guess he is good at fishing and has a fine head for business. Who else?”

“Um, Dr. Runous—”

“Drew?”

“Yes. But that was before he and your sister became involved. He hasn’t mentioned him in a while.”

“Anyone else?”

“Um, let’s see . . . Jackson James.”

“Jackson?” Cletus made a face, his nose wrinkling in distaste. “That ignoramus?”

I tried not to smile, but failed. Cletus looked positively aghast at the mere idea, affronted on my behalf.

“He’s not so bad,” I said, unable to help myself, wanting to see his reaction.

“Yes. Exactly. He’s not so bad. He’s just plain old *bad*. And he’s certainly not in the same stratosphere as Billy or Drew or even Hank. Your father has impaired judgment and can’t be trusted.” His gaze focused on some spot over my head, his eyes narrowing just slightly as he pulled his bottom lip between his teeth and chewed on it. I recognized that this meant he was deep in thought.

I took the opportunity to study his face, enjoying the view of him up close. Despite his attempts to mask his handsomeness with wild hair and a bushy beard, he was still remarkably attractive. Granted, he was also still dangerous. But I liked to think we’d formed something of an odd friendship. With that friendship came an equally odd affection.

It was true, I was beginning to feel affection for him. And I knew I was totally nuts—seeing as how I was blackmailing him, and I was still a little afraid of him, and he wasn’t acting out of the kindness of his heart—but there it was. Affection, plain and simple.

“I have an idea,” he announced, snapping the fingers of one hand. “And it’s brilliant.”

“Of course it is.” I grinned at him, enjoying my view even more now that his clever eyes were bright with excitement and pointed at me.

“Billy will take you on a date.”

I started, my grin immediately falling into a gaping frown of absolute horror. “Wait . . . what?”

“You and Billy. A date,” he said slowly and loudly, pronouncing every syllable, as though I was hard of hearing.

Unthinkingly, I smacked his arm and, leaning close, responded in a rushed whisper. “I heard you the first time, I’m not deaf.”

“Good. Just checking.”

“No. Not good. I’m not going on a date with Billy!”

Now he frowned. “Why not?”

“Because . . .” I waved my arms around to no purpose. “Didn’t you just witness that train wreck a minute ago?”

He nodded solemnly. “It was impossible to miss.”

A strangled sound escaped my throat. “How can you possibly think a date with Billy is a good idea?”

“Precisely because of how you reacted.” His tone was maddeningly rational and academic. “You want a husband, yes?”

“Yes,” I whispered, glancing behind Cletus unnecessarily to ensure we weren’t being overheard.

“And I’m guessing you want to marry someone your parents approve of, yes?”

I hesitated, then nodded tightly, realizing where he was going with this.

He was right. Of course he was right. If I could make it through a date with Billy, then I could make it through a date with anyone.

“I see your point,” I admitted miserably.

“Oh, now. Come on. Billy isn’t so *bad*.” Cletus nudged my shoulder, repeating my words from earlier.

I huffed an exasperated laugh. “Yeah. Not so bad. Except I think you’re forgetting one very important fact.”

“I never forget facts.” He shook his head quickly, both dismissing and teasing me. “Facts are my friends.”

“Oh yeah? You think so?”

“I know so. I send facts Christmas cards every year and they reciprocate with peppermint bark.”

“Well then, how about this fact: Billy will *never* ask *me* out on a date.”

And that was a fact.

Billy Winston was completely and irrevocably in love with Claire McClure. This information was not widely known, but I knew. I was a people watcher.

He’d been in love with her for *years*. Years upon years. They would watch each other, always casting cautious yet longing glances when they thought the other wasn’t looking. It was both heartbreaking and frustrating to see two people so desperately in love guarding their hearts.

Therefore, I knew—for a *fact*—that Billy Winston would never, ever, not in a million years, ask me out on a date.

CHAPTER 9

“Don't laugh at the spinsters, dear girls, for often very tender, tragic romances are hidden away in the hearts that beat so quietly under the sober gowns.”

— Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*

~Jennifer~

When Billy Winston asked me out on a date, it was terrible . . . and then it wasn't.

Allow me to explain.

“Everyone, y'all know Jennifer, right?” Cletus ushered me into his family's house, interrupting their conversations to introduce me.

I gave the room a tight smile and a little wave, unable to lift my gaze due to the pressure of twenty or so eyeballs moving over my person.

“I don't.”

I glanced up, finding a tall, gorgeous woman with dark brown hair and smiling brown eyes standing from her place at the couch. I immediately recognized her as Sienna Diaz. I recognized her because she was a famous movie star and I'd seen all her movies. She was fantastic.

Sienna held her hand out to me and I stepped forward in a bit of a daze, not because she was a movie star, but because she had an aura about her, like a gravitational field with 4th of July sparklers.

“You know Jenn, Sienna. She's the Banana Cake Queen,” I heard Beau explain.

My heart fell, but I salvaged my smile. “Very nice to meet you.”

“Oh. Yes. I know you by reputation.” She sounded delighted and gave my hand a little squeeze before releasing it. “I've had your amazing cake.”

“She's not the Banana Cake Queen, Beau. She is Jennifer Sylvester and she likes to garden while wearing overalls,” Cletus reprimanded his brother. Then, before I could recover from his statement, he pushed me toward his sister. “Go talk to Ashley. She also likes to garden. Discuss.”

Ashley stood and gave Cletus a giant grin, then turned her attention to me, reaching for my hands. “Come over here and tell me all about your garden, Jenn.” Ashley tugged me forward and unceremoniously placed me on the couch next to her. “And then tell me if you canned any tomatoes this year. I have mine frozen in bags, but I’d like to do more canning.”

“Billy, come with me. We’ve got sad cake to cut and a butternut squash pie to sample.” Cletus motioned for Billy to follow, which I noticed Billy seemed to do with some reluctance.

With Cletus and Billy gone, the room fell quiet and I felt everybody’s eyes on me. I tucked my fingers under my thighs to keep from twisting them on my lap, and lifted my eyes to Ashley’s friendly expression.

“Well now, let’s see,” I swallowed, trying to ignore everyone and focus on Ashley’s question. “I did can tomatoes. But I used a pressure cooker this year for them and my other vegetables. I had some trouble last year with my beans, when I used just the pot.”

She patted my knee and turned to her other side. “See now, Drew. We need a pressure cooker.”

What? Drew? Oh no!

I lifted my eyes and, to my horror, found Drew Runous sitting on the other side of Ashley Winston. He was watching me with a wary expression.

And I knew why.

And I didn’t blame him. I’d be wary of me as well.

Mortification and panic had me jumping to my feet. I glanced around the room, searching for a way out and finding only a sea of eyeballs looking at me like I was an escaped mental patient.

“Jenn?” Ashley asked, concern in her voice as she gained her feet next to me. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. Fine. Bathroom?” I asked tightly, keeping my gaze downcast.

“Um, just down the hall there. Second door on the left.”

I nodded once and bolted to the hall, my heart thundering between my ears. I walked to the end of the hallway, then realized I’d passed the bathroom door. But then I couldn’t remember which door Ashley had

indicated—was it the second or the third? And was it the right or the left? This house was huge and the hallway had entirely too many doors.

I tried to quietly retrace my steps, testing the third door on my right and found it was a closet.

“Shoot,” I muttered under my breath.

My hands were sweaty, so I wiped them on my jeans and tried the next door. It was a study of some kind, or a library.

“Dammit.” I closed my eyes and leaned against the wall. This was the worst. I was the worst. *I never should have come here. I should’ve just—*

“Jennifer? What are you doing?” Cletus’s question had me opening my eyes and straightening from the wall.

He stood in an open doorway, his hands on his hips, Billy hovering behind him and watching me with concern stitched on his forehead.

I glanced between the two men. “I’m looking for the bathroom.”

Cletus lifted an eyebrow at me, examining and dissecting me. “You don’t need to use the bathroom. You’re looking for an escape.”

I gathered a deep breath and the dam broke. “That’s right. I’m looking for an escape. Drew is out there. And—oh God—Cletus, I’m the worst. I’m so awkward, my awkward is embarrassed by my awkward.”

Peripherally, I noticed Billy step more completely into the hall, but I couldn’t stop talking, I needed to tell someone about my secret shame and Cletus was that person. I knew him better now. I knew he was weird and wouldn’t judge me. But also, he couldn’t turn me away. I was blackmailing him. He had to listen.

“I’m sure it’s not that bad—”

“It is. It was. You don’t know what I did,” I whispered on a rush. “Last year, in a misguided attempt to jump-start my search, I drove to the ranger station and gave Drew a banana cake. And then I kissed him.”

Both Billy and Cletus straightened, glanced at each other, then turned their eyes back to me.

“Actually, kiss might be the wrong word,” I lamented. “I had no idea what I was doing at the time, and clearly even less now. It was more of a-a-a lip

collision.” I smashed my fingers together in a sloppy motion, wanting to demonstrate how truly uncomfortable and unfortunate of a kiss it had been.

Cletus rolled his lips between his teeth and stared at me. I didn’t realize at first, because I was lost to my humiliation, but Cletus was laughing. Nor did I realize Billy was also laughing.

I didn’t realize until Billy made an inadvertent sound in the back of his throat and covered his mouth with his hand. Then I looked at them. I looked at them both. Their eyes were watery and their shoulders were shaking.

I huffed a little laugh and shook my head. A new kind of embarrassment spread to my fingertips, the kind that accompanies being the butt of a joke. I knew this embarrassment well.

“I guess it is kind of funny,” I said, hoping I sounded good-natured and self-deprecating instead of brittle.

They both stopped laughing, and that made me feel even worse.

Tears burned in the back of my eyes, cinching my throat. I glanced down the hall, toward the front door, and bit my bottom lip. “I think—” I stopped, swallowed, then tried again. “I think I’m going to go now.”

I started forward, but found my way immediately blocked by both Billy and Cletus.

“Now, wait. Wait a minute.” Cletus held me by my upper arms, keeping me in place. “Just hold your horses.”

“Jennifer, please accept my apology. That was ungentlemanly. We shouldn’t have laughed.” This came from Billy, who hovered at my side. He lifted his hand like he wanted to place it on my shoulder, but instead pulled his fingers through his dark hair. “I’m very sorry.”

I glanced up at him and shrugged, a rigid smile on my face. “It’s no big deal, I’m used to it.”

I was used to it—being laughed at, being the butt of jokes—I didn’t know why I was acting so silly. It was no big deal. No. Big. Deal.

My words appeared to frustrate Billy because he frowned, his icy blue eyes warming as they moved over me. “You’re a nice kid. And you shouldn’t be *used to* people laughing at you. That’s not right.”

Cletus was holding very still, and was being uncharacteristically quiet, but his eyes were wide and watchful as they bounced between us.

I spoke without thinking, wanting to diffuse his guilt. “Oh, it’s fine. I’d rather make people laugh than make them cry.” Billy winced and I realized too late what I’d said: I’d made them laugh, and they’d made me cry.

“Ugh!” My face fell into my hands and now I was laughing. “I always say the wrong thing.”

“Maybe you just need practice,” Cletus said very carefully, his tone communicating that his words held more than one meaning.

I peered through my fingers and found Cletus and Billy looking at each other, something meaningful passing between them.

Billy sighed. Then he nodded. Then he turned his attention to me.

Cletus let go of my arms and took a step back, stuffing his fingers in his pockets. Billy, meanwhile, inserted himself in the space Cletus had just vacated.

“Maybe you just need practice,” Billy repeated Cletus’s words softly, his smile small and coaxing.

I studied him with bemusement, my hands falling from my face. I couldn’t think of anything to say, mostly because I didn’t understand what was happening. My gaze drifted to Cletus. He was leaning one shoulder against the wall and his eyes were studiously downcast, as though the hallway carpet was incredibly fascinating.

“Jenn,” Billy said, drawing my attention back to him and his earnest expression.

“Yes?”

“How about if I help you? I can help you practice.”

My mouth fell open and I’m sure my face communicated my alarm. “Why would you do that?” I asked before I could catch myself.

His smile widened and he looked at me like I was adorable.

Adorable.

Not a hot mess.

And that made my tender heart feel both more and less tender.

“Because you’re a nice person,” he said simply, shrugging and making me smile; but then he added with a glimmer of mischief behind his eyes, “And maybe, if you’re feeling generous, I’ll get a banana cake out of it.”

After having my freak-show in the hallway, and reluctantly accepting Billy Winston’s offer of help, I assisted Billy and Cletus in the kitchen as they divided up the desserts. Under Cletus’s watchful eye, Billy and I traded cell phone numbers so we could make plans. Then the three of us carried slices of cake and pie out to their family.

Call it bravery or call it temporary insanity; whatever it was, I made a point to bring Ashley and Drew their pie and cake.

Drew accepted his warily—as he had every right to do—and Ashley accepted hers with a small, private smile. Then I sat myself down next to Ashley, looked at Drew straight on, and said, “Now, getting back to our discussion, there’s no need for you to procure a pressure cooker. You can borrow mine.”

Ashley’s smile grew. “Excellent idea. Don’t you think so, Drew?”

Drew’s silver eyes narrowed on me. I met his gaze, using mine to (hopefully) communicate repentance and make a plea to start over.

Still squinting, Drew finally said, “It’s not like we need a pressure cooker year round. If we used Jennifer’s then we could all do our canning together, make quicker work of it.”

Ashley turned her friendly smile back to me. “Fantastic. Let’s do that. When do you harvest your fall garden?”

The relief I felt was considerable, because I’d been avoiding Drew Runous for over a year. It would be nice, not having to run the other direction each time I caught sight of him.

All things considered, the rest of the evening was surprisingly nice. The Winston siblings, like their momma, were genuinely kind. And the people they chose as partners were also lovely. Duane and Jessica made a cute couple; Ashley and Drew fit perfectly together; and how Jethro fussed over Sienna warmed my heart.

The evening was surprisingly nice despite not typically enjoying large groups of people. In fact, I usually avoided groups as a rule. Being

homeschooled probably had something to do with it. Not all homeschoolers are this way, but my momma didn't see the need for me to socialize with kids my age. Now, in my twenties, group dynamics felt alien and intimidating.

But once I relaxed and just allowed myself to be, being a part of this group—the Winston group—was easy. They didn't stare or expect me to perform. I didn't have to say another word once Ashley and I finished our conversation about canning. An hour passed where I didn't say anything at all. I just listened, and blended, and enjoyed myself.

“Let the record show, never say never to Cletus Winston.” Cletus nodded once at his assertion, a smugly satisfied smile on his features.

At present, Cletus was walking me to my car. I'd lost track of time and when I realized it was after 10:00 PM, I made my excuses. He jumped up from his seat and offered to see me out, and so here we were.

I glanced at him and rolled my eyes. “Fine. You were right. I'll never say never to Cletus Winston.”

His smile widened briefly, but then he cleared his throat and wiped all humor from his features. “We have a lesson on Monday and you have new homework.”

“I do?”

Cletus opened the driver's side door of my car. “You do. This week, and once a day for the next month, you are going to change one thing.”

I waited for him to continue. When he didn't, I asked, “What do you mean?”

“Just that. You are going to change one thing every day for the next month.”

“Change what?”

He shrugged. “That's up to you.”

I frowned at him, a bubble of discomfort making me squirm. “You're going to have to be more specific.”

His smile returned, but now it was sly. “Nope.”

“Cletus.”

“Nope.” He shook his head stubbornly. “No, ma’am. You have to decide. It can be anything, anything at all. Change the route you take to work, change the lipstick you wear, or go crazy and change your hair color. The only rule is, it has to be something *you* want to change. You have to want it, not your momma, not your daddy, not your dog, *you*.”

I glared at him. The freedom he gave me felt too unwieldy, too foreign. But it also felt exciting.

“I don’t have a dog,” I deadpanned.

“There’s an example. Change your doglessness.”

“Fine,” I finally said, both smirking and glaring as I slid into my car. “Fine. I’ll change my underwear.”

He barked a laugh and took a step back as I shut my door. I started the engine, and rolled down the window. “Now, don’t go crazy,” he teased.

I pressed my lips together so he wouldn’t see me smile as I reversed out of my parking spot. But as soon as I turned onto the main road, I let the grin loose. And I grinned almost the entire way home.

Almost . . . because as soon as I pulled into my parents’ driveway, the weight of my day—my day before bringing compassion cake to the Winston’s—caught up with me. My mother would be home. And so would my father. I still had to deal with the consequences of saying *no* to my mother.

With a heavy heart, I parked my car and forced myself to leave it.

Maybe they’re asleep.

But I knew they weren’t. The entryway light was on. My father always turned the entryway light off when he went to bed.

My foot just touched the porch landing when my father pulled open the front door, his expression thunderous.

“Jennifer Anne Sylvester, get yourself inside this house right now.”

I sighed quietly and nodded, walking past him through the door. My mother was waiting for me, dressed in her blue bathrobe, makeup still on her face.

“So glad you finally decided to come home.” Her arms were crossed and her eyes were a little wild; her voice was laced with barely contained hurt

and fear. “Do you know how worried we were?”

“I’m sorry.” Guilt and disappointment—in myself—made it hard to breathe. I hated letting my mother down. “I should have texted and let you know—”

“No. You should have come straight home,” my father corrected, his tone both flat and furious. “You have no business being out this late.”

They stared at me, displeasure and irritation etched on their features. My stomach turned, I felt a little queasy.

My momma broke the heavy silence, her words dripping with frustration. “You’re in jeans, Jennifer. Are you trying to ruin everything? Everything we’ve worked for?”

I shook my head, but was unable to speak. I didn’t want to tell her that I’d gotten chocolate frosting on my dress because the gingham apron she wanted me to wear didn’t provide adequate coverage. So I’d changed, rather than wear the dirty dress. I didn’t want to tell her because it wouldn’t have made any difference to her anger.

My father huffed, releasing a humorless laugh. “Catch up, Jennifer. Use whatever brains you have. Are we going to have to guess? Or are you planning on telling us where you’ve been? What was so important that you had your momma worried half to death?”

“I took the compassion cake to the Winstons. Today is the one-year anniversary of Bethany Winston’s death and I . . . I just thought, maybe the cake would help.”

My parents were silent for a beat, exchanging a look, then their eyes moved back to me.

“Are you telling us a lie, Jennifer? Because it’s almost 10:30 PM and you’ve been missing since this afternoon.” My father’s voice was stony and suspicious.

I shook my head, ready to defend my honesty, but my phone chose that moment to ring. Startled, I pulled the cell from my purse. Before I could check the screen, my father snatched it from my hand and answered it, bringing it to his ear.

“Who is this?” he demanded.

I glanced at my mother, found her watching me with sad eyes, sharp with disappointment.

“What?” my father stiffened, standing straighter, his gaze darting to mine. “Oh, oh. Hello, Billy. Oh, no. It’s fine. It’s not too late. No, no. Not at all. Yes—here’s Jennifer.”

With confusion and wonder, my father handed my phone back to me and mouthed to both my mother and me, “It’s Billy Winston.”

I accepted the phone, frowned at it, then brought it to my ear. “Hello?”

“Hey, you left before we could make plans.” Billy’s baritone sounded from the other side.

“Oh, sorry.” I shook my head to clear it, our earlier discussion feeling like it happened weeks—not hours—ago.

Then I heard Cletus demand in the background, “Take her to The Front Porch for steak, and don’t let her split the bill.”

“Mind your own business, Cletus,” Billy chided.

“She is my business,” Cletus retorted.

I grinned in spite of everything.

“Jenn? Are you still there?”

“Yes, I’m here.” I hazarded a glance at my parents and found them watching me with unadulterated astonishment.

“How about Friday? We’ll go to the jam session for a bit, then out to The Front Porch,” Billy suggested.

“For steak,” Cletus shouted.

“Uh, jam session on Friday and then The Front Porch?” I clarified.

My father nodded his head vehemently and my mother covered her mouth, her eyes wide and excited. They both looked happy and proud and so totally different from what they’d been just moments ago.

And a funny thing happened. My heart broke a little. Looking at my parents and their one-hundred-and-eighty degree mood swing felt like . . . well, it felt like a betrayal.

“Yep,” Billy confirmed. “And Cletus says you can’t wear a yellow dress. And, for the record, I agree.”

“It’s a deal,” I said, doing my best to infuse my tone with cheerfulness even though I was panicking a little at the request.

Billy didn’t notice my false enthusiasm. Things settled, we said our goodbyes. My parents didn’t seem to notice either, because as soon as I hung up with Billy, they rushed forward to give me hugs.

“I’m so proud of you, Jennifer.” My father kissed my cheek, looking at me like I was something special.

“Oh, Jenny, you should have said something. No wonder you didn’t want to pay special attention to Alan Northumberland, not when you’ve got Billy Winston calling you.” My mother giggled.

Yes. *Giggled.*

I forced myself to form something like a smile with my mouth, stepping away from their fussing. “I’m really tired. I think I’ll go to sleep now.”

“Yes, yes. Go get your beauty rest.” My momma shooed me away, her earlier sadness and disappointment replaced with admiration and pride.

I turned and walked to my bedroom, my stomach still sick, and my heart in fractured pieces. One moment I was treated like a disobedient, disrespectful twelve-year-old, the next a beautiful success.

All because of Billy.

Never because of me.

CHAPTER 10

“I have a deeply hidden and inarticulate desire for something beyond the daily life.”

— Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*

~Jennifer~

The day after receiving my new homework assignment, I changed my nail polish.

Instead of pink I wore burgundy. Dark burgundy. I was at the Piggly Wiggly, picking up a rarely required mid-week crate of bananas, when I spotted the new shade on the end of an aisle. Sourwood leaves turn a dark maroon in the fall all along the Smoky Mountains; the color reminded me of their vibrant last hurrah before winter.

I stared at it. I liked it. I bought it.

That afternoon, after I was finished with my special orders for the next day, I removed the pink polish and replaced it with burgundy.

This small act of rebellion set my heart racing when I realized I would be wearing purple nail polish during dinner. My parents would see it and mother might not like it . . .

But then I remembered how they’d accused me of being a liar the night before, how they’d been proud of me because of Billy Winston’s phone call, how they’d been upset one moment and elated the next.

And my heart hardened.

My father usually cooked dinner. He was very particular about food, how it was prepared and what ingredients were used. He was so particular, he never ate anything I baked, not even my banana cake. I guess one could say he was a health nut.

“Jennifer. Come out and set the table,” he called.

I jumped slightly in my desk chair. I’d been absorbed in a letter from one of my pan pals. Anne-Claire Noel lived in the south of France and—for the last six years—had the most enthralling stories about the local nightlife.

She always started all her letters with *Jennifer, tu ne croiras jamais ce qui est arrivé !* (Translation: Jennifer, you'll never believe what happened!)

And she always ended her letters with *Quand vas-tu faire payer ces gens pour te faire bosser quatre-vingt (80) heures par semaine ? L'esclavage sous contrat est illégal aux Etats-Unis.* (Translation: When are you going to make those people pay you for working eighty hours a week? Indentured servitude is illegal in the USA.)

After so many years of writing letters to my pen pals, I could read and write in French, German, and Japanese. Luckily, my father couldn't read French. Nor could he decipher my Japanese pen pal's letters (written in Japanese) which oftentimes included stories that were even more salacious than Anne-Claire Noel's. He'd tried intercepting a few letters and attempting to translate, but lost interest after a few days.

Thank goodness he didn't know about Google translate; at least, he didn't know about it yet. I dreaded the day he discovered its existence. Just in case, I kept the most scandalous letters hidden in various books on my shelves.

I'd only met Anne-Claire Noel once, at a pageant when I was seven and she was eight, but we'd been writing each other since. She was now in law school and had been urging me to formalize my role with the Donner Bakery since I was fifteen. Her most frequent suggestion was that I establish my own corporation and have my momma pay me as a contractor.

I lived vicariously through her capering and I hoped to visit her . . . one day. Of course, she always brought up the fact that—as soon as I formalized the terms of my employment with the bakery—I'd have a lot more of my own money to spend however I liked, including flying to the south of France if I so desired.

I brought up the idea of paying me to my parents when I was nineteen. The conversation did not go well. My father had been furious, so I never brought it up again. I didn't even like thinking about it, as I knew they would take offense. Besides, I had some money; not a lot and not a bank account. But it wasn't like my parents were stingy with me. I drove a brand new BMW; it had been a gift for my birthday.

But your momma's name is on the title, not yours . . .

I set aside the letter and gave my newly painted nails one more glance, then left my room. Without a word, I set the table while remembering the conversation I'd had with my father when I was nineteen, how upset he'd become when I suggested being paid for working in the bakery.

Come to think on it, my parents seemed to get offended no matter what I did.

I bet they're going to get angry about my nail polish.

Tonight my father was making baked chicken and broccoli with no sauce. I suspected he took perverse pleasure in preparing flavorless—and therefore joyless—food. Therefore, I felt apathetic about his grilled chicken and broccoli, but I'd talked myself into a passionate tizzy about my nail polish by the time dinner was ready and we sat at the table.

I decided if they didn't like my nail polish, then they could just . . . just . . . not like it, that's what. They didn't have to like everything about me.

They aren't me.

I'm me.

I have to live with me, all day, every day.

And I like the red polish!

"Jennifer?"

I shook myself and met my father's questioning gaze.

"Yes, sir?" I asked.

"Are you listening?"

I shook my head, balling my hands into fists under the table, preparing myself for a confrontation. "No. I was thinking."

My parents shared a quick, amused glance, then my father said, "Your momma said you made a butternut squash pie yesterday?"

I nodded, scratching my forehead. "Yes."

"You didn't bring it home?"

Why would I? You would never eat it and momma would get after me about my diet.

Quelling these rebellious thoughts, I endeavored to answer without emotion. "Uh, no. I took it to, uh—" I caught myself before I said *I took it*

to Cletus, instead saying, “I took it to the Winstons, along with the compassion cake.”

My father chewed on his chicken, swallowed the bite with a sip of water, then said, “Well, that was nice of you.”

My momma then talked about the investors and how their visit had gone well. My father then talked about a business trip he had coming up. And then dinner was over.

I cleared my plate, helped with the dishes, then went back to my room in a daze.

Did they not notice my burgundy polish? *Or do they not care?*

I couldn’t be certain which, but what I did know was that I’d made a change and I’d been prepared to defend my choice. Even though the confrontation hadn’t happened, I’d been prepared.

And that made me feel strong.

I didn’t get much sleep that night. My head was too full of ideas, of things I could change. The possibilities were endless.

Because, *they aren’t me.*

I’m me.

I have to live with me, all day, every day.

And I got to choose who—or what—I wanted to be.

Two large special orders were cancelled Wednesday morning and rescheduled for the following week, leaving me with a bounty of both bananas and time.

I’d planned to go home, catch a nap, maybe write a letter to Anne-Claire Noel, or Akiko, my Japanese pen pal. Instead, and without planning to do so, I found myself at the East City mall just outside Knoxville.

“Since I’m here, I might as well go in,” I muttered to the inside of my car, trying to recall how much money I’d brought with me.

If memory served, I had five hundred dollars. I’d been carrying it around in my purse since a special event in Nashville over the summer. An up-and-coming musician had wanted my banana cake for his birthday party. I made

seven cakes in the shape of four-feet-long bananas and served every piece myself.

I guessed he liked my cakes because his manager gave me the five hundred dollars as a tip.

The East City mall was nothing extravagant. On one end was Sears—with a garden center—and on the other end was JC Penney, and in between were mostly national-chain retail stores with a smattering of locally-owned shops.

For example, the Garrison Meat and Cheese Emporium—an independent deli—and Lisa's Crafts and Honey—which, as the title suggested, carried craft supplies and jars of honey—were two of the most prominent local businesses within the mall.

I could have gone to Bell Town mall. It had the fancy stores, but it was another forty-five minutes away. Time was the deciding factor; I didn't have another hour and a half to spend, not if I wanted to make it home in time for dinner, and therefore avoid questions about my afternoon.

Presently, while unbuckling my seatbelt, I caught my reflection in the rearview mirror. I wasn't wearing any makeup. As I locked the car, I glanced down at my hands. My nails were still burgundy.

My parents hadn't said anything, but the absence of makeup had earned me several side-eyes from the bakery staff earlier in the day. I'd ignored these looks, feeling good about my lack of a mask, feeling more like myself than I had in a long time.

These changes, though perhaps subtle, had been my choice. And the thrill that accompanied making my own choices spurred me forward with a spring in my step, across the parking lot and into the department store.

Once inside, however, I faltered. I second-guessed myself, suddenly wondering why I'd come at all. I'd never gone shopping without my mother. I didn't even particularly enjoy shopping. Usually the activity consisted of me trying on clothes my mother picked out, and turning this way and that as she scrutinized the fit. The only clothes I owned not picked out by my mother were several matching pairs of red lace bras and underwear, the overalls I used for gardening, a pair of jeans, and a few T-shirts.

The overalls I'd picked up at a yard sale.

The jeans had been a gift from my grandma Lily.

The T-shirts were mostly souvenirs sent by my pen pals over the years, places they'd visited.

But the underwear had been sent by Anne-Claire Noel for my twenty-first birthday. She'd warned me ahead of time that she was going to send them so I could intercept the package before my father came home from work. *Toutes les femmes ont besoin de lingerie sexy, ça leur donne un secret, she'd written, Une femme avec un secret est mystérieuse et séduisante*

(Translation: All women need sexy underwear; it gives them a secret. A woman with a secret is by nature mysterious and alluring.)

With that thought in mind, I headed straight for the lingerie section and promptly picked up a black lace bra and panty set in my size. Then I made a beeline for the women's section, my head held high in false bravery as I searched through the racks with shaking hands.

But then a miraculous thing happened. After three racks of clothes, my hands stopped shaking. I stopped feeling determined and fell into a rhythm, growing absorbed with the oddly meditative act of assessing clothes. I just simply searched for . . . well, for something *I* liked, something of *my* choice.

Pretty soon, I'd amassed an armful of outfits and sought the dressing rooms. Previous experience shopping with my momma meant I knew where they were and that they were unlocked. I chose the dressing room farthest down the hall and locked the door behind me.

And then, for the first time in my life, I tried on clothes that I'd picked out. At first, the experience was incredibly bizarre and I didn't know what to think of the image before me. It was me, but it wasn't the Banana Cake Queen. The Banana Cake Queen didn't wear a maroon and white flannel tunic with leggings.

She also didn't wear a sapphire-blue sweater dress that hugged her body.

She also didn't wear a white T-shirt and dark skinny jeans.

Nor did she wear a fitted—and awesome—black dress, with a scoop neck, capped sleeves, and a band of black lace at the hemline.

But apparently Jennifer Sylvester did. Because after an hour trying on clothes, I bought myself four new outfits.

And then, drunk on determining my own destiny, I decided I was hungry. Furthermore, I decided I would eat something delicious rather than save my appetite for one of my father's joyless dinners.

Carrying two bags full of new clothes, I walked to the Garrison Meat and Cheese Emporium. I had a soft spot for cheese steak sandwiches and my father's militant food practices meant such artery-clogging delectableness was never allowed in the house.

I walked past the men's section, the cosmetics counter, the shoe department, and into the central concourse. East City mall was the closest mall to Green Valley, so unsurprisingly I recognized several people on my way to the Emporium. Equally unsurprising, no one greeted me. But a few folks gave me odd looks and double takes, as though either my appearance or my presence was confusing.

The Emporium was just off a modest food court in the center of the mall. Garrison Bradley—the owner—had set up three small tables at the front of the shop where customers could eat sandwiches or snack on their popular cheese platters.

I spotted Garrison Jr. behind the meat cutting counter helping a woman I didn't recognize. I plucked a number from the countertop ticket dispenser and waited my turn, counting four other people milling about waiting to be served.

One of these people was Scotia Simmons, local gossip, all around unpleasant person, and good friend of my mother's. I gave Scotia a wide berth, trying to look as natural as possible, not because I was worried she'd talk to me, but because I didn't particularly want her to call my momma and share my whereabouts.

So I loitered next to the fancy condiments and feigned interest in the ingredients while I people-watched. Garrison Jr.—who was now about fifteen—had grown taller since I saw him last. I knew he'd joined the football team because my daddy told us so over dinner. But I also knew he preferred books to sports and was frequently hiding in a corner of the local library devouring fantasy novels.

Scotia was on the phone with her daughter, Darlene—former head cheerleader at my father’s high school, now attending Vanderbilt for graduate school—and was lamenting the fact that Mrs. Beverton, our local choir director, hadn’t been waxing her upper lip since last May.

“She’s grown a full mustache, Darlene.” Scotia *tsked*, speaking louder than was strictly necessary. “The poor woman looks like a weasel. Enough already without the whiskers, bless her heart.”

I pressed my lips together in an unhappy line. Mrs. Beverton was a kind woman and didn’t deserve to have her physical attributes discussed uncharitably in such a public place.

Still, I stared unseeingly at the mustard label and attempted to fade into the scenery. I was in yellow, standing next to the mustard display, and was the Banana Cake Queen. I was basically invisible.

Eventually, all the customers in front of me were served. I was relieved when Scotia walked off toward the checkout, seemingly unaware of my presence, and it was my turn.

“Number thirty-six.” Garrison Jr. updated the number on the display behind him as he called out my ticket.

I stepped forward and motioned to the bread on top of the counter. “Could I have a small cheese steak with extra cheese?”

“Sure thing.” Garrison Jr. retrieved a medium-sized loaf of French bread while I rolled my paper ticket between my fingers and waited.

But before he’d cut the roll in half, Scotia appeared at my side and called to the teenager, “You know, I think I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want this turkey breast. Instead I think I’ll have the honey baked ham. And maybe also some of that Swiss cheese.”

Garrison Jr. turned to Scotia and promptly resembled a deer caught in headlights as he attempted to simultaneously stare at us both.

“Uh. . .”

“Is there a problem?” Scotia placed her package of turkey breast on the counter. “I know you have honey baked ham. I can see it right there.” She pointed to the interior of the glass case.

“It’s just that I was already helping the Banana Cake Queen,” he squeaked, tipping his chin toward me.

Scotia glanced at me and did a double take, turning completely on the second pass. “Jennifer Sylvester.” Her eyes narrowed as they moved over me, assessing. “You’ve gained weight.”

I decided this meant that she thought I looked healthy. “Thank you, Mrs. Simmons.”

She frowned, shaking her head slightly as though I were a simpleton, someone to be pitied. I swallowed down, down, down the familiar pangs of embarrassment and discomfort. Instead, gripping my shopping bags, I lifted my chin. A sudden desire to contradict her expectations gripped me.

“Is your momma here?” she asked, as though I weren’t allowed in public without an adult escort.

I lifted my chin higher. “No, ma’am.”

“Oh.” She appeared to be disappointed by this news, but rallied quickly, dismissing me and turning back to Garrison Jr. “Cut me my ham, young man, while I think about the cheese.”

Garrison Jr., still holding my French bread, didn’t move and neither did I. I didn’t know what to do. On the one hand, it wasn’t that big of a deal. What Scotia Simmons thought or didn’t think of me mattered very little in the long run. I should just let the woman order her ham and cheese.

On the other hand, she’d already had her turn. Now it was my turn. She was a line usurper and a bully. I wasn’t in the mood to be bullied or usurped.

Gathering a deep breath and tightening my grip on my shopping bags, my heart racing a million miles a minute, I prepared to speak up for myself.

I hadn’t quite collected my nerves before Scotia sharpened her tone at Garrison Jr. “What is wrong with you?” she huffed. “I don’t have all day to wait for my honey cured ham and Swiss cheese.”

I licked my lips, mentally arranging and rearranging the words I would say, and opening my mouth to begin. Yet it was no use, the objection caught in my throat and with each attempt I grew increasingly frustrated with myself.

Speak up! Say something! You can do this.

And then unexpectedly, a familiar voice cut into our conversation. “Mrs. Simmons, what’s your number?”

I started because the voice sent an electric shock of surprise racing down my spine and a prickle of excitement beneath my skin.

Both Scotia and I glanced behind us and found Cletus Winston standing just a few feet away. He looked remarkably messy in his white T-shirt and greasy coveralls, the long sleeves tied at his waist. But to me, he also looked breathtakingly gorgeous.

Quite literally, the sight of him stole my breath.

His clean white T-shirt was just faintly tight across his impressive chest, hinting at the bulky power beneath. The short sleeves were pulled slightly tighter over the bulge of his biceps, revealing—not hinting—at his impressive strength. The long blue sleeves of his coveralls tied low on his narrow hips emphasized the flat plane of his stomach. The tips of his long fingers were stained gray from a day’s work at the auto shop. His long hair stuck out and up at odd angles and was adorably askew, like he’d been running his big hands through the curls recently or he’d been caught in a windstorm.

I’d like to run my hands through those curls. The thought caught me unawares and drove both the earlier determination and frustration from my mind, leaving me nonplussed and hot under the collar.

He wasn’t looking at me, thank goodness. His attention was affixed to Scotia Simmons, an affable and innocuous expression on his chaotically attractive features.

But I also detected a glint of exasperation behind his eyes, which—by the way—were hazel today.

He didn’t allow her to respond, continuing, “Because I have number thirty-seven, and I just heard number thirty-six being called.”

She frowned at Cletus, then cast an aggravated glower at me. “I was number thirty-five, but I—”

“Oh. You already had your turn? See now, I was wondering if they’d started using numbers with a fractional component.” Cletus stepped forward and handed Scotia his ticket. “Here, you can have my number thirty-seven. That way you don’t have to draw a new number.”

Scotia blinked at him, then at the ticket he’d placed in her hands.

I blinked at him, too. Because he'd managed to grab a ticket and evade my notice until just now.

Meanwhile, Cletus gave me a deferential head tilt. "Do you mind splitting your sandwich? I was planning on ordering the cheese steak as well."

It took me precisely two seconds to recover. "Oh, no. That's perfectly fine."

He then turned to Garrison Jr. and instructed gently, "Please make Ms. Sylvester's cheese steak an extra-large and wrap the four parts separately."

Garrison Jr., seemingly relieved, set to work with great haste, making our sandwich with the swiftness of a man on an important mission. After a moment, I felt Scotia peering around Cletus, her eyes affixed to my profile. I ignored her. My heart was now racing for a different reason.

Cletus was standing exceptionally close, his big arm brushing against my shoulder. He still made me nervous, but the nervousness was different than before; based in excitement, not fear.

I'm not afraid of him anymore.

The realization dawned suddenly and sent a lovely warmth to my limbs. I wasn't afraid of him at all. Although I recognized his brilliance, cleverness, and cunning, he was officially no longer scary.

Something had shifted between us the other night, when I'd brought the compassion cake and he'd somehow managed to arrange things with Billy. Or maybe something had shifted in me when I'd painted my nails yesterday and walked out of the house this morning with no makeup.

"How's that sister of yours, Cletus? I haven't seen her since she moved back to town," Scotia stated out of the blue, breaking the not-quite tense silence that had fallen.

Cletus gave Scotia a benign smile. "Ashley is quite well, thank you for asking." Then to me, he asked, "Jennifer, did you want potato chips or potato salad with lunch?"

"Um—"

"She should eat a green salad," Scotia put in, her stare moving over me with displeasure. "I know her momma is worried about her weight."

Heat climbed up my cheeks and I grit my teeth, my eyes falling to the floor. I hated that my appearance was up for public comment, not just on social media—which was one of the main reasons I hated the million or so followers there—but also with my mother’s friends.

Undaunted, Cletus cut in good naturedly, “Speaking of weight worries, Ms. Simmons, you might want to stick with the turkey breast and skip the ham and cheese.” Then he added on a whisper, as though he were telling her a secret, “Turkey has less calories per serving, and every little bit helps.”

Scotia narrowed her eyes on him, her mouth pinching, and asked with an air of intense irritation, “Is Ashley still living out of wedlock with that Drew Runous? I wonder how your momma would feel about her only daughter living unmarried, with that man in sin, bless her heart.”

Something flashed behind Cletus’s gaze as he glared at Scotia Simmons, something sinister. Meanwhile, Garrison Jr. placed the sandwich on the counter, his eyes wide as they bounced between the three of us. He backed away from our trio like one backs away from a rattlesnake.

Cletus collected our sandwich, the flash of sinister now completely hidden.

He turned from the counter, placed his hand on the small of my back, and responded to her rude question with an air of thoughtfulness. “Now that I think on it, I’m not surprised you haven’t seen Ashley since she returned. We do our best to shield her from ignorant, judgmental folks. After all, we want her to stay in town, don’t we?”

Not waiting for the woman to respond, he guided me forward. I moved where he led, too surprised by the audacity of his insult to say anything at all. He stopped us when we were across the store.

Pulling a twenty from his pocket, he handed it to Mrs. Bradley at the register and called back to Mrs. Simmons loud enough for everyone to hear, “Oh, yeah. Before I forget, Mrs. Simmons, Beau wanted to make sure your daughter Darlene knew he found her missing underwear in his GTO last week. I know she was fretting over the loss. Please let her know he’s just going to mail them back this time instead of swinging by the house.”

Mrs. Simmons turned a horrified shade of white and the deli fell silent.

Cletus gave me a small, conspiratorial smile, then to a gaping Mrs. Bradley he said with a wink, “Keep the change.”

CHAPTER 11

*“The human heart has hidden treasures, In secret kept, in silence sealed;
The thoughts, the hopes, the dreams, the pleasures, Whose charms were
broken if revealed.”*

— Charlotte Brontë

~Jennifer~

“**Why’d you thank** that horrible woman?” Cletus asked, unwrapping his sandwich. We were presently sitting at one of the public picnic tables just off old Cooper Road Trail. It was warm for October. I took advantage of the mild weather, opting to leave my yellow cardigan in my car.

“Who? You mean Scotia Simmons?” I asked, wiping my fingers on a napkin.

“Yep.” Cletus nodded, then took a big bite of his cheese steak.

“Did I thank her?” I tried to recall.

After exiting the mall to the parking lot, he’d pointed to his car—a Buick I didn’t recognize—and told me to follow him. He’d held my sandwich hostage as he’d strolled away. Reasoning I had no choice if I wanted to eat a dinner with personality, I conceded and followed Cletus and his new-to-me Buick up the mountain road to the trail turn off.

We parked. He waited for me to exit my car, walked us to a picnic table set right next to the mountain stream, and there we were.

“You did thank her,” he answered after he swallowed his bite. “She said something about you gaining weight and you said, ‘Thank you.’”

“Oh. That.” I shrugged. “She said I’d gained weight so I assumed she meant I was looking healthy.”

Cletus raised an eyebrow at this, staring at me as though I’d lost my mind. “Why would you do that? Clearly she was waving her obloquious flag.”

“What does *obloquious* mean?”

“It means she’s a hateful bitch.”

I started and my eyes widened at this, because I couldn't remember him ever using such strong language before. And yet, some part of me felt relieved and grateful for his use of the words. I felt oddly vindicated and . . . supported. Like he was on my side.

Even so, I didn't remark on his word choice, instead explaining my *modus operandi*. "I find that it makes everything nicer for me if I turn insults into compliments."

He lowered his sandwich to the table. "You do this often?"

"Yes. All the time."

"How often? Once a month?"

"No. Every day, usually," I answered easily and honestly.

But then as he continued to stare at me, his brow furrowed and stern, I squirmed a tad under the weight of his glare. I realized abruptly how that sounded.

But that can't be true. I'm not insulted daily.

. . . am I?

"Who is insulting you daily?"

I dropped my eyes to my sandwich, attempting to conduct a mental tally of the last month.

Yesterday morning, Momma said I was having "an ugly day." The day before, my father said I had more hair than sense. The day before that, my father asked if my picture was next to the word stupid in the dictionary.

I counted back two weeks and, sure enough, each day included at least one or two episodes of my mother criticizing my appearance or my father commenting on my lack of brains. I frowned at my discovery, because it was a discovery, and attempted to parse through the suddenly less-than-ideal picture of my home life.

Was this actually my reality?

The more I thought about it, the more I realized it was. My parents spent a lot of time telling me how unlikeable I was. *Why would they do that?*

I couldn't admit the truth to Cletus, because the truth made me pathetic, so I waved away his glower and forced a cheerful grin. "No one. Sorry. That came out wrong. I misspoke. No one is insulting me daily."

My neck felt hot and itchy. I thought about taking another bite of my sandwich but decided against it, instead glancing out over the water to the cliff on the other side.

“Is it your daddy?”

I shook my head, even though—looking back now—my father was the main reason I’d developed this habit. “Don’t worry about it. I misspoke.”

“I don’t think you did, Jennifer. Is it your momma?” His voice softened and that only made me feel worse, like something pitiful.

I set my jaw and cleared my throat, standing from the table and walking to the edge of the stream.

“Jenn?” he called, pushing the issue.

“Let’s talk about something else,” I said without turning around.

He was silent for a beat and I felt his eyes on my back. For some reason I was precariously close to crying. But that was silly. I was silly. I wasn’t hurt. I was fine.

And I was immensely relieved when Cletus heaved an exaggerated sigh and asked irritably, “What do you want to talk about?”

Without thinking too much about it, I responded, “If you could be anywhere right now, where would you be?”

“Alaska,” he said immediately, drawing my attention back to his handsome face. He’d also abandoned his food and was in the process of walking over to me.

“Alaska? What’s in Alaska?”

He crossed his arms and stopped just three feet from where I stood, facing me. “The sky.”

“We have sky here, too.” I motioned to the blue expanse above our heads. “A whole stretch of it, right in front of you.”

“Yeah, but the sky in Alaska is bigger, closer,” he said with an edge of impatience; I got the sense he didn’t like my insistence that we change the subject. “Like the heavens are sitting on your doorstep, and going for a stroll among the clouds is entirely plausible, if you felt so inclined.”

Despite the hint of displeasure in his tone, his description of Alaska had me smiling. “I had no idea you liked the sky so much.”

“I do. I do like the sky. I like looking up and being surprised by what I see. It doesn’t happen too often, but when it does . . .” he paused, breathing out, his gaze moving over my face, “when it does I’m usually in Alaska.”

“The sky here isn’t surprising?” I thought about what might be meant by a surprising sky. I was usually inside all day, working at the bakery, and likely missed any sky-related events that might qualify as surprising.

“Not usually. Sure, it’s pretty.” He shrugged. “But pretty is boring. Give me the startling shades of an Alaskan dusk over the prosaic prettiness of a Tennessee sunset. That’s what I like.”

His description had me grinning wider and taking a step closer to him; I liked how his face lit up as he spoke about the Alaskan sky. “What do you mean, *startling*?” Really, I just wanted him to keep talking.

Cletus tilted his head back and forth in a considering manner. “In the spring, the sunsets are red and orange. But in the fall, they’re dark purple with streaks of lavender and indigo, the most beautiful color I’ve ever . . .” Cletus’s frown was subtle as he trailed off, and his eyes grew distant, like he was silently debating weighty matters.

Suddenly, he announced, “Your eyes aren’t purple. They’re blue. Dark blue.”

I squinted then, blinked rapidly, feeling suddenly self-conscious of my eyeballs and stumbled back a step. “I know that,” I stammered. “They just look purple sometimes.”

Cletus charged forward and secured my chin with his fingers, stepping close and holding me still. He examined my irises. “They’re reflective.”

“Pardon?” I’m sure I now resembled a startled animal.

“They reflect the opposite color that surrounds them. You wear green or yellow, they’re purple. But if you wear orange, they probably appear sky blue.”

I nodded lightly, careful to hold his gaze, not wanting him to stop touching me, not wanting to miss the opportunity to look at him up close. Or maybe I just wanted to be close to him. Either way, I liked the way his nearness made my tummy flutter and my chest feel tight.

“Something like that.” My voice cracked; I cleared my throat silently. “But if I wear black or white—”

“Then they’re true. Then they stop telling falsehoods.” His stare refocused, probed deeper, moving beyond the surface color of my irises to the person inside.

The full weight of Cletus’s piercing gaze, especially this close, was . . . unsettling. I flinched, just a little, but held my ground. Even so, a betraying blush rose to my cheeks. His eyes skimmed over my face; I saw him take note of my high color, the side of his mouth hitching in a subtle, almost imperceptible movement.

“Why’s your face so red?” he whispered, his eyes now hooded as they moved to my mouth.

“It’s hot out here,” I croaked, willing my legs to hold my weight.

At least, I was hot.

“Am I making you nervous?” His voice lowered an octave.

“Yes,” I answered with complete honesty.

His grin hitched higher as his fingers released my chin. Cletus’s thumb skimmed lightly down my neck in a purposeful slide, making me swallow reflexively, and leaving a trail of goosebumps behind. But when he moved completely away and back to the picnic table, I felt the loss of him. I felt dizzy with it. And the dizziness was disorienting.

“I told you, you’re going to have to stop being scared of me sooner or later.” Cletus picked up his sandwich again, took a big bite, then spoke around the food, “Eee em nomon ealk anesis redklos.”

I narrowed my eyes, the acute dizziness and lingering goosebumps easing as I tried to decipher his gibberish. “What did you say?”

He shook his head, chewed, swallowed, then said, “I’m not scary, I’m ridiculous.”

I scoffed, moving back to the table and sitting across from him. “You are many things, Cletus Winston, but nothing about you is ridiculous.”

“Really?” He gave me a searching look, the side of his mouth lifting. “What about my hair?”

Unbidden, my attention moved to his hair. His crazy, long, clean but untamed hair.

I love your hair. “What about your hair?”

“My hair is ridiculous. It’s been misbehaving since birth.”

That made me laugh and I grinned at him, at the picture of baby Cletus with disobedient hair. I imagined his hair wasn’t the only thing about him that was naughty.

“It’s true,” he said, as though my laughter contradicted his earlier statement. “I’m the only one of my siblings to have inherited Grandmother Oliver’s curls as well as her distichiasis.”

“Distichiasis? What’s that?”

“It’s a genetic mutation that causes a double row of eyelashes.” He pointed to his eyes and leaned forward. I followed his lead and leaned across the table, studying his eyelashes. Sure enough, he had a second row.

“That’s amazing. I’ve never heard of that before.” It certainly explained the thickness.

He took a small bite of food, nodding, chewing, then swallowing before adding, “Ashley and Billy also have distichiasis, but not the curly hair. And I’m the only one who had blond hair when I was little.”

I studied him, thinking about this new information. I knew Cletus when he was younger, but—since he was some years older than me—obviously not as a little kid.

“Blond, thick, curly hair and double eyelashes must’ve given you no end of trouble growing up.”

Cletus sighed, nodding somberly. “Yes. When I was a real little kid—two and three—most people thought I was a girl. My momma didn’t do much to discourage the assumption. She’d wanted a girl badly and I’d had the misfortune of being born before Ashley arrived.”

“What happened after Ashley arrived?”

“Not much changed, though Momma did correct the misassumptions with more fervor. Curly hair attracts things, like gum and knots. But long, blond, curly hair and thick eyelashes on a boy attracts assholes.” Cletus’s demeanor changed, his voice grew deeper, rougher, as though he were thinking about a memory in particular.

My attention snagged on his beard and I asked without thinking, “Is that why you grew a beard? So people wouldn’t mistake you for a girl?”

Cletus was quiet, but when I lifted my eyes back to his, they were cloudy and introspective, as though he were giving the matter serious thought.

Finally, he shook his head. “No. I grew a beard because no one was around to teach us boys how to shave.”

. . . *gah*.

I barely resisted the urge to stand, walk to his side of the table, and pull him into a hug. Barely. Not because he sounded sad; he didn’t sound sad, he sounded matter-of-fact. And that made the statement even worse.

His gaze refocused on mine and he gave me a knowing smile, as though he could read my thoughts. “Don’t feel bad for me. I had plenty growing up. Our grandmother lived with us until she died, and she more than made up for any deficits left by Darrell Winston. She was from the old school, where bacon fat was used for everything from baking biscuits to making soap.”

“I don’t think I remember your grandmother.”

“You wouldn’t. I believe you were only six or so when she passed.” His eyes lost focus again, moving over my shoulder. “She grew up dirt poor, so she was the queen of clever when it came to saving and reusing materials. She used to describe her childhood thusly, ‘I was so poor, I couldn’t even pay attention.’”

I smirked at that. “I thought your grandparents had money?”

“Oh, my grandfather did. But even though my grandfather Oliver—her husband—came from money and made a good living, she never could abide wasting. The woman looked at trash and saw its potential as something useful. She made a moonshine still from reclaimed rubber hoses, two oversized mufflers, and a stone furnace. It still lives in our detached garage.”

“She made a moonshine still?” I was now relaxed. And I was hungry again. I picked up my sandwich.

“Yep. I use it once a year around Christmas time.” His eyes moved over me; as though gauging my interest. He must’ve seen that I found the topic fascinating because he continued. “But that’s not all. Her castoff dresses, those that were threadbare, live a second life as quilts. She made old

curtains into napkins, plastic milk cartons became toy plastic shovels, and she once turned a 420 tractor tire into a sand-table for us kids.”

“Ha! What a good idea.”

“She also fixed up automobiles and, honestly, is the person most responsible for teaching us how to change oil and tires, getting us interested in cars.”

“Maybe you inherited your mechanical aptitude and engineering genes from her,” I suggested between bites.

“Probably.” He nodded, as though he found my statement had merit. “‘But sometimes,’ she’d say, ‘trash is just trash and should be left at the side of the road.’ She usually said this whenever my father was around.” His eyes dropped and he frowned at his food, his voice growing distant. “She despised my father, but she never raised her voice. She used to tell me, ‘Being quiet can be louder than shouting.’”

I thought about that, thought about the statement in reference to my own perpetual silence.

Is my silence loud?

I didn’t think so. If anything, my silence perpetuated my problems. It fueled my unhappiness.

Before I could think too much on the words, he added, “Darrell called her the garbage lady and ridiculed her recycling. He couldn’t understand why a woman with so much money didn’t just buy everything new.”

“What did she say?”

Cletus’s gaze returned to mine and his smile was soft and sad with some memory. “Her answer was always the same: ‘Old things have soul.’ Then to me she’d add on a whisper, ‘And young things have spirit.’”

The saying, so simple and succinct, struck a chord. My stare fell to the picnic table and I wondered if his grandmother’s words of wisdom could be applied to me.

Did I have spirit?

In the silence that followed, while Cletus seemed content to finish his food, lost to his own thoughts, a melancholy settled over me. I didn’t feel particularly spirited. Nor did I feel soulful.

I felt hushed. I felt smothered. I felt suppressed and . . . ignored. Not just by my parents and their expectations, but also by me. I'd been ignoring myself. I'd been ignoring my own wishes and hopes.

So instead, I decided to feel motivated, determined, ready, and . . . excited.

I was excited, ready to find my spirit.

Burgundy nail polish on day one and they didn't bat an eye.

No makeup on day two and my father did a double take, but said nothing.

Wearing my hair in a bun on day three earned me several disapproving looks from my mother, but no reprimand.

However, the black dress I wore on day four for my fake date with Billy—

“What do you think you're wearing?” my mother asked from the doorway to my room, her hands on her hips, her brow pulled together in a severe frown.

I glanced at myself in the mirror. I still liked the black dress with the scoop neck, capped sleeves, and lace band around the hem. I especially liked it with my hair pulled back, like it was now, and the black pointy heels I'd bought for the occasion yesterday after work.

“It's a dress,” I said with a shrug, sitting on the edge of my bed and pulling on my new shoes.

I didn't know how it was possible, but her frown intensified. “First that awful nail polish and now this? It's indecent.”

I wrinkled my nose at her; the spike of irritation I felt at her words meant I had to force calm into my voice. “Because it's black?”

She huffed. “I do not need to explain myself. You will not wear that. You will wear the dress I laid out for you. Scotia called me yesterday, said she saw you at the mall. I guess now I know why you were there.”

I glanced at the yellow dress she'd placed on my bed. The three-quarter length sleeves, the high collar, the wide skirt that fell to my calf.

I wasn't going to wear it. And if she didn't like it then, well, that was just too damn bad.

I lifted my eyes to my mother, met her frown with one of my own. I wasn't immune to her disappointment. The look she was giving me

smarted, made my heart twinge with guilt, made my hands a little sweaty. But, as I realized yesterday, these looks were a daily occurrence, no matter what I did. I could never satisfy her and I was no longer satisfied with always doing as she liked. It was just a dress. But it was my dress, and it wasn't indecent. It was pretty and I liked it and there was no reason—*no reason at all*—for me to change.

I shook my head and balled my hands into fists on my lap. “No, Momma. I'm not going to wear a yellow dress.”

She huffed again. “Jennifer Anne Sylvester, you are trying my patience. I do not like being spoken to—”

“Now, Diane, leave her alone.” My father's voice sounded from down the hall and I heard his footsteps approach. Soon he was also in the doorway. He gave me a quick once-over and nodded. “She looks really good. Hopefully he'll be concentrating on the way she looks so she doesn't have to talk so much.”

I swallowed the rising bitterness at my father's implied insult, determined to ignore it rather than pretending it was a compliment.

My mother's mouth opened and her eyes bugged out. But she didn't get a chance to speak because the doorbell rang, announcing Billy's arrival.

I felt a little flutter of excitement, but it wasn't because of Billy or the date. I didn't fancy Billy *that way*, but I did hope we could be friends. The flutter was entirely because of the dress. I was going to walk out of the house wearing this black dress, these black shoes, and go to the jam session. I might've been a tad overdressed for the jam session and community center, but not for a dinner date with the town's most eligible bachelor. It felt as though it was my first time in public as myself.

And, yeah, I was damn excited.

Before my mother recovered, I grabbed my shawl, slipped past my parents, and strolled down the hall to the front door. I heard their hushed voices behind me; my mother's was furious, my father's was exasperated.

I ignored them and opened the door.

Billy Winston—in all his tall, dark, and handsome glory—turned; a polite smile affixed to his features, and then he promptly gaped.

“Jenn?” he asked, like he didn't recognize me.

I grinned, feeling a little self-conscious, but still excited. “Hi.”

His eyes moved down, then up, then down again. “You look—”

“Billy Winston, such a pleasure.” My momma appeared next to me, a brittle smile on her face. “Why don’t you come in for a bit?”

My father appeared a moment later, reaching forward to shake Billy’s hand. In the next moment he pushed me out the door.

“No, no. We don’t want to keep you. You kids should get going.”

“But—” My mother moved to reach for my hand; my father blocked the attempt by placing his arm over her shoulders and holding her in place.

“Go on. Have fun. See you later.” He waved, then shut the door.

Billy stared at the door for a moment, then focused his eyes on me. I shrugged. He appeared to be either bewildered, or amused, or both. But he recovered quickly.

Turning toward his car, he offered me his arm and a small, genuine smile. “Shall we?”

I slipped my hand in the crook of his elbow and returned his grin. “We shall.”

“**So Cletus told** me I needed to change one thing every day. He wasn’t specific about what I should change, just that I should decide on the one thing myself.”

Billy nodded.

I continued. “At first I didn’t see the purpose. Do you know? Cletus was right. Something as trivial as painting my nails a different color made me feel like I could do anything I set my mind to.”

Billy smiled.

I continued. “Cletus also said—”

Billy cleared his throat. “Do you go to the jam session much? I think I’ve only seen you here a handful of times.”

“I don’t, actually. I’d like to, but Saturdays are busy. I’m usually making special orders on Friday night. I’ve heard you sing a few times, though. You should do it more often, you have such a nice voice.”

Billy smiled again, his eyes sliding to me, then away. “Thank you.”

“And Cletus is amazing on the banjo. Last year he did a folksy version of “Thriller” during Halloween. It was spectacular.”

Billy sighed.

Conversation was surprisingly easy with Billy Winston, once I stopped being afraid of saying the wrong thing. Instead of worrying, I just said whatever I wanted. He wasn’t a big talker, other than asking me questions, so I filled the silence. Sometimes what I said made him laugh. Sometimes it made him nod. Sometimes it made him cough.

But usually whatever I said made him smile. And that was nice. He was nice.

He pulled his truck into the community center lot and it was clear the jam session was already in full swing. The evening was chilly, so folks were dressed in coats.

I pulled my shawl over my shoulders and Billy opened my door, helping me from the car. I slipped my fingers back into the crook of his elbow while trying to suppress a new, and more powerful, flutter of excitement as we approached the community center.

I wondered if Cletus would be there. I wondered what he would think of my dress, and my hair in a bun, and my purposefully minimal makeup, and my nail polish. Even though I was nervous, I grinned at the thought.

“What are you smiling about?” Billy asked, giving me the side-eye.

“I’m nervous,” I answered honestly, feeling breathless, then asked before I could catch myself, “Do you think Cletus is here?”

Billy’s mouth tugged to the side and he studied my face. “I’m sure he is. Why?”

“I wonder what he’ll think of my dress,” I admitted excitedly.

He chuckled and shook his head.

“What? What is it?” I pressed, searching his profile for a sign as to why he was laughing.

He pulled us to a stop and faced me. “Since this is a practice date, do you want me to give you a tip?”

I nodded eagerly. “Yes, please. All tips are welcome.”

“Okay. Here goes.” He gathered a large breath, like he was bracing himself, and said, “When you’re on a date with a man, it’s probably best not to bring up a different man.”

My lips parted as my face fell. “I’m sorry. I keep talking about your brother.”

“No, no. It’s fine.” He reached for my hand and squeezed it. “This is a practice, no need to apologize. I’m not upset. But if this were a real date, you bringing up Cletus and wondering what he’s going to think of your dress would definitely rub me the wrong way. If I’m on a date, I want that woman to be thinking only of me. Does that make sense?”

I nodded, because it did make sense. “Just like, I probably wouldn’t like it—if this were a real date—if you kept bringing up other women.”

“That’s right.” He moved my hand back to his arm. “You’ll want to keep the conversation about the two of you.”

I considered things as we walked. “Thank you, Billy.”

“For what?” He opened the double door for me, placing his hand on the small of my back to usher me inside. The entryway was full of people, but I hardly noticed them.

“Thanks for doing this, and for the tip. Thanks for sacrificing your Friday night.”

Billy covered my fingers on his arm with his hand. “It’s not a sacrifice, Jennifer.”

“Well, it can’t be pleasant.”

He grinned again and gave me an incredulous look.

“What? What did I do this time? Do you have more tips?” I needed to know. I hoped he filled the whole night with tips, so I would be an expert when the time came for a real date.

Billy’s grin faded as his piercing blue eyes moved over my face. If he’d done this just last week I think I would’ve fainted on the spot, mortified and terrified and assured of my own failure.

But so much had changed in a week. I wasn’t afraid of him anymore. I was changing, becoming braver. So I met his glacial eyes straight on and lifted my eyebrows encouragingly.

“You can tell me, whatever it is,” I whispered earnestly, stepping closer. “Like I said, all tips are welcome.”

Finally, he said, “You have no idea how gorgeous you are, do you?”

I gaped at him, because that was not what I’d expected him to say.

But before I could recover, a stern voice to my left interjected. “She has no idea whatsoever.”

I turned and found Cletus standing at my shoulder. Startled, I stumbled a step to the side so I could see him better. What I found surprised me.

His jaw was clenched.

His mouth was curved into a frown.

And Cletus’s eyes, a dangerous and fiery blue, were narrowed on his brother.

CHAPTER 12

“When a thing is funny, search it carefully for a hidden truth.”

— George Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*

~Cletus~

“**Cletus.**” Billy bestowed upon me a single head nod. His typically taciturn eyes were alight with some mischief. I didn’t miss how he slid his arm around Jennifer’s waist and brought her close to his side. I didn’t miss it and I didn’t like it.

What is he up to?

“Billy.” I also noticed how he’d splayed his hand on her hip. I didn’t like that either. Gradually, I brought my eyes back to his, catching the tail end of a smirk. I increased the intensity of my eye squint.

“Why aren’t you playing?” Billy asked, all nice and easy. Smooth even.

I knew my brother well enough to know he was fighting a smile. But he didn’t smile. Billy didn’t do anything he didn’t want to do, a fact I should have remembered *before* I’d tricked him into a date with Jenn.

Rookie mistake. You should have sent in Beau. I was disappointed with myself.

Jennifer cleared her throat, drawing my attention to her. She was confused, although bewildered might have been a better word. Beneath the bewilderment, she was looking at me with anticipatory hope.

“Hi, Cletus,” she said, her voice soft and friendly and expectant. “How are you?”

I studied her, my eyes darting over her person in a quick assessment. She’d changed. It had only been two days since I’d seen her last, since our surprising picnic at Cooper Road Trail. But she’d taken her homework very seriously. Successfully leaving her house in that dress couldn’t have been easy. I was proud of her and wanted to tell her so.

But I was also irritated with my brother and seeing red because of it.

Even before Billy arrived, Jennifer Sylvester on his arm in her surprising dress and a new hair style, the day had not been an enjoyable one.

Beau had lost his temper, again. Shelly had tried to give him pointers on a tricky engine rebuild. She didn't seem the least bit flustered by his outburst, which only served to irritate him further. He'd left in a snit.

Then, I'd tried to make taffy. It wasn't the first time I'd tried to make taffy, and it wouldn't be the last. I never succeeded, but I was determined.

Next, upon arriving to the jam session, one of my banjo strings had broken. Not the end of the world, certainly. But then, as I was restringing it, another string broke.

And now I'd just overheard my older brother—who was supposed to be permanently embroiled in a sweeping, tragic, and epic love story with Claire McClure—confusing my Jenn and raising her hopes.

My Jenn.

Not Billy's Jenn.

Mine.

"Jennifer Sylvester," I said, digging deep and finding the wherewithal to be a gentleman. I gave her a deferential head nod and a taut smile. "How are you this fine evening?"

Her pretty eyes dimmed by degrees even as her smile increased. It looked fake, and that made my own smile slip.

"Fine. Thank you," she said, her attention dropping to the floor.

She was twisting her fingers. She was nervous.

Dammit, Billy. You had one job. One. Job.

I moved my glare to my brother. "May I have a word?"

"Now?" he asked, looking and sounding almost delighted. Of note, delighted for Billy was imperturbably stoic for everyone else.

"Yes. Now." I bared my teeth in a grin.

Billy's eyes moved between mine and I cursed his fastidious grooming. He'd taken extra care with the beard trimmer this afternoon. He also smelled like a profligate, cologne, and unrequited infatuation.

My older brother turned and whispered something into Jennifer's ear. I stiffened, barely restraining the urge to grab him by his shirt collar and yank

him down the hall.

But I didn't. Instead I made a list of all his most treasured possessions for . . . reasons.

She nodded and sent him a genuine, albeit small smile. Jennifer turned her smile to me but didn't raise her eyes higher than my neck.

"I'll go say hi to the sheriff. I think I see him at the donations table with Judge Payton." Jennifer tugged her shawl tighter around her shoulders and set off. I turned my head to watch her go. I wanted to ensure she made it through the crowd without incident.

Then my eyes dropped to her shape, because—in this dress—her shape was on display. The indent of her waist was sharp, and the generous curve of her backside tapered to slim thighs and shapely calves. I couldn't see her shoulders because she donned the shawl. The interesting black dress she wore had a band of black lace that began at the knee and ended an inch below it.

"Cletus?"

"Hmm?"

Nothing was provocative about the dress . . . and yet, *everything* was provocative about the dress.

"Cletus."

"Yeah?"

It reminded me of lingerie, but I couldn't quite figure out why.

"Cletus, stop staring at my date."

I slid my eyes to Billy, who'd stepped next to me and stood at my shoulder. He appeared to be amused. I scowled at him, because what he'd just said earned a scowl.

"Come with me." I tilted my head toward the blues room. The musicians were currently on break. Most of the audience had removed themselves to other places, leaving a sparse collection of stragglers and lonely instruments at the front.

I walked him to the far corner, turned on him, crossed my arms, and demanded, "What do you think you're doing?"

Billy lifted his left eyebrow at me, his eyes glowing with an unholy light, but otherwise his expression remained irritatingly enigmatic. He was the only one of my siblings I had trouble reading.

“I’m on a date.”

“No. Wrong answer. You’re not on a date.”

The smirk was back.

I ignored it.

“You had one job, Billy. One job.”

“Oh yeah? What was it again?”

I lowered my voice and made sure no one was eavesdropping before continuing. “Help Jennifer. Give her some confidence. Show her a good time.”

He scratched the back of his neck, still smirking. “Last time I checked, before you dragged me over here, we were doing just that.”

“Then why is she so nervous? Why is she doing that twisting thing with her fingers and giving me fake smiles?”

Billy’s smirk morphed into a grin, and he opened his mouth as though he was going to respond, but then stopped himself. His eyes darted between mine and he lowered his chin. He shook his head.

“Cletus,” he started, exhaled a gruff laugh, then returned his eyes to mine, his expression once again unreadable. “Jennifer is a sweet girl. But I’m not interested in Jennifer. And you know that. And that’s why you asked me for help.”

I examined my brother, knowing he was telling the truth, but unable to reconcile the truth with what I’d just witnessed. “Then don’t lead her on, Billy. Don’t call her gorgeous.”

“You don’t think she’s gorgeous?”

“Of course I think she’s gorgeous. I’m not blind, am I?”

“I don’t know, are you?” he asked, a ghost of a smirk behind his eyes.

I grunted and checked my watch. I was missing the bluegrass session. If I didn’t hurry, it would be over and I’d lose my chance to jam. I had the talent show in Nashville with Claire soon and improvising with the group today was important.

“Just promise me you’ll be nice to her.” I held up a warning finger in front of his face. “You be nice. This is a fake date and don’t let her forget it. I can’t help her if she’s mooning after your pedantically manicured beard-line and hipster hair.”

“She’s not mooning after *me*, Cletus,” he said flatly.

“Let’s keep it that way.” I administered a menacing eyebrow arch, preparing to leave, but then I remembered I needed to speak with Billy about another subject. “By the way, I have the entertainment for Jethro’s bachelor party all lined up.”

Billy’s expression didn’t change. He blinked at me once and made a sound of dissatisfaction in the back of his throat. “I can’t believe I agreed to your plan for the party. Can’t we just go with the original set-up: Beau’s scavenger hunt, drink whiskey, and burn stuff?”

“You’ll thank me later. And I’ll cherish the photos for the rest of our lives.” I turned, calling over my shoulder. “And, after this, no more dates with Jenn. Your call to service is over. I’ll take it from here.”

I didn’t wait to see if he would follow, but I kept my pace at a leisurely stroll. Though I was meandering back to Jennifer, I meandered with purpose. I felt the urge to reassure her. I also felt the urge to set my eyes on her and confirm Billy hadn’t done too much damage with his smooth compliments.

I saw the sheriff standing behind the donations table. A crowd blocked my view of the actual table, but the sheriff was a tall man, easy to spot. As I wove my way through the masses I decided it would be best to drive her home now. Or maybe I could take her to The Front Porch for steak and we could strategize. Billy wouldn’t mind.

But then I stopped short.

Jennifer was there, standing next to the sheriff right where she said she’d be. On her other side was a hovering Jackson James. He was talking at her. And smiling down at her. And standing too close.

Red alert!

My blood pressure spiked and my meander morphed into a power-walk.

“ . . . you should come more often.” Jackson finished his stupid sentence, his eyes lowering to her chest like a cheeseball, then back up to her eyes.

“Jenn,” I said very loudly, sidestepping Jackson and inserting myself between the two of them. “There you are. I’ve been looking for you.”

“Have you?” she asked, her sweet face tipped back and her impossibly pretty eyes arresting mine.

“Yes. I have,” I said, then promptly forgot what I was going to say next. I sensed a hovering presence behind me so I glanced over my shoulder at Jackson—the hoverer—and frowned impatiently. “Do you mind? Give a man some space.”

“That’s real funny, Cletus,” he said, not sounding amused. “Because I was just—”

“Do you have any—uh—taffy?” I asked Jennifer, not wanting to hear Jackson’s complaining. If he was going to complain, I decided it was best to pretend he was a ghost. Taffy was the first thing to pop into my mind.

“Taffy?” Her dark eyebrows drew together; I wondered if her real hair color would be the same dark shade as her eyebrows. I hoped so.

“Yes. Taffy,” I said gently, and smiled when she smiled and shrugged. “I like to live dangerously.”

She opened her mouth, just about to ask me something and I couldn’t wait to find out what, when Jackson cut in impatiently. “By eating taffy?”

“Yep,” I turned just my head and gave him my profile. “It puts my dental fillings in grave peril.”

Jennifer laughed. I smiled at the sound, allowing myself the luxury of looking into her eyes. She had an appealing laugh. And a great smile.

“Are you ready?” Billy—in all his handsomely smooth, well-maintained glory—sidled up to Jennifer and wrapped his arm around her waist. “We should head out if we’re going to dinner.”

She turned surprised eyes to my brother, then to me, then to Jackson. I sidestepped, cutting off Jenn’s view of the latter and forgave Billy just a little for putting his hands on her. “That’s right. You two kids go get that steak. Have fun.”

I tried to herd them forward. Unfortunately, Billy was a gentleman and took the time to shake hands with Sheriff James and Judge Payton before moving off. Meanwhile, I maintained my defensive position, blocking

Jackson from seeing or following them, until Billy's tall head was out of sight.

"Dammit, Cletus." Jackson, growing exasperated, shoved me to the side and craned his neck, presumably searching the crowd for Billy and Jennifer. "What is wrong with you?"

"Was I in your way?" I squinted at him and smiled, deciding that leprosy via armadillo infection was definitely in his future.

When I awoke on Saturday morning I had a hankering for baked goods. Unless Duane was making his blueberry hotcakes, my breakfast consisted of three hard-boiled eggs, an avocado, a grapefruit, and a half liter of water. I saved my special coffee for after breakfast.

Today I didn't want eggs. I wanted . . . a muffin. Or whatever.

Though I'd stayed up the previous night until Billy arrived home, he was irritatingly circumspect with details. I swear, getting information out of him sometimes was harder than getting blood out of a turnip.

I showered quickly, intent on making it to Donner's Bakery for whatever Jenn had cooking, and ask her directly how the date had gone, i.e. did I need to maim Billy? Or had he been a gentleman? Or, even if he'd been a gentleman, did I still need to maim him?

After toweling dry, I wiped the foggy mirror and grabbed my comb. But I halted mid-brush stroke when I caught sight of my reflection.

My hair had grown long, falling over my forehead and ears, reaching the back of my neck. It looked messy—well, messier than usual—and it was past time for a trim. Spur of the moment, I decided I'd stop by the barber on the way to the bakery and have my hair seen to.

While I was pulling on a pair of dress pants and the dark gray shirt Sienna had bought me for my birthday, Beau popped his head in my room.

"Hey, Cletus. I was thinking about—" He'd stopped speaking so suddenly, I looked at him. He was staring at me like I'd grown rooster feathers.

"What?" I glanced at my outfit then back to his face.

"Today isn't Sunday," he said, his eyes on my shirt.

"I know that."

“Then why’re you dressed up?”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” Beau walked all the way into my room and stood behind me. We were both reflected in the closet mirror. “Who are you going to see?”

I shrugged. “No one.”

“Is it Shelly?” he asked suddenly, scowling. “Are you two involved?”

My answering frown was immediate, because I’d hadn’t spent much time thinking about Shelly; I needed to add her to my to-do list. “I’m not involved with Shelly. At least, not yet.”

Beau stiffened and he crossed his arms. “What does that mean?”

“It means, eventually, I’ll see to her. She and I are suited.”

His eyes dropped to where I was fastening the dark gray buttons over my black undershirt and he was quiet while I finished up.

I walked around him to my shoes and sat on the bed to pull them on.

“You think you two are suited?” he finally asked.

“Yep.”

“How long have you, uh, felt this way?”

“Since I met her and determined ours would be an ideally placid union. Why?” I lifted an eyebrow at his reflection; he hadn’t moved, nor had his eyes moved. He was staring unseeingly at the mirror.

“Because I . . .” he hesitated, tugging a hand through his hair and turning away from the mirror to face me, “I would have made an effort to be nicer, if I’d known you were interested.”

“Beau, you should be nicer regardless of my feelings on the subject. You’re nice to everybody else. You know what momma used to say: if you don’t want someone to get your goat, don’t let them know where it’s tied.”

His lips formed a flat line and he nodded once. I inspected my brother. He was unhappy, and unhappy was not a normal state of being for Beau.

“Is there something going on with you?” I asked, giving him ample opportunity to share his troubles.

His eyes lifted to mine and he twisted his lips to the side. He stared at me, carefully masking his thoughts and saying nothing for a time. Then he

shook his head.

“Nope. Nothing is going on with me.” Beau’s tone was deliberately devoid of telling emotion.

I scrutinized him further.

“Stop it, Cletus.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop trying to peer into my mind.” He cracked a half smile, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“I would never do that, Beau. Your mind is a depraved and dissolute place. I would fear for my eternal soul should I manage a glimpse inside.”

He grinned at my teasing and I was pleased to see it. “That’s right.” He turned to the door and called over his shoulder as he left. “And don’t you forget it.”

Kevin Arthur liked cutting hair. I reckoned his desire was a good one, considering he was a barber. However, Kevin always wanted to cut more inches off my hair than requested. We argued every time I came into his shop.

I told him my hair needed weight, otherwise it stood straight up and out, and my head—which was larger than average already, likely to accommodate my massive brain—resembled a cantaloupe on a toothpick, with cantaloupes being the least esteemed of all fruit.

He maintained I needed a short cut, with the sides clipped close, and the top longer and thinned. He said the thickness of my hair was responsible for its propensity to misbehave. He said the cut would bring all the girls to my yard.

This was doubtful. First of all, I didn’t want girls in my yard. I didn’t want anyone in my yard. My yard was fine just as it was: self-maintained.

Secondly, I’d never been popular with the women folk. Women, or at least the women I knew, didn’t much enjoy my lack of willingness to deal with bullshit. For that matter, most men I knew didn’t enjoy this about me either.

Bullshit was the adult version of Santa Claus. For reasons I’ll never comprehend, the general population seemed to enjoy wallowing, spouting,

and believing in bullshit.

But back to my barber

I left Kevin and two inches of my hair at his shop in Knoxville. We'd argued about the length. He finally acquiesced and quit his badgering. Then he moped. So, against my better judgment, I let him trim and shape my beard. I came to regret this decision. He'd cut it too short and it now had a distinctly manicured appearance.

I was ridiculous. I gave myself five minutes of feeling ridiculous, and then moved on. I had muffins on my mind and it was already past 10:30 AM.

Donner's Bakery was on the far side of Green Valley and definitely not on my way home. The bakery was attached to the Sky Lake lodge, the only property still in the possession of Don Donner's family, Jennifer's great grandfather. Diane Donner-Sylvester had inherited the lodge in a state of disrepair, her father having squandered the family fortune and whittled the Donner hotel empire down to almost nothing.

I had to park some distance from the bakery entrance. Surprisingly, the lot was nearly full. I tried to recall the last time I'd been to the bakery other than late at night, two Mondays ago, and realized it had been several years.

The property looked significantly different since my last daylight visit. What had been run-down and shabby was now as well manicured as my recently trimmed beard.

All the buildings had been freshly painted and the landscaping was top-notch. Both the bakery sign and the lodge sign looked brand new and the parking lot had been repaved. The bakery had a new awning, French-style wrought-iron tables and chairs along the window, and apparently—I realized upon entering—had been completely remodeled on the inside.

As soon as I stepped into the bakery I was assaulted by the smell of heaven. This I recognized, because it had been the same aroma I'd encountered two Mondays ago when Jennifer let me into the back door of the kitchen. I approved of this smell.

I also approved of the concoctions in the display case, each more elaborate than the last. And of course, set to one side in a glass pedestal of honor, sat three whole banana cakes, and one half banana cake. Apparently, some people had a slice of banana cake for breakfast.

That sounded like an excellent idea to me.

As foretold by the plethora of cars in the lot, the bakery was busy. I leaned to one side and scanned the counter. Jennifer wasn't at the register and she wasn't taking orders, which made sense. She was probably elsewhere, baking.

I frowned, restlessness pulling my eyes to the hallway that led to the kitchen. I knew Jennifer baked fresh items every Saturday and Sunday. Billy had made it back to the homestead at 11:00 PM the previous night. Assuming he'd dropped her off fifteen minutes before coming home, this meant she'd slept less than four hours.

Concern had me leaving the bakery, walking around the building, and trying the back door to the kitchen. It was unlocked, so I walked in.

What I found shouldn't have astonished me if I'd stopped to consider readily available evidence, but I was surprised.

There, in the calm center of a frantic activity storm, was Jennifer Sylvester. She wore her yellow dress costume and high heels; her blonde wavy hair was pulled back in a net, and thick, expertly applied makeup covered her features. She was wearing the Smash-Girl apron and she was baking, but she wasn't the only one.

She had a staff of at least ten. Jennifer was directing traffic and her voice was not soft, or feeble, or anything resembling a woman with no backbone.

I stood stock still for at least three minutes and watched her work, correcting someone to her left, answering a question thrown from her right, all the while filling delicate puffy balls with crème. She was making crème puffs.

"Hey, Cletus." I turned at the greeting and discovered one of the Tanner twins giving me a wide grin. "What are you doing here?"

"I, uh . . ." I was going to say I was there to see Jennifer, but clearly she was busy. I didn't want to interrupt.

Blithe Tanner—at least I thought it was Blithe, though it could have been Blair—lifted her eyebrows expectantly. "You need something?"

"Cletus?"

I turned at the sound of Jennifer's voice. She was walking over to me, wiping her hands on a towel. At the last minute she sucked her thumb into

her mouth, her pink tongue darting out to lick crème from the digit.

My throat was suddenly and curiously dry.

“Hey, Jenn. Didn’t mean to interrupt.”

She gave me a soft smile and shook her head. “You’re not interrupting. I was just finishing up an order for tonight. Banana crème puffs. Do you want to try one?”

Before I could make an excuse—because I was absolutely planning on making an excuse—she grabbed my hand and tugged me over to her workspace. Stopping short, she turned on me, plucked a crème puff from the counter and held it up to my mouth.

“Open up,” she said, her eyes on my mouth.

So I did.

She placed the puff on my tongue, her attention still fixed on my lips. “How is it?”

I didn’t moan, but I wanted to. Instead I finished chewing and said with forced composure, “That might be the most delicious thing I’ve ever eaten.”

She grinned, looking sublimely happy, and I suddenly wanted to pay her all the compliments, as long as she kept smiling.

But then her mother’s voice bellowed, “Jennifer! Are you finished with the— Oh.” She stopped short, her eyes jumping over me; she looked truly perplexed. “Cletus Winston. What are you doing here?”

I stood straighter and gave Diane Donner-Sylvester a deferential head nod, but I didn’t get a chance to answer her question.

“He’s here because of Billy,” Jennifer lied, untying her apron.

“Oh.” Diane frowned as she looked between the two of us.

“The puffs are all finished, as are the four banana cakes. Blair will arrange them into their boxes. I’ll be right back.” Jennifer tipped her head toward the Tanner twin I’d spoken to moments ago, then reached for my hand and led me out of the kitchen to the back door. She hung up her apron and darted outside.

I studied her momma as we left, the shrewd woman’s confused surprise morphing into confused suspicion.

Once again, Jennifer's speed was impressive for a short woman in high heels. This time I walked beside her rather than at a distance behind. We were a good fifty feet away from the bakery when she stopped suddenly and spoke.

"It's good to see you."

"You too," I said automatically, and I meant it.

"I like your hair cut," her eyes moved over me, appraising, and her smile returned just before she wrinkled her nose, "and your beard. I'm not used to seeing it so short, though. It'll take me a while to get used to it."

I stroked the shorter length and scowled. "My barber takes too much liberty."

She chuckled, lifting her hand like she was going to touch my face, but then she snatched it away and lowered her eyes to the ground. "I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me?" I asked dumbly, half of my wits still back in the kitchen with her fingers placing a banana cr me puff in my mouth. I glanced at the fingers in question. Her nail polish was burgundy.

"Yes." She lifted her chin and ensnared my eyes. "Thanks for pushing Billy into going on that date. I'm going to make him a banana cake to say thanks, as he really went above and beyond."

"Is that so?" I frowned, and it was not on purpose. It was just a plain-old frown based entirely on what she'd said. "Define above and beyond."

"Well, funny thing about that. He was a real gentleman, even when Jackson approached me."

"You mean at the jam session?"

"No. I mean at The Front Porch. Jackson was there, at the restaurant, and he came over to our table while Billy was in the men's room."

My frown intensified. All on its own. Without consulting me.

"What?" My question arrived much sharper than I intended.

"Cletus . . ." Jennifer's eyes were wide with an emotion I couldn't quite read and she was twisting her fingers.

Meanwhile, my heart was beating erratically. All on its own. Also without consulting me.

“What is it?” I stepped closer and placed a hand on her arm, needing to touch her for reasons I didn’t understand.

“Cletus, Jackson asked me out.”

I stared at her and her words, not grasping her meaning. “What do you mean? Out where?”

She gathered a large breath, her gorgeous eyes searching mine, her expression oddly circumspect, and said on the exhale, “He asked me out on a date.”

CHAPTER 13

“My soul is a hidden orchestra; I know not what instruments, what fiddlestrings and harps, drums and tamboura I sound and clash inside myself. All I hear is the symphony.”

— Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

~Cletus~

I was early.

The appointed time for our Monday lesson was 9:30 PM. It was now 9:17 PM.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel of my car and glared at the back door of the bakery, debating my options.

On Saturday, after Jennifer had detonated the Jackson James bomb, her mother promptly bellowed for her to return. We didn’t get a chance to finish the conversation because Jennifer left me standing on the edge of the parking lot while she jogged in her high heels back to the kitchen.

I’d been fixating and distracted since.

Witnessing Jennifer’s command of the kitchen had been a sight to see. I kept thinking I was proud of her, but then dismissed the thought. I had no right to be proud of her. I wasn’t responsible—indirectly or otherwise—for her success and abilities. She was responsible. I just hoped she was proud of herself.

And then there was the small matter of Jackson James and his intentions. My intuition told me his intentions weren’t pristine.

And yet . . .

My eyes flickered to the dashboard. It was now 9:28 PM. Two more minutes.

What to do about Jackson wasn’t my call. I’d signed on to help Jennifer find her backbone so she could use it in all facets of her life, and that was still the plan. Although she very clearly used it already in her kitchen. *With ease.*

But still . . .

The back door opened and Jennifer peeked her head out. She was scanning the lot for my car. I saw the moment she spotted it. She stepped more completely out of the kitchen and waved me over. I exited my automobile and strolled with measured steps to where she stood, endeavoring to mask my internal conflict.

“Come on in,” she whispered as I approached. “I made you some crème puffs. And Billy’s cake is ready. Do you mind taking it back to him?”

“Not a problem.”

Jennifer moved to the side, giving me a wide berth, then closed the door. It was cold and I was wearing my jacket. She stepped around me and crossed to the stove. I noticed she was wearing slippers with her yellow dress, her hair was pulled back in a bun, and she’d washed the mask of makeup from her face.

I thought maybe this is what she’d look like at home, after work, with that husband of hers she so desperately wanted. Whoever he might be, I was coming to realize he’d be a very lucky man.

“Do you want something to drink? It’s been chilly today. I can make tea.” Water was boiling, or had just been boiling, from a blue and white kettle.

“Tea would be nice.”

She gave me a friendly smile then moved to fill the two cups she’d laid out with hot water.

I studied her. She appeared to be at ease, which was a huge change from just two weeks ago. Her nail polish was now blue, and instead of pearls she wore a delicate gold chain with a cross.

“I know you’ve probably been too busy to think about my problem, but I’d appreciate your advice,” she said, stirring the tea.

“Which problem would that be?” I assumed she meant Jackson James, but I couldn’t bring myself to say the words.

That guy . . . what a little shit. The more I thought about him approaching Jennifer while she was on a date with Billy, the more I wanted to step up my armadillo infestation plans. Or maybe just beat the tar out of him. Granted, her date with Billy had been fake, but Jackson was ignorant of that fact.

Consequently, he was a shit.

My jacket felt too hot, so I unzipped it and placed it on the counter, claiming a stool and leaning my forearms on the butcher block.

“I guess you’re right.” She nodded, obviously reading more into my question than my intent. “It’s not really a problem. It’s what I wanted, actually.”

I had to clear my throat past an unexpected tightness. “Going on a date with Jackson is what you wanted?”

Jennifer leaned her hip against the counter and shrugged. “Not necessarily Jackson, but I think he’ll do. I know my father approves of him. He comes from a really nice family and he’s always seemed like a gentleman.”

Despite taking off my jacket, my neck was still hot. I was quite suddenly and forcefully . . . irritated. I resolved to keep this irritation to myself, partially because I didn’t understand it and partially because Jennifer hadn’t earned it. The irritation simply was.

She didn’t notice my struggle, her eyes were on her teacup as she said, “I guess,” she started, sighed, and started again, “I guess I’m not sure it’s a good idea.”

My irritation eased enough at this statement for me to say, “You don’t have to go. If you don’t feel ready yet, or unprepared, just call it off.”

“No, I feel good about the date—prepared I mean—Billy gave me lots of tips.”

The irritation rose again, like a wave. “What kind of tips?”

“Things to talk about, and things not to talk about. He was really helpful, so thank you for arranging that.”

“No problem.” I would have to try drilling this information out of Billy later; thus far he’d been frustratingly tightlipped. “So why are you doubting whether you want to go on the date with Jackson?”

Jennifer eyes darted to mine, then away. She finally asked, “What if he wants to kiss me, Cletus?”

I responded with the truth before I could catch myself. “He’s definitely going to want to kiss you, Jenn.”

“That’s a problem.” Her eyes widened to their maximum diameter and she clasped her hands over the teacup.

“Why is that a problem, other than the obvious hardship of being forced to kiss Jackson James?”

She ignored the insult and answered the root of my question. “It’s a problem because I’m twenty-two and I don’t know how to do that.”

“Kiss?”

“Yep.”

I stared at her. Then my stare moved to her lips. “You’ve never been kissed?”

“Nope. Well, not really. Timothy King tried to kiss me once, but I didn’t want him to. He got his mouth on my chin before I was able to push him off.”

Note to self: maim Timothy King.

“And then there was that time I surprised Drew, but like I said, it was a lip-collision. Not a real kiss. It was so awful, I often wondered if I should send him a letter of apology.”

“No need for that.” I waved away her suggestion.

“I mean, I’m sure I could do it eventually. How hard can it be?”

I thought about her problem, because it was a problem. Once again, she’d caught me off guard. I knew she’d been sheltered, but clearly I had no idea how painstakingly her parents had been in isolating her.

The woman needed kissing.

But first, she needed to know about kissing.

“Well, academically speaking, it’s not difficult to kiss a person. Just like it’s not difficult to bake a cake. But it’s difficult to bake an excellent cake, right? Just so with kissing. The chances of you baking an excellent cake on your first try is—”

“Basically zero.”

“That’s true. But while I appreciate your realism, allow me to suggest we embrace optimism. Because kissing is more than just technique. It’s also about the chemistry you have with another person and his or her technique

as well. So the difference between kissing and baking is that two people are involved, and that makes it both more and less complicated.”

“How is it more complicated?” She passed me my tea then took a sip of her own.

“If you had to bake with a partner, you’d have to rely on that partner and hope he or she was just as good as—or better than—you. Plus you hope the two of you have good chemistry. Plus, and I cannot stress this enough, that other person needs to keep a tidy kitchen.”

“Tidy kitchen?”

“Yes. If you’re after a life-long baking partner, avoid indiscriminate bakers. And if you take on a reformed, previously indiscriminate baker, make sure he’s had his kitchen thoroughly inspected by the health department.”

Her dark eyebrows arched over her violet eyes, which were shadowed with concern. “Then how is it less complicated?”

“If your partner and you have great chemistry, technique matters less.”

She thought about this for a stretch, sipping her tea and staring unseeingly at the counter between us. Then she sighed.

“Clearly I’m the weaker baker in this scenario. For all intents and purposes, in this analogy, I’m the baker who can’t make toast. Just being pragmatic here, I guess my worry is, I’ll meet someone with whom I have great chemistry and blunder the execution—that is, burn the toast.”

“But you teach people how to bake, right?”

“Yes.”

“So you just need to learn proper kissing technique. That’s all.” I shrugged, hopefully communicating that it was no big deal. “Once you feel confident in your technique, then you can see if the chemistry is there.”

“You make it sound like I can just check the classifieds for a kissing instructor. How do normal people do this? How do normal people learn how to kiss without frightening off good kissers?”

“Most people figure it out in high school. No one knows how to kiss in high school, so it’s all different variations of too wet and unpleasant. It’s a lot of trial and error, bad kisses, figuring out what works and what doesn’t.”

“See now, I missed all that . . .” She shook her head, clearly frustrated. “You know, I never wished I’d gone to high school until last year. When I was fourteen and my parents told me they were going to keep me at home and continue homeschooling me, I was relieved.”

“Why?”

“At the time I had three pen pals who were already in high school, and they made it sound like Dante’s sixth circle of hell.”

This description made me smile. “It can be.”

“But now, looking back, I wish I’d gone. I wish I’d experienced a more traditional high school experience, and all the torture that goes along with it. I wouldn’t be so stupid about stuff now. I feel like I’m constrained by my lack of experience.”

“I don’t think your assessment is quite right. In this case, in matters of interpersonal relationships, I don’t think it’s necessarily bad to be inexperienced, just like it’s not bad to be experienced.”

Her mouth was pressed in a dubious line. “I find that hard to believe.”

I grinned at her, because once again she looked cute. “It’s true. If you don’t mind another analogy, finding a mate is like playing an instrument. I might play the banjo for years, but then give it up to play the bassoon. Well, I don’t know how to play the bassoon, so it’s like starting all over again. Each instrument is like starting all over. No one has all the answers, no matter how much experience they have in their past.”

Jennifer set her cup down on the counter with a *thump*. “But, using your analogy, if you’ve played the banjo, at least you know how to read music. You know what the notes mean. I’m like a person who has never even heard a song, and suddenly wants to become a concert pianist.”

I was quiet, because she had a good point.

“What about you?” she asked, placing her hands on her hips.

“What about me?” I straightened from the counter, bracing for whatever unexpected question she was about to toss at me.

“What are you looking for? In your partner? What level of experience are you looking for?”

“Ideally, for efficiency sake . . .” I hesitated, because she was looking at me as though my answer held the key to her future success and was telling of men my age. I thought about lying, to make her feel better and bolster her confidence, but decided against it.

My preference for experience was revealing of most (what I considered normal) men my age or older; by normal I meant men without a daddy, superiority, or power complex. I didn’t know anyone my age or older who was looking to school a shy, blushing virgin unless that man was also a shy, blushing virgin. I had nothing against shy, blushing virgins. I just didn’t want to have sex with them.

Because sex with an inexperienced woman was decidedly vanilla. I didn’t much like vanilla, or missionary, or doing it with the lights off. I didn’t want a woman who was reticent about her body, who tried to hide it with sheets and darkness.

I liked flavor and well-lit rooms, where I could admire everything that made a woman’s form different from a man’s. I liked a variety of positions and a woman with stamina, who knew how to use my body to make hers come and approached sex with enthusiasm, not trepidation.

I wanted a woman who knew she liked sex, not one who hadn’t made her mind up due to lack of experience.

So, yeah. I considered lying. But I decided against it. I didn’t want any lies between Jenn and me if I could help it.

But I did gentle my voice. “Ideally, I’d like someone who has, if at all possible, a good amount of experience.”

Her face fell and she lowered her eyes to the wood floor.

A twinge of regret originating in my chest tightened my throat. “Jenn—”

“No. It’s fine. I guess, ideally, I want the same thing. I don’t want to be with someone who is looking to me for direction. I don’t know what I’m doing, so I guess I’d like someone who wouldn’t mind teaching me.”

Unbidden, a flash of what that would look like appeared in my mind’s eye. Jennifer Sylvester divested of clothing and gazing at me with trust. My hands on her waist, hips, thighs while I kissed my way down her soft, warm, pliant body . . .

The flash of imagining forced an equally sudden and visceral reaction in my body. One that drove most of the air from my lungs and left an uncomfortable stiffness in my pants, especially since the images didn't stop there.

How would it be when she was experienced? When *she* asked for what she liked? When she whispered a request in my ear during a jam session break and we snuck off someplace private? When she gazed at me with confidence and knowledge of her own desires?

I'll have to get a bigger car. And a desk. I'd like to take her on a desk.

"Cletus?"

I shook myself, coming back to the present, and realizing with some disappointment that we still had our clothes on and there wasn't a desk in sight.

But there is a kitchen counter.

"Pardon?" I asked, frantically fighting against the torrent of seductive imagery.

She frowned at me and involuntarily my eyes darted to her chest. Like a cheeseball.

Dammit.

I covered my face with my hands and rubbed my eyeballs.

"Are you all right?"

I nodded and made a mental list. I made a very unsexy list of chores that needed doing around the homestead, including but not limited to cleaning out the chicken coop, sharpening the knives in the shed, and chopping wood. I definitely needed to chop wood. Definitely. Even though Jethro had chopped all our wood while in a snit about Sienna. And before that Billy had chopped a pile of wood while in a snit about Claire.

. . . Claire!

"Claire!"

I dropped my hands from my face and snapped my fingers.

"Claire? You mean Claire McClure?"

"Yes. Claire McClure. You should discuss these matters with her. She's very smart. And a woman."

Jenn's eyes lowered to her now empty teacup and she leaned forward on the counter in much the same way I'd been doing moments prior. "Do you think she'd mind talking about this stuff? She doesn't even know me."

I grabbed my jacket, needing to leave right now.

Right. Now.

The first few buttons of her housedress were undone, which meant the top most edge of her lace bra was visible. It was red.

Her bra was red lace. My educated guess was that her underwear was also red lace. I was officially fixating. I needed to leave before I attempted to confirm my educated guess.

So I announced. "I'm leaving." And pulled on my jacket.

Jennifer looked at me with surprise. "You're leaving? Now?"

"That's right." I fumbled for my zipper. Thank God tomorrow was Tuesday. Tuesday morning was my morning in the upstairs bathroom, and I was going to need it.

"Oh." She frowned her confusion as her eyes moved over me. "I have the crème puffs and cake all boxed up. Let me grab them."

I nodded, heat rising up my shirt collar.

"Um, will I see you at the jam session this Friday?" she asked as she bent into the refrigerator to retrieve the baked goods.

I tore my eyes from her backside and stared unseeingly out the kitchen window because I was plagued by thoughts of lifting her skirt while she was bent over and everything that entailed, including but not limited to: skimming my fingers up her smooth, bare thighs; parting her legs; reaching into the front of her dress with one hand and pulling down her bra while slipping the other into her red, lace panties . . .

Yep. That's what I was thinking about. And, as an aside, I now understood the popularity of housedresses in the mid-twentieth century.

A cold shower was in order. And yoga. And then another cold shower.

"Cletus?"

"Yep?" I answered tightly, trying and failing to make another unsexy list of chores.

"Are you going to be at the jam session?"

“No. Not this week.” I just decided—just this very moment—I would skip the jam session.

“What about next Friday?”

“No. I can’t. I’ll be down in Nashville. Claire and I have the talent show.” I couldn’t wait any longer. I bolted for the back door and powerwalked to my car.

I heard her footsteps behind me and the sound brought me up short. I’d left her to carry the boxes, and that was discourteous. My momma raised me better, even if I was suffering from penile engorgement.

I turned and met her a few feet from the kitchen door, relieving her of the boxes.

“Thank you very much for these. You didn’t have to bake us treats.” I kept my eyes on the boxes.

“I don’t mind. And it’s the least I can do for all you’ve done. And all you’re doing. By the way, do I have any homework?”

Homework.

Dammit.

“Yes. Homework. Yes.” I nodded, trying to remember what I’d planned to give her for homework. I couldn’t remember, so I made it up. “You have to talk to Claire McClure about instruments and baking with a partner.”

“You mean I need to ask her about sex.”

Oh for the love of—

“Yep.” I turned and escaped to my car.

“So you’ll send me her phone number? And let her know I’m calling?” Jenn was trailing after me, pummeling me with questions. I needed her to leave me alone so I could stop thinking about teaching her how to pleasure herself.

“Yep.” I opened the trunk and placed the bakery boxes inside, then walked past her to the driver’s side door.

“Okay. Sounds good. I guess I’ll see you in two weeks.”

“Yep,” I said, closing my door and immediately starting the engine.

Jennifer lingered just beyond my parking spot, her arms crossed against the cold. I placed the car in reverse, but didn’t hit the gas. I couldn’t leave,

not until she was back inside. She didn't move.

Grunting my frustration, I rolled down my window. "What are you doing? It's freezing out here. Go back inside."

She shuffled forward in her slippers and bent down to the height of the window. Before I knew what was happening, Jennifer Sylvester placed a featherlike hand on my jaw and a sweet kiss on my cheek. The whole thing was over before I knew it had happened.

Giving me a triumphant smile, she backed away from the car. I looked at her and she looked back, her smile never wavering. Then she turned and jogged to the back door. She stepped inside. She shut the door.

I don't know how long I stared at the back door to the kitchen, but when I eventually glanced at the clock on the dash, it was 10:46 PM. I still needed a cold shower, but I decided to skip it.

My decision had nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that I could still feel the warm, gentle brush of her fingers on my jaw, or the searing press of her lips on my cheek.

Shit.

CHAPTER 14

“Let's clear one thing up: Introverts do not hate small talk because we dislike people. We hate small talk because we hate the barrier it creates between people.”

— Laurie Helgoe, *Introvert Power*

~Jennifer~

Over a week later and I hadn't heard from Cletus.

I tried not to feel disappointed and mostly succeeded. We weren't friends. I might've been developing affection for him and enjoying our time together; but I couldn't allow myself to forget that I was, in fact, blackmailing the man.

The only reason he was talking to me at all was because of that video. Once our deal was over, he'd likely avoid me. *I'd become invisible again.* And that was okay. I just needed to prepare myself for the eventual rejection.

I was good at dealing with rejection. No biggie.

Therefore, my decision to seek him out ten days after our last lesson made no rational sense.

“What are you doing, Jennifer Sylvester?” I asked myself out loud as I pulled into the parking lot of the Winston Brothers Auto Shop. “You've obviously lost your mind.”

I had definitely lost my mind.

I was blackmailing him to help me find a husband. But recently, when I thought about him, when I thought back on our stolen moments together and my heart became too full for my chest, part of me—clearly the very wrong in the head part of me—wondered if I should just blackmail him into marrying me instead.

See? I'd lost my mind.

I'd lost it the moment I stepped forward, bent into his car, and placed that kiss on his cheek ten days ago.

But he was just so . . .

I sighed and glanced in my rearview mirror, my chest aching as I watched shadows and shapes of movement within the shop's garage. My eyes snagged on my nails where they rested on the steering wheel. They were painted black.

Yes. Black.

I'd painted my nails black.

I'd also stopped wearing the yellow dresses during the day, preferring to bake in jeans, T-shirts, and Converse. And I'd made an appointment with my hair stylist for mid-November. I wasn't sure what I was going to do to my hair, but I did know I was going to change it.

My mother was not happy. There had been much wringing of hands and wailing over the last few weeks. But each time she threw a fit, I met her hysteria with calm reassurances that I still wore the yellow dress and heels during the special events, and when pictures needed to be taken for social media. It didn't matter what I wore in my free time.

Regardless, she gave me indigestion-face whenever she spotted me without full makeup, or wearing jeans, or my hair in a ponytail. Sometimes I'd catch her mumbling the word *farmer*.

My father also seemed to be at a loss. On the one hand, I hadn't corrected his assumption that Billy Winston and I were still seeing each other. "Billy Winston" seemed to be the magic phrase; I could do no wrong as long as Billy and I were potentially an item, à la, "Billy likes it when I wear my hair like this." Or "Billy likes these shoes."

On the other hand, his default these days was enabling my mother. He'd never been good at saying no to her, so the last few weeks hadn't been pleasant. Plus recently, every time he made a comment about my intelligence, I left the room. I didn't try to turn it into a compliment or make excuses for him. I just stood and left.

I debated leaving the auto shop now, driving off without stopping in, because I didn't have much of a plan. I'd made a new recipe, blueberry pancake muffins, so basically, muffins that tasted like blueberry pancakes. On a whim I thought since Cletus had liked the butternut squash pie experiment, he might enjoy being my first taste-tester for the muffins.

So, in summary, I no plan. I only had a whim.

Movement in the rearview mirror caught my eye and I glanced at the reflection once more. Beau Winston was walking toward my car, a wry smile on his handsome face, his dirty coveralls zipped open to his waist showcasing a pristine white undershirt.

Caught, I took a bracing breath and grabbed the plate of muffins; it felt like a shield. I exited my car.

“Hey, Jenn,” he said with a friendly smile, his gaze traveling to the plate I held, down to my shoes, up to my hair—which was in a ponytail—then back to my eyes. “Something wrong with your car?”

“Hiya, Beau.” I cleared my throat because my voice was squeaky with nerves. “No. Nothing wrong with the car. I was just driving by and thought I’d stop in and bring y’all some muffins.”

His blue eyes—which were already clear and bright as the summer sky—brightened further. “What’d you bring?”

Some of my nerves dissipated; it was nice to see baked goods would always be welcomed. “Um, something new I’m trying out. They’re blueberry pancake muffins.”

He laughed lightly. “They’re for Cletus, right?”

“No, no. They’re for all of you.”

He narrowed his eyes, his look suspicious. “Blueberry pancakes are his favorite.”

“Are they?”

His glare of doubt diffused. “You didn’t know that?”

“No. I had no idea.” But I did make a mental note.

“Huh. Well.” Beau’s gaze moved over me anew, like he found me to be a curiosity—and not in a bad way—then turned and motioned for me to follow. “Come on in. I’m just finishing up. I can make some coffee and we’ll hang out for bit.”

“Oh, that sounds nice.” I was surprised by the offer. I’d never had a real conversation with Beau Winston, but I’d formed an opinion during my people watching. He was unfailingly friendly and quite popular with the ladies.

He glanced over his shoulder and slowed his steps so we could walk together. “Wait ’til you try my coffee. I doubt it’ll do justice to your muffins.”

“Don’t get your hopes up. They could taste like feet,” I warned.

He barked a laugh, his eyes twinkling at me with real warmth. “I seriously doubt that anything you made could—”

“What is the status of the Ford Expedition? Did you finish with the radiator?” a female voice, shaded with a Yankee accent, interrupted just as we stepped into the garage.

I didn’t miss how Beau stiffened at my side even as I searched for the owner of the voice.

Almost immediately, I spotted her. She was hard to miss, standing just three or so feet away. Her eyes grabbed my attention first. They seemed to glow and were the most vibrant dark blue I’d ever seen, like sapphires. The rest of her was just as striking.

She was tall. Like, *really* tall, six foot or more, and her shape was that of a healthy supermodel. She wore no makeup, but her skin was flawless, her lips generous, and her cheekbones impossibly high. She had one of those perfectly proportioned faces, the kind magazines are always talking about as the definition of true beauty.

Her brownish, blondish hair was braided in a thick rope down her back. The austere style only served to highlight the dramatic exquisiteness of her face. She was stunning in coveralls. In fact, she looked like she might’ve just walked out of a fashion shoot even though she was covered in grease. I couldn’t fathom what she’d look like in normal clothes.

The woman’s gaze moved over me with disinterest. I honestly had no idea how old she was. Though her face had no visible wrinkles, her features were mature and her eyes exuded an awareness I’d only ever witnessed in those of advanced age.

“Shelly.” Beau’s sharp tone pulled me from my gawking. “This is Jennifer Sylvester. You’ve probably heard of her banana cake. Jennifer . . .” his earlier levity had entirely disappeared, replaced with a stern and shuttered glare, “this is Shelly Sullivan. She’s new to town and works here.”

I extended my hand toward Shelly. “Nice to meet you.”

She looked at my offered fingers, then at me. Shelly set her teeth and crossed her arms. “Nice to meet you, too.”

Her tone was flat and frustrated and it quickly became obvious she wasn’t going to shake my hand. I let mine drop, feeling disoriented and embarrassed. I wondered what she’d heard about me, if someone had said something disparaging. Or maybe she didn’t like me because of the whole Banana Cake Queen persona.

“Don’t take it personally.” Beau gave me a small, reassuring smile. The warmth left his face once again as he turned his eyes to Shelly. “She doesn’t shake anyone’s hand.”

Shelly’s eyes dropped to the cement for a brief moment and I got the sense she was just as—if not more so—embarrassed as I was. But then she lifted her gaze to Beau and it was bursting with defiance.

He met her glare with one of his own.

Meanwhile, I stood there, stuck between their glares.

When I couldn’t tolerate the tension any longer I sought to fill it. “How are you settling in, Ms. Sullivan?”

Her cobalt eyes moved to mine and some of the rigidness eased. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, uh, how are things? How’s your place? Do you need anything? Are your neighbors nice?”

She studied me for a long moment, like I was something interesting. She reminded me so much of a regal bird of prey, and I couldn’t help but compare her to a hawk or a falcon: proud, beautiful, clearly intelligent, and yet distant and removed somehow.

Untouchable.

Finally, just before the silence grew untenable, she answered, “My house is adequate. I need potholders, I keep using towels and I’ve burned my hand three times. I haven’t met my neighbors, so I don’t know if they’re nice.”

I grinned, because I liked how she’d answered my questions, straightforward and without any artifice or fuss.

“Maybe you should make more of an effort,” Beau snapped.

I gaped at him and his rudeness. I'd never seen or heard Beau Winston be rude to *anyone*. He didn't seem to notice my stare because, though his next words were addressed to me, Beau kept his gaze on Shelly. "I'll go start that coffee."

He walked away.

Shelly followed him with her eyes until he left the garage and was lost to the sunlight. She brought her gaze back to mine, again looking at me like I was something interesting.

"He doesn't like me," she said simply, sounding thoughtful rather than upset about her observation.

My ingrained instinct was to reassure her, respond with something like, *Oh, I'm sure you're wrong. I'm sure he likes you.* But I got the sense Shelly Sullivan didn't suffer false pleasantries.

Plus, I was curious . . .

"Why do you think he doesn't like you?"

"Because he said to me, 'I don't like you.'" A small smile hovered behind her hawkish eyes and I was surprised by their twinkle, especially given the subject matter.

"Does that bother you?" I asked, before I could stop myself, then attempted to explain my curiosity. "I have plenty of people who call me all sorts of names on social media, and folks around town call me uppity sometimes. Or they say I'm *simple* when they think I can't hear them."

"You're not simple." Her thoughtful frown returned. "The people who call you simple are the simple ones. You should put castor oil in their banana cake frosting and weld their toilet shut."

I giggled, because castor oil frosting would certainly call for several trips to the bathroom. "Maybe you could help me weld the toilets shut. I wouldn't know how to go about that."

Her face suddenly blossomed with a grin and it took me by surprise, the expression looked so foreign on her, I got the sense I was seeing a once-in-a-lifetime event, like a total solar eclipse or Halley's comet.

"I've welded toilets shut before."

The humor behind her words and tone also took me by surprise and had me smiling. “What else have you welded?”

“Anything I can get my hands on. I once welded the driver’s side door shut on my brother’s . . .” Her grin waned by degrees until she looked a little lost and overwhelmed, and a flicker of intense sorrow flashed behind her eyes before she effectively concealed it with swift stoicism. She swallowed and stuffed her hands into her pockets. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Okay. You don’t have to talk about that.”

Her stare moved over my features. “You have seven dark freckles on your face.” I lifted my eyebrows at this observation and sudden subject change. She was right. But she wasn’t finished. “Your shirt also has seven buttons. Most women’s shirts have eight buttons.”

I glanced at my shirt, then back to her. “Why does my shirt only have seven buttons?”

“The shirt you’re wearing has only seven buttons because it was specifically made for a short person.”

“You’re right. I got it in the petite section.” I smiled at her, because her observation and subsequent conclusion was useless, but it was also oddly cool. “You’re kinda like Sherlock Holmes.”

“I just notice things, meaningless things, typically having to do with numbers or patterns.” Her intense blue gaze swept over me and she pressed her lips together, like she was forcefully stopping herself from continuing.

So I prompted, “What is it? Is something wrong?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t shake your hand,” she blurted, then she sighed, as though the words cost her.

“That’s okay.” I waved away her apology; I didn’t want to make a big deal of it. “It confused me at first, but I’d much prefer to talk to you than hold your hand.”

Her smile was smaller this time, but struck me as no less singular.

I liked Shelly Sullivan. She was weird. I imagined her type of odd made it difficult to find friends; but to me, she seemed like someone worth knowing.

Therefore, before I could think better of it, I suggested, “We should go out. You and me. We should go out and do stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?” She looked wary.

“I don’t know.” I didn’t know. I didn’t know what two women did when they got together other than gossip—which is what my mother did with her friends—and I had no interest in that. I’d never had an in-person girlfriend. All my friends were pen pals. Except Cletus, but he wasn’t really my friend since I was blackmailing him; and he wasn’t a woman.

Definitely *not* a woman.

“We could make soap,” I suggested for no reason in particular.

Her eyes lit. “You know how to make soap?”

“I do. I make soap all the time, when I’m not baking.”

“I’d like to learn how to make it. I like soap.”

“Good.” I grinned, excited.

“Yeah. Good.” She also grinned, but it was tinged with confusion, like she couldn’t believe what had just happened.

“We’ll make it at my kitchen, at the bakery. It’s a sterile environment, it has to be, and that’s important for soap making.”

Her eyes grew even wider at this news. “It’s sterile?”

“Yes. Well, not hermetically sealed type of sterile. But it’s professionally cleaned—from top to bottom—every day.”

“That sounds amazing.”

I chuckled. Her enthusiasm about the cleanliness of my kitchen was adorable. Seeing that she had a thing for hygiene, I added, “And we’ll wear latex gloves while we do it.”

“While you do what?” Cletus’s voice cut in; both Shelly and I turned our heads toward the sound.

My heart did a pathetic little flutter, leaping toward him, and my eyes devoured every visible detail of Cletus Winston. It was the first time I’d seen him in over a week and I . . . well, I’d missed him. I’d missed his company and bluntness. I’d missed his funny facial expressions and deadpan jokes. I’d missed his somber nod, because he did it so well and used it when he didn’t know what else to do.

I braced my feet apart as he neared and my heart continued to act erratically. I made an effort to subdue the misbehaving organ by reminding it that I was blackmailing this man.

We were not friends. He did not like me. He tolerated me, nothing more.

But he is so . . .

“Hi, Cletus,” I said, feeling inexplicably out of breath.

He stepped next to Shelly and offered a disappointingly benign, “Hello.”

Cletus’s eyes skimmed over me briefly with what felt like purposeful detachment, then he turned his attention to Shelly. “Do you need me to order gloves for the shop?”

She shook her head. “No. I told you, I’m fine with grease. Car engines are cleaner than people.”

“Unfortunate, but true.” He gave her a half smile.

The sad little flutter became a painful, deflating flop. But I plastered a grin on my face, because I was good at this. I was good at people being disinterested in my presence.

I shoved the muffins at Cletus’s chest, unable to raise my eyes higher than his chin. “Here. These are for . . . for your family.”

In an automatic movement, his hands lifted to the plate and I released it to his grip.

Not waiting for a response, because my heart hurt and was screaming at me to leave, I gave Shelly a quick smile and promised, “I’ll see you later.”

I turned and walked quickly out of the garage.

You have lost your mind. Your mind is lost. What were you expecting? Honestly, what did you think was going to happen? He doesn’t care two sticks about you.

I was a good five feet from the shop, lost to my litany of regret, when I felt fingers close over my arm and spin me around.

Startled, my hands flew to my chest and I gasped. It was Beau. He released me immediately.

“Sorry, sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No.” I exhaled a shaky laugh and shook my head. “No, it’s fine. I just didn’t see you.”

He gave me an apologetic grin. “Did Shelly say something? To make you leave?”

“What? No! Not at all. She’s great.”

His grin wavered, disbelief clouding his eyes. “Really?”

I didn’t get a chance to respond because Cletus emerged from the shop, clutching the plate I’d brought to his chest. I took an automatic step backward, prepared to finish the march to my car and make my hasty escape.

“Just stop right there,” he called, his forehead stitched with irritation.

Drawing even with Beau, he scrutinized me. Then he scrutinized Beau. Then he scrutinized me again.

“Beau,” he passed the plate to Beau but kept his eyes trained on me, “take these to the front and close up. We’ll join you in a moment.”

Beau’s gaze moved over Cletus’s stern profile, his eyebrows lifting in surprise as his attention bounced between us. Eventually, he said, “Sure thing,” while turning and strolling to the front office of the shop.

Once Beau was gone, Cletus placed his hands on his hips. “Something is wrong with you.”

I straightened my spine, flinching at his statement. “I beg your pardon, but that was incredibly rude.”

He blinked at me as though he were confused, much of the irritation waning from his features. As though finally realizing what he’d said—or at least how it sounded—a regretful noise escaped his throat and he scrunched his face like he was frustrated with himself.

“No. You mistake my meaning. I’m . . . concerned. You appear to be upset. What’s wrong?” His voice gentled and his eyes searched mine. “What’s happened? And what can I do to help?”

I crossed my arms because my stupid heart was fluttering again. He caught me off guard. I was not at all prepared for Cletus Winston’s concern.

“Nothing. Nothing is wrong. I just wanted to bring y’all muffins. Can’t I bring y’all muffins?”

He was scrutinizing me again. “No. Something’s off. Is it Jackson James? Do I need to maim him? Because I will. I could give him leprosy, you

know. Armadillos are carriers.”

My mouth fell open and a bubble of laughter emerged unchecked. “Cletus Winston, you will do no such thing.”

“Sheriff’s deputy or not. Just say the word. It might improve him, actually.”

“You are terrible.” I laughed, even though he was terrible, and I felt terrible laughing at such a terrible joke.

At least, I hope it’s a joke.

Before I could give the matter too much thought, Cletus nodded, reached for my hand, and tugged me toward the front office. “That’s better. I much prefer your real smiles. Those fake ones don’t fit your face. By the way, I like your shoes.”

I stumbled, having trouble keeping up with him, both his long stride and the rapid subject changes. He opened the door and guided me inside, keeping our hands linked as he pulled the door shut behind us and turned the bolt.

“Shelly said she’d close up the garage,” he called to Beau, who was just setting three coffee mugs on the counter. “She doesn’t want any of these mystery muffins and I didn’t try to talk her out of her poor decision.”

“More for us,” Beau agreed with a grin.

“Exactly.”

I shook my head at the two brothers. “Y’all need to learn how to share.”

Cletus turned his gaze on me, his eyes darting from my chin to my forehead before moving between mine. “Sharing is overrated.”

“I agree,” Beau approved cheerfully. “Who wants coffee?”

Cletus brought us even with the front of the counter, whereas Beau was standing on the other side. He pulled the plate of muffins to the center of the tabletop. “Is it decaf? I don’t want to be up all night.”

“It is,” Beau confirmed, already filling his cup.

“Jenn?” Cletus prompted, “Do you want any?”

“Yes, please.”

“How do you take your coffee?” Beau set out a bowl of sugar.

“Black is fine.”

Beau and Cletus exchanged a glance, then they both turned identical questioning looks on me.

“You don’t take anything in your coffee?” Cletus asked.

“No. I’m surrounded by sweets all day. I like my coffee black.”

“Huh . . .” Beau studied me, like I’d revealed something important about myself. Then, out of the blue, he said, “Jennifer Sylvester, you have the most beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen.”

I stared blankly at Beau, frustration and disappointment warring with feelings of being flattered. During my date with Billy, when he had called me gorgeous, I experienced similar emotions. Like any normal person, I appreciated compliments about my exterior, but they also just felt like confirmation that my father was right. My outside was what people were interested in, and that my face and body determined my value.

Cletus stiffened beside me but said nothing. When I glanced at him his expression was carefully blank.

“Oh, thank you, Beau,” I said, trying to focus on the positive. It had been a very nice compliment, even if it had been in reference to something that wasn’t even really about me. I had no control over the color and shape of my eyes.

“No, thank you.” His spreading grin was both sweet and seductive. “You should come with us on Saturday. I’ll drive you.”

“Where are you going?”

“Cletus and Claire tried out over the summer and made it to the semifinals in a big-deal talent show. Saturday is the last round. There’ll be record labels, the whole nine yards.”

I eyeballed Cletus. He maintained his air of determined inscrutability and took a gulp of his coffee.

I couldn’t read Cletus’s thoughts on the matter, and I didn’t want to overstep. “I appreciate the invitation, but I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“You wouldn’t be imposing.” This assurance came from Cletus and he paired it with a soft smile. “If you want to come, you should come.”

“Good.” Beau nodded, grinning at me happily. “It’s a date.”

“It’s not a date,” Cletus contradicted, casting a frown at Beau.

I didn't know if he realized it, but Cletus was still holding my hand and his grip tightened as he challenged his brother. He'd linked our fingers together and held my palm pressed against his thigh. His hands were magnificent, strong, and beautiful. A thrilling current of energy raced up my arm at the contact.

"Not you, dummy. Me." Beau wrinkled his nose at Cletus and grabbed a muffin. "Jenn and me."

"Jenn and you?" Cletus looked and sounded mystified.

"That's right." Beau spoke around a bite of muffin, then moaned, looking at me. "What the hell did you put in these things?" He chewed, finished the first muffin with one more bite, then grabbed a second. "When we get married, you should make these every day."

I smirked at this, because years of people watching meant I knew how Beau operated. He was a shameless flirt.

"Slow your gourd, Beauford." Cletus pulled the plate farther away from Beau, his voice rising with irritation. "Don't eat the whole plate, greedy britches."

"There are at least twenty muffins here, Cletus. Slow your own gourd."

"I want them to last," he argued.

"Or, she could just make more. Because, I have to tell you, Jenn, I've never had a muffin this good before." Beau pointed a remarkably attractive and flirtatious smile at me; it was one I recognized well from every time he attempted to put the moves on Darlene Simmons. His voice was deep with lurid suggestiveness.

However, and sadly, his suggestiveness—the real meaning behind his words—mostly flew over my head. I hazarded a guess, but decided to look up how a muffin might be a euphemism for intimacy.

"Hey, hey. Switch off the high beams, Beauford Winston." Cletus snapped his fingers in front of Beau's face. "Jennifer isn't one of your lady prospects."

Beau lifted a dismissive eyebrow at Cletus, then slid his eyes back to me, mischief written all over his features. He winked. "I was just complimenting her muffin."

“That’s it.” Cletus grabbed the plate of muffins, administering a severe glare of disapproval to his younger brother, and turned back to the office door, bringing me along with him where our hands were linked.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

“You’ve lost the right to these muffins.”

“Cletus,” Beau’s shout was ripe with strangled frustration, “you can’t have all the muffins.”

“I can and I will,” he called over his shoulder, then tilted his chin toward the bolt. “Jenn, unlock that for me, please.”

Flustered, I obliged and he pushed the door open with his elbow.

“When you get home, you and I are going to have words.” Anger seeped into Beau’s tone and the unexpectedness of it had me turning back to Cletus’s brother. His usually friendly gaze was harsh with fury.

Cletus hesitated, a deep crease appearing between his eyebrows, and then he turned his glare on his brother. “Beauford Fitzgerald Winston, I don’t know what’s gotten into you lately. But you need to sort it out. I’m giving you a month.”

With that, Cletus steered us out of the office and left his brother to stew.

CHAPTER 15

“But we insist, every morning, on showing only the rose that blooms, and keep the thorny stem that hurts us and makes us bleed hidden within.”

— Paulo Coelho, *Adultery*

~Jennifer~

Cletus and I spent a long twenty minutes in complete silence.

We left the auto shop in my car, but he drove. He drove north on the Parkway for about fifteen minutes. The autumn colors streaked by in a blur of yellows, oranges, and stubborn greens against a crisp blue sky. Less often, I'd spot a sourwood with leaves that appeared purple.

They weren't purple; they were burgundy. But few people took the time to really look, so the leaves were called violet and that was that.

Eventually, he took an unmarked turnoff and another five minutes passed. At first, I was quiet because he was quiet, and the events of the late afternoon deserved contemplation. But after contemplating and finding all my conclusions reached nonsensical dead-ends, I broke the silence.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

His eyes cut to mine, then moved back to the road. He readjusted his grip on the steering wheel. “There's this spot up here I want to investigate.”

“Oh. What kind of spot?”

“A stream. Jethro told me about it. It's a short hike, but since you're in sneakers I thought we'd check it out.”

“Sounds good.” Despite feeling excited, I arranged my features into a mask of polite interest. My brother and I used to go hiking when we were kids, but I hadn't been hiking in years.

“Afterward I'll take you home,” he said, though it sounded like he was talking to himself.

“How will you get home?” I asked just as the small paved road became a gravel one.

“I have my ways,” he said.

Cletus's middle name wasn't "Evasive", but it should have been

Another few hundred feet and Cletus pulled us to one side and parked.

"Do you have any room over there? Can you climb out this side?" He eyeballed the foliage pressed against my window.

"Yeah, I can climb out the driver's side."

I made quick work of it, glad I was in my sneakers and jeans so I didn't have to worry about inadvertently flashing him.

Once we were both out of the car and he'd locked it, Cletus pointed to a trailhead some thirty feet away. "It's just there. I'll go in first. Jethro said the ground can be uneven."

"I see it. That's fine."

I walked alongside him, turning once to look back at my car and our hands bumped. I jerked mine away instinctively, earning me a frowning side-eye from Cletus.

"Are you sure you want to come along? I can come back later on my own."

"No. I want to come. I like to hike."

"Really? You go hiking often? It wasn't on your list."

"I haven't gone in a while, but Isaac and I used to go all the time." I tucked several strands of hair behind my ear; the bundle had been coming loose from my ponytail all day but I'd been too busy to pull out the hairband and twist it back up.

"That sounds like a good memory."

"It is. We used to go every weekend for a few years. We'd do geocaching, where you use the GPS and write your name down on a list, or swap a trinket." I nodded distractedly, a sudden melancholy squeezing my chest. Isaac had returned, but he hadn't returned to me.

"When did you stop? When he left for the army?"

"No. Before that. My feet grew too big for hiking boots and my momma never replaced them."

Cletus nodded but said nothing, frowning absentmindedly.

I should buy some hiking boots.

I wanted to, but my cash reserves were running low after my last shopping spree. I hesitated asking my momma for money. Things were strained between us recently and she'd taken to giving me the silent treatment most of the time.

Or you could, you know, demand that she pay you for working eighty-hour weeks.

My pen pal's advice, about formalizing my employment with the bakery, was making more and more sense. I was seriously growing to resent having to ask for money I'd technically earned.

What twenty-two-year-old had to ask their mother for money? Yet worked full-time . . .

At the entrance to the trailhead, Cletus turned in first. It was too narrow to walk side by side. Jethro had been right, the ground was uneven and the path wasn't well marked. But Cletus seemed to know how to read the way. I followed and relied on tree trunks to keep my balance as the ground shifted.

We were about fifty feet along the trail when I took a moment to appreciate the beauty around me. Light was different in the forest, beneath the canopy. And the autumn foliage created a different light than the summer forest. It was both dimmer and brighter, which made no sense. Dimmer due to the absence of indirect sunlight; but brighter because the sun's rays were diffused by the golden colors of fall.

Perhaps *softer* was the right word.

The light of the surrounding forest was softer. I felt as though the air itself was alive and I was displacing its vibrancy as I moved. A collection of faint sounds, both near and far, heightened this impression: the crunch of leaves beneath our shoes, a conversation between two sparrows, the percussion of a woodpecker, the low rustle of wind through trees, and eventually, the gentle rushing of an unseen water source.

"Did you go on a date with Jackson?" Cletus asked suddenly, his voice sounded carefully light.

I studied his back, his big shoulders. My eyes followed the line of his back. He had a nice back.

"No. I . . . I put him off. I still haven't made up my mind."

“What’s holding you back? Is it still your concern about baking with a partner?”

The side of my mouth lifted. “Yes, to be honest. That’s definitely part of it and that part concerns me. And by the way, you never sent me Claire’s information.”

“Ah, yes. Well you’ll see her Saturday. You can talk to her then.”

“Saturday?”

“Yep. When you come to the talent show and watch me play the banjo.”

I thought I detected a hint of vulnerability in his tone, but when he remained quiet I decided it must’ve been my imagination.

“Um, I’d really like to go, but I don’t think my father will allow it.” I attempted to disguise my sadness with pragmatism. I didn’t want to admit that I’d been considering sneaking out my window for the occasion.

. . . *but I shouldn’t have to sneak out my window.* I should be able to go where I wanted, when I wanted. A tower of resentment was building around my heart; every day I felt myself growing less and less concerned about what would make my parents happy.

Cletus was quiet for a bit before asking, “What if Billy came? What if y’all had another fake date?”

“Then my father would be thrilled,” I answered flatly.

“Why does your father like him so much? Watch your step. The path looks wider past here.” Cletus turned and grabbed my hand, helping me down a steep drop, then tangled our fingers together. “Don’t misunderstand me, I think Billy is the best sort. But I know I’m biased because he’s my brother and he’s always been a steady source of support. I’d like to understand your father’s preoccupation with him, though. You know,” his eyes darted to mine, then away, “so I can help you find someone similar. For the husband search. That’s why.”

“My father has been bringing Billy up since I was little.” I tried my best to sound normal, because Cletus kept possession of my hand, presumably because the ground was now loose rocks instead of firm dirt. “I mean, he was the star quarterback in high school. When he turned down that football scholarship to UT and disappeared for a few months, I think he shocked everyone. My father was so disappointed.”

“He had his reasons.” Cletus’s voice was defensive, but also distant with a memory.

“I’m sure he did. More recently, my father has been impressed with how Billy basically started at the bottom of Payton Mills and has worked himself up to South East Region Vice President.”

Cletus frowned. “Is that his title?”

“My father thinks so. And he’s certain Billy wants to run for state senate. Both my parents like the idea of having a son-in-law in politics. I think that’s why they like Jackson so much. I know he has plans to run for office.”

“Jackson would make a great politician.”

“I thought you didn’t like Jackson?”

“I don’t. Saying someone would make a great politician is like saying someone would make a great serial killer. It’s not a compliment.”

I tried not to laugh, but a frustrated chuckle escaped anyway. “What about your grandfather? Your grandfather Oliver was in politics, right? I think my grandfather Donner and your grandfather Oliver were friends.”

“Right.” Cletus chewed on his bottom lip, his eyes on the rocky trail, but also hazy with thought. “Is that what you want? A husband in politics?”

I shrugged. “I don’t care what he does, as long as he’s nice to me and wants a houseful of children.”

“Why do you like kids so much?” He switched his hold on my hand, pressing our palms more completely together as he unnecessarily helped me jump a gap in the trail.

“Are you kidding? Kids are the best. Kids are free of prejudice, and they want to have fun all the time. They want to play all the time. And they’re like sponges with knowledge. Eager to learn. How many adults do you know who are eager to learn?”

“Not many,” he admitted on a mumble.

“And babies. I love babies. I love cuddling them and holding them and just everything.”

“I like babies, too.” Cletus gave me an artless smile and we were quiet for a moment after, likely both thinking about the wondrousness of babies.

I decided nothing was better than babies. *Except for maybe Cletus holding a baby.*

I grinned at this thought, of seeing Cletus with a baby, kissing its belly and making it giggle, but then quickly suppressed the smile. Cletus was now frowning and had brought us to a stop.

Two lines of concentration appeared between his eyebrows and he released my fingers, his throat working to swallow. “Are you sure about babies?” His voice was pitched oddly, gruff and soft at the same time. “What if you had a chance to go to college instead? Become a—oh I don’t know—a chemist?”

I smirked at this idea, of me going to college, at twenty-two, and working in a lab, and placed my hands on my hips. “No. I don’t think I’d like that. Working in a lab is the same thing as working in a sterile kitchen, and I do that already. I don’t want to be a chemist.”

“What do you want to be?”

“A mother,” I said simply, because it was true. That’s what I wanted first and foremost. “And a really excellent wife and partner. And homemaker. I want to have a family to take care of, to love and fuss over and think about. That’s what I want. I know it’s not progressive, or flashy, and I know people don’t place much importance on that stuff anymore, just like people don’t put much importance on humility and kindness, forgiveness and compassion. But those things are important to me. I know people will look down their noses at me for being *just* a mom, but I’m used to being marginalized for what I do and what I look like. And I think being a great mother is the most difficult and most important job in the world. So people can just take their judgmental crap and—” I swallowed, stopping myself. My heart was beating wildly in my chest and my voice had lifted considerably. I was surprised by both my soapbox speech and the vehemence of feeling behind it.

After I stopped yelling I was surprised by how quiet the forest sounded in comparison to my tirade. The sparrows had ceased conversing, likely put out by my hollering.

“They can just what?” Cletus prompted, amused curiosity making his eyes bright, though he was trying to hide the amusement.

“They can help themselves to a piece of castor oil cake,” I grumbled, squinting at uneven path.

He laughed at that. So I laughed, shaking my head. I liked laughing with Cletus.

“I guess you feel pretty passionate about this, huh?”

“I do.” I lifted my chin.

Cletus stared thoughtfully at my upturned face for a moment before saying, “Do you realize how talented you are? Do you have any idea?”

“Thank you for saying so.” I pressed my lips together, administering the response I always recited when someone complimented me.

“I don’t think you do know.” He shook his head, his gaze scrutinizing. “It’s not just your baking. The way you handled that kitchen when I stopped by, all those people asking questions at the same time. You were the calm center of the storm. You were impressive. You *are* impressive.”

I gave him a half smile, swallowing a knot in my throat and endeavoring to suppress my absurd blush. I didn’t know what to say. Compliments in general made me uncomfortable, but compliments about something other than my baking prowess left me feeling like a long-tailed cat on a porch full of rocking chairs.

My father frequently reminded me that pride was a sin. Meanwhile, my mother told me people were jealous of me, what I looked like, of my social media celebrity. I didn’t believe my mother. I didn’t think anyone was jealous of me. That was just nonsense.

Cletus’s eyes narrowed on me, his scrutiny becoming a piercing thing. “You don’t believe me.”

“It’s not that. It’s . . .” I struggled, “I don’t wish to be boastful or prideful.”

Cletus sneered. “You are the opposite of boastful, and your humbleness verges on infuriating.”

“Gee, thanks.” I rolled my eyes.

“Look, all I’m saying is that if a person is great at something, she shouldn’t have to pretend she’s not, and she shouldn’t have to downplay her

hard work. There's nothing wrong with humility or modesty, Jenn. But—for heaven's sake—take credit for being a badass.”

I pressed my lips together, but this time it was an attempt to hide my smile. “Okay, thank you.”

“Do you accept that you are a badass?”

“Fine. Yes.”

“Then say it.”

“Cletus—”

“Say, ‘Cletus, you are ceaselessly correct in all things, especially about the fact that I’m a badass.’”

“I will not,” I laughed, shaking my head.

“Hmm . . .” He wasn’t smiling. In fact he appeared to be irritated. Abruptly, he asked, “If your daddy likes Billy so much, why doesn’t *he* date him?”

I struggled again, trying to keep up with the rapid subject change, but quickly managed, “I think he would if he could, but he can’t. He’s married. And my father is a strict monogamist.” I kept my voice light, hoping to see another of Cletus’s smiles.

He didn’t smile. In fact, he frowned, deeper and more severe than before, his eyes focused someplace over my head as he unceremoniously announced, “My father had three families.”

I stiffened and felt my eyes widen; but I caught my mouth before it fell open. “Pardon me?”

His eyes cut back to mine briefly, then fell to the rocks at our feet. “He had three families that I know of. My momma was his only legal wife. Darrell married Drew’s sister while he was still married to my mother. Her name was Christine.” His eyes flickered over me again before he added, “They didn’t have any children before she died.”

A moment passed while I absorbed this information. I felt lost in the conversation, not knowing why or how we’d come to the subject, or why he was sharing it with me.

Finally, I offered lamely, “I . . . I had no idea.”

“Not many people do. In fact,” he studied me again for a long moment, his expression growing contemplative, “none of my family knows about the other one, Darrell’s third family.”

“How did you find out?” Wind stirred and lifted my troublesome lock of hair, flinging it across my eyes; I pushed it out of the way.

Cletus tilted his head back and forth, as though considering how best to respond. “It’s complicated. But basically, I found him—my half-sibling—accidentally when I got tested and typed for the national bone marrow registry. I was a match, but it was a mistake.” He shook his head, looking frustrated, and swallowed some thickness in his throat. “Darrell’s son lived in Texas.”

“Texas?”

“That’s right. Texas. My momma always told us that, way back, our father’s people were Native Americans. We’re Yuchi, a small Native American tribe native to this these lands.” He gestured to the area around us. “Most were killed by Cherokee in a dispute orchestrated by a corrupt white fur trader, very few survived. That’s its own strange story for another time. Anyway, those who survived were either absorbed into the nearby Cherokee tribe or sent to be slaves on plantations. My direct ancestor married a French trader and, there you go.”

“How about that.” I wanted to hear the entire history, about the corrupt fur trader, but decided that conversation could wait given the giant information missile he’d just detonated.

“Anyway. Darrell’s other woman, the woman he married—not legally, but even so—her name is Susan. She’s half-Cherokee, somehow involved with the Cherokee casinos. That’s how they met. At a casino. She didn’t know about us. She didn’t know we existed. She had no idea Darrell was already married with *seven* kids. So when I showed up, asking about her son and his ancestry, I gave her a shock.”

“This is crazy.”

“I thought, when I first found about my half-brother—about our match—that we were related through some distant Yuchi ancestor, since most with lineage to Yuchi are part of the Cherokee Nation.” He huffed a laugh. “Ironically, our ancestor was much more recent.”

I stared at Cletus for a beat, absorbing this information. “Why haven’t you told your brothers and Ashley? Don’t you think they’d want to know?”

Cletus’s eyes drifted to some spot over my shoulder and dimmed, grew distant. “He died.”

My hands flew to my mouth. “Oh my God.”

“He died of cancer about five years ago. Our brother died when he was twenty-four. I never met him. His momma remarried after Darrell left them without a word some twenty-five years ago. She had three more sons, by a good man. None of them were a match.”

“Oh, Cletus.” Unthinkingly, I reached for him, wrapped myself around his body, and pulled him into a tight hug. “I’m so sorry.”

He didn’t reply, his arms unresponsive by his sides. But I didn’t care. The man needed a hug. I’m a firm believer that if a person needs a hug, you give that person a hug. So many times I’ve been in a situation where I needed a hug, and instead had to settle for a good cry on a pillow at the end of the day.

And I knew I’d made the right decision when he repeated on a whisper, “I was a match.”

I buried my face against his chest, squeezing him as hard as I could until he finally lifted his arms and wrapped them around my shoulders. We stood together, embracing, while the sparrows lifted their voices once again. The sounds of the nearby stream filled our ears.

Cletus was warm. The light was soft. And absurdly, the cadence of the water made me think of tears.

If I’d had any lingering doubts, they were now permanently dispelled. Darrell Winston was a reprehensible human being.

I couldn’t imagine what Cletus felt, how angry he must’ve been with his father. Nor could I comprehend how Susan felt, finding out two years too late that her son had a bone marrow match, and that match was a half-brother.

“The truth can be like people that way,” Cletus said, lifting an eyebrow at me.

I blinked at him, confused. “Pardon?”

I was sitting at the edge of the clear water stream, pristine enough to drink. Multicolored pebbles dotted the shallow riverbed. I’d taken off my shoes and dipped my toes in, and actually enjoyed the cold. Cletus stood off to one side, leaning against a tree.

“The truth can be like people,” he repeated.

“How so?”

“Sometimes,” the side of his mouth tugged upward with a humorless smile, “it’s real ugly.”

I sighed, knowing he was right. The truth about his half-brother was ugly.

“Take your father for instance.” Cletus’s tone was meticulously conversational, but I detected an undercurrent of frenzied resolve.

I stiffened my spine and squinted, suspicious of his intentions. I wasn’t quite ready to talk about my father. “What about him?”

“He’s real ugly.”

My mouth dropped open. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. The man is ugly,” Cletus proclaimed with a grumpy single head nod. “And I’m not just talking about his exterior.”

“Cletus Byron Winston, you are being rude.” I might have my own less than glowing thoughts about my father, but he was *my* father.

He opened his mouth to respond, then snapped it shut and did a double take, his eyes narrowing on me. “First of all, how do you know my middle name?”

“Your momma used to use it when you were naughty, when you boys would help her shelve books in the library. ‘Cletus Byron! Stop stuffing Astrophysics Monthly down your pants!’”

Cletus grinned. Then he chuckled. His eyes lost some of their zealous focus as he pushed away from the tree and strolled closer. “Oh yeah. She did, didn’t she?”

“I felt sorry for Billy, though.” I scooted to one side as he sat down. “His name always confused everyone, like your momma was trying to talk to Shakespeare’s ghost. ‘William Shakespeare, would you please stop Beauford from pulling down his pants in front of the girls?’”

Cletus laughed harder, leaning backward and holding his stomach. “I remember that. How old was Beau?”

“He was ten. He was trying to show us his new Tarzan underwear. I don’t think he meant any harm.”

“He sure did love that underwear.” Cletus nodded and he scratched his beard. “I’m going to have to find him some Tarzan underwear in adult size.”

“So you can torture him about it?”

He pretended to be shocked by my accusation. “Certainly not. I don’t torture my siblings.”

“Yeah, right.” I gave him my side-eye. “You forget, I’m a people watcher. I know you sell embarrassing pictures of them on stock photo sites. Jethro was griping about it after church over the summer. If it’s not torture, what do you call it then?”

He lifted his chin proudly. “I offer invaluable character building opportunities. I help them reach their true potential through suffering.”

“Oh, please.” This made me snort-laugh and I pushed his shoulder with my fingertips.

And he laughed too, which was fun. It was nice to laugh with someone in real life instead of via a letter sent once a month. And it was more than nice to laugh with Cletus.

I liked the sound of his laugh with its rumble and artless sound. When he smiled or laughed in earnest, his dark lashes had the effect of making his eyes appear brighter and his grin lit up his whole face.

The first time I’d heard him laugh he’d been helping his momma at the library. I’d been fourteen and I think he’d been around twenty at the time, maybe a little older. His mother—who was always kind to everyone—had said something funny, and the sound of his rejoining laughter caught me off guard. I hadn’t expected him to do it. I’d never seen him be anything other than stern, angry, or stoic prior to that point.

Lively eyes that captivated me with their cleverness, pretty lashes, and a mouth full of straight white teeth framed by an exceedingly pleasing mouth. I’d started noticing him everywhere after that and I’d listened for his laugh,

though—after watching him for a while—I decided it was best to keep my distance.

Nevertheless, his smiles, true happy smiles, were rare. Before blackmailing him, I could count on one hand the number of times I'd heard his laughter.

“What are you thinking about?” My hair had fallen across my face again. He tucked it behind my ear, his fingers and eyes lingering on my neck.

“Just that, uh . . .” I searched for an appropriate story to tell, an alternate truth to, *Well, Cletus, since you asked, I was just thinking about how epically tremendous your smile is and how nice your fingers feel on my skin.*

Unable to meet his steady gaze, I shifted my attention to the stream and cursed myself for being a terrible liar. Actually, allow me to clarify that: I'm great at lying to myself. I'm super crummy at lying to others.

His hand dropped. Another silence followed; this one was weightier, and I couldn't figure out why. All I knew was I could feel his eyes on me and they felt heavy.

But then, out of nowhere, Cletus said, “I guess we're going to have to practice.”

“Pardon me?”

“Practice kissing. Like what you did with Billy.”

I reeled back as my head whipped to the side, our eyes colliding. I couldn't believe my ears. “You think . . . you want me to practice kissing with Billy?”

“No. No. Absolutely not.” Again, Cletus's gaze flickered over me. “I mean you and me. I'll help you practice.”

The heart flip returned, but this time it was more forceful than before. And it brought some friends—the tummy cartwheel, the throat cinch, and the chest ache.

What. The. Hell . . .?

“I don't know if that's a good idea,” I rasped, forced to clear my throat, astonishment making my lungs burn.

“Why?” He shrugged, like it was no big deal.

Meanwhile, my hands were sweating. I was sweating everywhere. Even my feet in the cold stream were sweating.

“Because . . . because . . . because—” I glanced at the canopy above us, then the other side of the riverbed, the dirt next to me, the tree trunk to my left. Basically, I looked everywhere but at Cletus. “Because I’m blackmailing you and it doesn’t feel right. Like, I’m forcing you to kiss me.”

“But you’d practice with Billy?”

“Yes. He’d be doing it to help, not because of something I’m holding over his head.” I felt the urge to place some distance between us, so I stood and grabbed my shoes. I perched myself on a large rock and pulled on my socks.

“What if I promised I wasn’t doing it because of the blackmail?” Cletus tried to catch my eye so I lowered my chin to my chest as he added, “I want to help.”

I shook my head, unable to speak. I didn’t want to kiss Cletus.

Sometimes Cletus was open with me. But sometimes he was distant. I never knew from one moment to the next what mood he’d be in, just like I never knew what color his eyes would be.

I didn’t want to kiss him and then spend time with him after, pretending like everything was fine. I didn’t want to kiss him and then be invisible to him again when our deal was at an end. Because I would remember. I already felt too much.

So, no. I didn’t want to kiss Cletus.

Not if it didn’t mean something to him.

Because it would mean something to me.

The ache in my chest became a burning thing, I pressed my fingers against my sternum and rubbed.

“Here are the facts.” Cletus paused, his tone rational and reasonable. “You need practice. Yes, at first you got my attention because of the video. I freely admit that. But we’ve become something else. We’re friends, right?”

“I hope so,” I admitted as I stood from the rock and faced the trail, not yet brave enough to meet his gaze when the subject was whether or not he

would teach me how to kiss.

“Then let me help you, as a friend. I can teach you how, give you confidence in your technique. I know what I’m doing. I’m basically a kissing professional.”

“I have no doubt you know what you’re doing,” I said without turning around and a little stab of jealousy prickled behind my eyes, making my brain hot.

How many women has he kissed?

“Then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t . . . I don’t know.” I closed my eyes and rubbed my forehead. I could feel his eyes on me and it did nothing to ease the riot of emotions and longing assaulting my heart, making it difficult to breathe and think.

“How about we do it once, no big deal. If you—”

“Cletus!” I faced him suddenly. He sounded so practical, so academic about the whole thing. Like kissing me would be as forgettable as eating a tuna sandwich. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Fine.” He lifted his hands as though he surrendered. “Don’t talk about it. Just think about it.”

I exhaled an agitated breath and turned away. “Fine, I’ll think about it.”

In my peripheral vision I saw him nod once, like the matter was settled.

I felt slightly sick. Because the truth was, given the strength of my reaction to his suggestion, I probably wouldn’t think about anything other than kissing Cletus Winston for the foreseeable future.

CHAPTER 16

“Hide not your talents, they for use were made. What's a sundial in the shade?”

— Benjamin Franklin

~Jennifer~

Rain pounded against the roof when Billy picked me up on Saturday morning. Rainy days are my favorite because hot food tastes best on a cold rainy day.

My mother was not happy about my decision to go to Nashville. It took some convincing, but she finally acquiesced. She said it was because I didn't have any events or special appearances booked. But the truth was, I didn't give her much of a choice.

The only thing giving me some guilt was that I had to bake, decorate, and freeze the cake orders for the next several days ahead of time. The cakes wouldn't be as fresh as usual, but they were finished and ready to be delivered.

Hopefully, their personality would keep.

I escaped my house easily enough, Billy holding a big umbrella over our heads, but then stopped short in my driveway. Billy's truck was nowhere in sight. In its place was an impressive, black Lincoln town car. The first thing I noticed about the car—other than its make, model, and color—was that it had suicide doors and appeared to be vintage.

“What's this?” I asked.

“This is Cletus's car. He wanted us to drive it over.”

Beau was leaning against the car and lifted his head from where he was scrolling on his phone. The redhead gave me a welcoming grin, and then he wagged his eyebrows. “Bring any muffins?”

I chuckled and blushed because I'd looked up the euphemism-use of the word *muffin* on my laptop. My father would see it in the search history, but

I told myself it was just as well. Sooner or later a girl with a mind to marry has to figure things out. Ignorance didn't feel much like bliss these days.

Billy scowled at his brother, but I cut in before he could reprimand Beau. "No muffins for you."

"What? Why?"

"Because I'm a discriminate baker."

Billy barked a laugh. And once Beau recovered from his shock, he laughed as well.

When we were settled and on our way, I thought to ask, "Where is Cletus? Are we picking him up?"

"No. We're the only ones driving. I had work last night and Beau held down things at the auto shop. Everyone else flew out yesterday on, uh, Sienna's plane."

"Sienna has a plane?"

Beau answered from the back seat. "She chartered it, to fly from Knoxville to Nashville."

"Oh." I let this information sink in. I'd never known anyone who chartered a plane. It took me a moment to wrap my mind around the idea. "So, who went yesterday?"

"Everybody. Jethro and Sienna, Duane and Jess, Ashley and Drew, Cletus, of course. Roscoe is already in Nashville, for vet school, so he's meeting us there."

"I didn't know he was becoming a vet." I glanced over my shoulder at Beau.

"Y'all are the same age, right?" Billy checked his side mirror and merged onto the highway.

"That's right. We were in church choir together." I didn't add that he and I had never spoken to each other over the course of our entire lives, but so it goes being the unofficial reject in a small town.

Rascally Roscoe is what the pastor's wife used to call him; becoming a vet and working with animals suited his playful spirit.

"He's not going to recognize you." Billy's comment drew my eyes to him; he was watching me with a thoughtful frown.

“I’m sure he’s changed, too.”

“Not much.” Beau laughed. “He’s basically the same. Meanwhile, you’ve become a swan in the last two months. What happened all the sudden?”

“Jennifer has always been lovely.” Billy scowled at Beau through the rearview mirror, and his defense of me sounded almost . . . well, it sounded almost brotherly. It reminded me of Isaac and made me happy-sad.

“That’s not what I meant, Billy,” Beau responded irritably. He tapped me on the shoulder and I turned in my seat to meet his earnest expression. “I wasn’t referring to what you look like, Jenn. *You* have changed. You’re finally talking to people. It’s good.”

“I’m not talking to many people,” I said and thought out loud. “Just ya’ll, really. Cletus has—” I stopped myself, glancing at Billy.

“This isn’t a date, so feel free to bring up Cletus to your heart’s content.” He dipped his head in an encouraging nod.

I gave him a grateful smile. “Cletus has been a big help, and so has your brother here.” I indicated to Billy with my thumb. “I think I’ve been stuck. Y’all grew up here, you understand how it is. Everybody thinks they know everybody, but they don’t. Not really. Look at my family, Isaac for example. If someone had predicted five years ago that Isaac would be riding with the Iron Wraiths, I think everyone would’ve called that person crazy.”

“Do you talk much? You and Isaac?” The line of Billy’s brow had grown stern, preoccupied.

I shook my head, attempting to ignore the dull ache in my chest. “I’ve seen him, around town. But he doesn’t acknowledge me.” I stared out my window and spoke my thoughts as they occurred to me. “His indifference was difficult at first, and confusing. Growing up, you know how sheltered we were. My momma kept us busy and we had a good education, but I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t lonely sometimes. Isaac was my friend, my only friend really if you don’t count my pen pals. And I was his. He was so serious and stern all the time, and I’d make him laugh.”

Beau placed his hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “He’ll come around.”

“Or he won’t.” Billy’s tone was severe and his tempestuous eyes cut to Beau’s reflection. “Or he’ll become one of them and he’ll be lost.”

Beau sighed loudly. “Gee thanks, Billy. You win the award for most depressing statement of the road trip. Next time maybe keep all the sunshine and rainbows to yourself.”

“No. It’s okay.” I patted Beau’s hand where it rested on my shoulder. “When Isaac left, I think it was good for me. I missed him, and I miss him now. But I didn’t get restless until he left for the army. If he’d done as my parents wanted, gone to college for marketing and joined the family business, I don’t know if I ever would’ve approached Cletus for help. Desperation is a great motivator.” I laughed, and Beau squeezed my shoulder again.

“So you went to Cletus for help?” The curiosity in Billy’s tone had me regretting my words.

“I . . . uh . . . yes. I asked him if he’d help me, uh, figure out how to get out there and meet people. And he said yes.” I rolled my lips between my teeth, hoping they wouldn’t ask about the particulars.

“I’m surprised,” Beau said.

“I’m not,” Billy’s eyes had clouded, as though he was recalling a specific memory.

Before I could ask why Billy wasn’t surprised, Beau spoke up. “You’re not? He likes to meddle with us, and he’ll help people with car troubles and the like. But after what happened with—”

“Beau.” Billy’s tone was sharp and exacting. “Mind your words.”

I glanced between the two brothers, knowing my eyes were wide with curiosity and anticipation. “After what happened?”

Billy shifted in his seat, his jaw ticking. He didn’t look at me. “Cletus used to, you know, lose his temper a lot growing up.”

I remembered this about Cletus, but only via hearsay. “My father used to talk about Cletus, at dinner. He said Cletus was a dangerous kid, always getting into fights, and that we should avoid him.”

“Cletus doesn’t like bullies,” Beau chimed in, but then volunteered nothing else, even though I got the sense he wanted to expand further.

Billy’s lips pressed together in a slight grimace. “He doesn’t like bullies,” he echoed. “He used to get into trouble for standing up to bullies, instead of minding his own business.”

“He still stands up to bullies,” Beau mumbled. “He’s just a lot sneakier about it now.”

Billy scratched his cheek, his eyebrows pulling into a V as he studied the road. “We should talk about something else.”

“Good idea.” Beau smacked the seat next to him. “How about we talk about Jennifer’s muffins and how I can get another taste?”

“Oh good Lord.” I chuckled, not caring that he made my cheeks burn red.

“Beau.” Billy’s voice was heavy with warning, but there was humor in it as well. “How about we talk about Thanksgiving? What are your holiday plans, Jenn?”

“Oh, we don’t usually do much. The week before is a busy time for my momma and me. I must’ve made over five hundred banana cakes last Thanksgiving, and every year it increases. So my father goes to a friend’s house to watch football on the day. My momma stays at the lodge and works.”

Billy glanced at me askance, visibly horrified.

But it was Beau who spoke. “Oh, *hell* no. You’re coming to our house for Thanksgiving. And you’re eating pie. Lots of it.”

“And you’ll bake nothing,” Billy commanded.

“I don’t know.” The idea of spending Thanksgiving with the Winstons struck me as wonderful, but also terrifying. “I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“You wouldn’t be.” Beau sounded so sure. “It’s settled.”

“Besides,” Billy added with confidence and a glimmer of something like mischief, “I’m sure Cletus was already planning to invite you. We just saved him the trouble.”

The car ride ended too quickly and by the time we’d reached our destination, I felt affection for Billy and Beau Winston.

What does this say about me? Was I doomed to go through life developing *an affection* for every new person I spoke to for longer than an hour?

If so, maybe my parents had been right to keep me sheltered.

I also couldn’t help comparing this new affection for Billy and Beau to my feelings for Cletus. It was different, but I couldn’t put my finger on why.

My feelings for Cletus were . . . overwhelming, whereas my affection for Billy and Beau felt tranquil.

Clarity about the issue arrived when Cletus and Claire took the stage for the talent contest.

The whole shebang took place at the old Marzipan Theater in Nashville. The event space accommodated an audience of about five thousand; an impressive number, but nowhere near the size of a big arena show. Beau explained as we took our seats that the theater had hosted the likes of Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash back in the day, but had fallen into disrepair. It had recently been beautifully restored and the talent show was meant to relaunch it as a viable venue.

Cletus and Claire were the third act of ten. When Cletus appeared, my heart rose, clogging my throat, and I sat at the edge of my seat, waiting with bated breath for them to start their three-song set. They did and the audience fell quiet; they'd chosen a haunting love song to open, one I'd never heard before.

Cletus didn't play the banjo during this first song, he played the acoustic guitar and he sang a duet with Claire. I'd never heard him sing before, and so my bated breath became a breath held, and then a sigh of thorough delight and wonder. He had a remarkable voice, deep and rich, and like his laugh it reminded me of smooth chocolate.

As Cletus and Claire finished the first song to a round of roaring applause, I decided that the difference between Cletus and his brothers was that Billy and Beau did *not* agitate my emotions. They inspired warmth and fondness; benign, safe feelings.

Cletus, however, had me on spin cycle. He agitated every single one of my emotions. I was all over the place. I'd never realized that feeling so much all at once was possible.

Cletus picked up his banjo for the next song, which was an upbeat cover of Mumford and Son's "I Will Wait." Claire played the guitar and sang lead vocal.

I glanced at the row of Winstons and their partners and it warmed my heart to see each of them smiling at the stage, various shades of adoration

and pride written on their features. I didn't feel envy, but I did feel longing. This, right here, was why I wanted a big family.

They finished the set with Johnny Cash's "Tennessee," but Claire switched *blue-eyed girl* with *boy*, and *gal* became *guy*. It totally worked. She sounded deep and husky for this last song, demonstrating her impressive range. Plus, her voice had a vivid quality that sent goosebumps down my back. She was brilliant.

Much like Sienna with her gravitational aura, Claire's presence on stage was both natural and thrilling. And so was Cletus. I might have been a little biased, but I thought he was just as good as Claire . . . except, he held himself back. He was circumspect, as though foisting the attention on his partner was the primary goal.

Even on stage, Cletus seemed determined to hide from the spotlight, to conceal his amazing. This comprehension left me agitated. He was remarkable, and yet he was determined people think of him as mediocre.

They finished and the place exploded, all five thousand or so audience members jumped to their feet. Claire laughed and tossed her hair, mouthing the words *thank you* and blowing kisses. Meanwhile, Cletus packed up his gear, took a short bow, and walked off the stage.

Duane, who was sitting to one side of me, guffawed at Cletus's abrupt departure; so did Jessica next to him.

Beau, who was on my other side also laughed and nudged my arm, yelling over the exuberant crowd. "He doesn't care about the contest, not for himself. He did this to get Claire up there and to buy a car."

"To buy a car?" I asked, confused. "You mean with the prize money?"

He shook his head. "No. One of the judges—some big record producer—owns a 1971 Buick Riviera. It has a split rear window that makes it look a bit like a shark. He already has one, but he wants two for some reason. He's got the Lincoln to trade and is hoping to leverage Claire."

I wrinkled my nose at the ridiculousness of this news, and also the fact that Cletus was using his friendship with Claire to get his hands on a car.

Beau, seemingly able to discern the direction of my thoughts, shook his head, leaned closer and spoke directly into my ear. "This is classic Cletus, killing two birds with one stone. Claire deserves to be on that stage, but she

needed to be pushed. She never would have done it on her own. He did it because he cares for her. We all do. Cletus just handed her a record deal—whether she wants it or not, that’s up to her—but he’ll also manage to extort some powerful fella in the process.”

Beau pulled away, meeting my gaze and watching me process his words. He bent to my ear again, adding, “His mind works in mysterious ways,” Beau shrugged, “but the man always gets what he wants.”

“**Oh good Lord.** Please tell me you did not use the words, *academically speaking* when you were giving sweet Jennifer advice.”

“I may have uttered the phrase.” Cletus’s eyes darted to mine, then away. “I don’t remember.”

“You lie like a dog, Cletus Winston. You do too, remember. You remember, and you did use those words, and you don’t want to admit it.”

I blushed, bright red, my eyes bouncing between Cletus and Claire.

The three of us were in a dressing room, sharing a bottle of champagne and a tray of fancy appetizers. It was my first time drinking champagne and my head felt fuzzy.

Shortly after their set ended, an usher came and found me in the audience, told me I was needed backstage. I excused myself from the row of Winstons and followed the attendant through a maze of hallways. He halted at a door with a piece of paper taped to it that read *McClure & Winston*.

The usher knocked, Claire opened it, hugged me, then pulled me inside.

“Cletus explained everything,” she’d said, wrapping her arm around my shoulders. “I’m here to help. We are now good friends and you can ask me anything you like.”

And that was it. Just like that, Claire McClure, Cletus Winston, and I were discussing sex backstage at a big deal talent show.

“Fine. I did use the words ‘academically speaking,’” Cletus admitted reluctantly, “Moving on—”

“That’s a problem, Cletus, because there’s nothing academic about making love.”

“I beg to differ—”

“Just please stop talking and let me set this unsuspecting woman straight. Stop polluting her with your *academically speaking*.”

He started to roll his eyes then stopped. Instead, he plucked a carrot from the appetizer tray and snapped it with his teeth. “Fine. You explain it then.”

“I will. Prepare to be amazed.”

He frowned, like something smelled bad. “I don’t know if I want to be amazed by you when the subject is sex.”

“Then you can leave.”

Cletus brought his narrowed eyes to me, then away, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. “I’ll stay. For now.”

Claire laughed at him, like she thought he was funny and wonderful—which he was—then moved her warm gaze to mine, her smile softening as she considered me.

When she spoke, she did so as though we really were good friends, her voice was gentle and familiar. “I remember when you won at the state fair for the first time, for your banana cake. Your momma was so proud and happy, but you looked totally petrified.”

“I was,” I admitted easily.

“How old were you?”

“Sixteen.”

“And you’ve won every year since?”

I nodded.

Her brow wrinkled and her eyes moved over me, thoughtfully assessing. “You’ve never been kissed, or so Cletus told me.”

I nodded again, glad he’d told her so I didn’t have to. “I know ignorance is supposed to be bliss, but it’s feeling more and more like a cage these days.”

The side of her mouth hitched but her eyes looked a little sad. “Love is a . . . well, it’s interesting. It can be wonderful, but it can also be destructive. I understand your loyalty to your parents, I do. But you’re right. You’re in a cage, and you’re looking for a way out. Don’t rush it. You have time. I was actually the opposite. When I was nineteen I was a bird, looking for a cage. Believe it or not, your situation is better.”

I nodded solemnly, because I knew her story. Everyone in town knew about Claire, how she'd been born Scarlet St. Claire, the only child of Razor Blade St. Claire, president of the Iron Wraiths. She'd grown up in the motorcycle club and, by all accounts, it hadn't been an easy life. At fifteen she'd disappeared for three years, only to show back up engaged to Ben McClure, son of the local fire chief. They married when she was nineteen. He went to war, she went to college. Four years later she had her degree, but Ben had died overseas.

She'd taught at my father's high school—music and drama—and took care of Ben's parents. Just last summer, she'd moved to Nashville to accept a teaching position at a community college. But if Beau was right, this evening she might be accepting a record deal instead.

She seemed to be debating what to say next, and when she spoke she started slowly. "Let me tell you a story. My husband—" Claire broke off, her eyes darting to Cletus for a split second, then away. Her cheeks heated, but she cleared her throat and pushed past whatever flare of emotion held her momentarily hostage. "My husband, Ben, when he was alive, loved to play baseball with his father. They'd toss the ball around. He loved it. When he joined the army and was deployed, a pro-baseball player was deployed with him. So he had the chance to play baseball with a real professional. I mean, this guy was fantastic, just one of the best in the world. But when I asked Ben about it, do you know what he said?"

"No," Cletus said suddenly and unnecessarily.

Claire's eyes cut to his and she gave him a flat look of annoyance before continuing. "He said, 'You know, Claire, it was fun. But if I could play baseball with anyone in the world, it would still be my pop.'" She paused, allowing Ben's answer to sink in, then added, "That's the difference love makes. So Cletus is right on the one hand. Having experience, good technique, good moves—those are all just fine. If you're having sex for recreation or playing it like a professional sport, then those things are critical. But if you're making love, then experience and good moves are a bonus, but not at all important. It's the person, not the technique, that makes it worthwhile."

I felt my smile grow as she spoke and was grinning when she finished.

Claire's clever eyes held mine. "So don't worry about your lack of experience. You wait—if you want—because when the right guy comes along, he won't mind about your technique or lack thereof, and you won't mind about his. He'll care about you. You'll care for each other."

Music, the muffled sounds of a live performance, invaded our space, but I paid it no mind. Claire's words were like a salve to my nerves. Unthinkingly, I turned to Cletus, maybe to thank him for bringing me backstage, for making this stolen chat with Claire possible, but the words immediately caught in my throat.

His eyes were already on me and his look hit me squarely in the chest, a hot spike of awareness. It was another of those rare windows into the real Cletus Winston, unmasked and raw, but this time he didn't look angry. He looked ravenous.

The hot sensation spread lower, to my abdomen and lower, to my . . . other . . . area.

I flushed, felt overheated. His gaze singed, and yet I also felt oddly liquefied by it, loose and adrift.

The muffled sounds dissolved, as though I'd been pulled into a tunnel where only he and I existed, Cletus and his ravenous appetite and his fiery-blue eyes.

But then I jumped, flinching and tearing my eyes away, because an unexpectedly loud knock rapped against the door. A moment passed where no one spoke and I couldn't see, but the invasive clamor of live music met my ears followed by sounds of cheers and applause.

"I'll get it," Cletus said, his voice gruff, as though he hadn't used it in days.

I watched him stand, watched him move to the door, his big shoulders rising and falling with an expansive breath. I noticed his hands were balled into fists and his forearms were bare. He'd rolled up his sleeves to his elbows. I tried to recall whether I'd ever seen his arms before. And, if so, why they were so distracting now?

A gentle nudge against my calf had me turning back to Claire. Her eyes were wide and her mouth was hanging open. She mouthed, *You and Cletus?*

I shook my head quickly.

Her gaze narrowed and flickered over me. She nodded her head, mouthing again, *You and Cletus*. This time it wasn't a question.

My stomach fluttered with panic-induced vertigo. I shook my head again, whispering, "We're not like that," just as Cletus opened the door.

"Mr. Winston. Fine performance," an unknown female exclaimed, drawing my attention back to the door.

"Mr. Platt, Ms. Flom. I imagine you'll be wanting to speak to my partner?" Cletus crossed his arms, tilting his chin up and adopting a tone I'd never heard him use before. Most of his accent was gone. He sounded like a Yankee.

"Where is the lovely Ms. McClure? We'd love to congratulate her as well, maybe talk some things over. Did she get the champagne we sent?" a voice asked, which I guessed belonged to Mr. Platt.

Cletus nodded once. "She did."

"Good. Good. So perhaps we can—"

"Let's cut to the chase." Cletus leaned against the doorjamb and a friendly smile curved over his lips, but from where I was sitting his eyes were remote and remarkably shrewd. "I want your Buick, Ms. Flom. You want Claire McClure in a contract. I'm sure we'll be able to reach an equitable arrangement, where everyone leaves the table happy."

"That sneaky bastard," I heard Claire whisper and I looked back to her. She didn't look upset. In fact, she was smiling.

"Did you know?" I leaned close to Claire so as not to interrupt the negotiation occurring at the dressing room door.

"Beau warned me," she said on a low breath.

"What are you going to do?"

Her gaze held mine and I saw indecision, but I also saw excitement.

"Well, Cletus wants that car." Claire smiled and shrugged. I returned her grin, laughing lightly.

She sighed, it sounded happy, and her attention moved back to the man in question.

I followed her gaze, repeating the words Beau had said to me less than an hour ago. "And Cletus always gets what he wants."

Soon after Cletus concluded preliminary negotiations with Ms. Flom and Mr. Platt, I made my way back to my seat. They needed to get back on stage for the awards.

Claire and Cletus came in first place. Knowing the truth—that whether they won or lost made no difference, because Claire was already on her way to signing a record deal and Cletus had successfully negotiated the purchase of the car he wanted—was a bit like catching a glimpse of the Wizard of Oz standing behind his curtain.

Reality didn't negate the triumph of their win, but the festivity that followed felt less about winning and more about just wanting to celebrate with family. Even though Jethro and Sienna's wedding was literally three weeks away—and they'd all be seeing each other again for the occasion—the siblings and their partners seemed to jump at any opportunity to celebrate together. I loved this about the Winstons.

Thanks to Sienna's clout, the entire second floor of the family's favorite barbeque restaurant in Nashville had been secured. Billy was on my right and Beau on my left. Claire was way down on the other end, chatting with Sienna and Jethro. Roscoe sat directly across from me, with Cletus across from Beau and Jessica across from Billy. Duane sat on the end cap.

Next to Cletus was Ms. Flom, and she seemed intent on monopolizing his attention. A fact that had me both irritated and relieved.

I didn't want to meet with another of his ravenous looks and deal with the confusing longings that accompanied it. I didn't know what it meant and I had no experience from which to draw. Therefore, I sat quietly—avoiding eye contact with Cletus—and slipped into my role of people watcher. It was interesting to study the different dynamics at work.

The record executives had been invited to join our gathering and Mr. Platt was fawning all over Sienna. The servers were also hovering over her. Even while we were standing in front of the restaurant she'd been recognized and mobbed by strangers in the street.

"What are you staring at?" Billy asked, attempting to follow my line of sight.

I indicated with my head toward a graciously smiling Sienna. “Sienna Diaz.”

Billy’s gaze moved over me. “What about her?”

“How does she do it? Everywhere she goes, people—strangers—want to talk to her. I would hate it.”

“Would you?” Billy seemed surprised.

Beau nudged me with his elbow, obviously having been eavesdropping. “What about all that publicity your momma arranges for the Banana Cake Queen? Don’t you dress in costume and do appearances? And don’t you have a million followers, or something crazy like that?”

“The Banana Cake Queen has just over a million followers on Instagram. Jennifer Sylvester has zero.” I pushed my pulled pork around on my plate.

Beau nudged me again, this time with his shoulder. “I hate to break it to you, but you are the Banana Cake Queen.”

“She doesn’t look like the Banana Cake Queen.”

I lifted my eyes to the speaker of this comment and found Roscoe looking at me funny.

“Hey, Jenn,” he said, still looking at me funny. “How are things?”

Other than polite hellos early in the evening, I hadn’t spoken to Roscoe at all so far. But I’d caught him sending curious glances my way.

“Things are good, Roscoe. How are your things?”

“My things are great. To tell you the truth, I didn’t realize who you were until we sat down for dinner. I didn’t recognize you at all.” He squinted at me, then Billy, then Beau. He also smiled. “So which one of these jokers brought you?”

“I did.” Billy administered a no-teeth grin to his youngest brother.

“Technically, we both did.” Beau nudged me a third time, giving me a conspiratorial side-eye.

“Is that so . . .?” Roscoe leaned back in his seat.

I didn’t get a chance to respond because movement at the other end of the table had us all glancing up from our conversation.

Claire had stood and was passing out hugs, to Jethro first, then Sienna. She turned to the rest of the table. I thought for a moment she was planning

to go around and say goodbye to us, one at a time, but her movements halted suddenly when her eyes crashed into Billy's.

I sensed him go stiff at my side, heard his quick intake of breath. Almost immediately, she tore her gaze away.

I fought the urge to lay a comforting hand on his arm. Emotion rolled off the big man, wild and reckless and so very sad. I just wanted to hug him.

"I have to get going, y'all. I have an early morning." Her smile was wide, though it looked a little rattled to me.

This news was met with various sounds of disappointment, protests, and well-wishes. She waved and blew a kiss to Jessica, who acted like she caught it in her hand and stuffed it down her bra. This made everyone laugh.

Claire also laughed, then turned, striding purposefully away from the table. I watched her go, feeling both happy and sad.

I wish . . .

I wished I'd made an effort to know Claire before she left Green Valley. She was definitely someone worth knowing.

"What is it, Cletus?" Billy asked sharply, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I glanced between the two brothers and moved my twisting fingers to my lap; it was the first time Cletus had looked in my general vicinity since the backstage sex pow-wow and the subsequent ravenous look.

"I know what you're thinking." Cletus shook his head slowly.

"I guarantee, you don't." Billy's response was gruff and made the hairs on the back of my neck stand straight up.

"No. I do. And you're wrong."

Billy's throat worked as he swallowed, his glare piercing and hot. "It's none of your business, Cletus."

"Well, you're right about that. It's none of my business. It's your business. But you're still wrong. You can't win a woman with brute force, or wishing, or begging—not that you were planning on begging."

Billy's eyes flashed and he ground his teeth, the muscle at his jaw and temple jumping.

“You can’t wear her down.” Cletus softened his words, like he was softening a blow.

I realized with some surprise that our immediate tablemates had turned their attention away; Roscoe, Jessica, and Duane had their heads together, and I heard Duane mention Italy. Beau was studiously picking through his rib dinner. Everyone else was too far away to hear Cletus and Billy’s conversation. The restaurant noise from the first floor masked their exchange.

I took a page from Beau’s book and redirected my eyes to my plate.

“Then what do you suggest?” Billy sounded confrontational, his low voice laced with frustration. “What would you do?”

“Lay it all out. Tell her everything.”

Billy’s gaze focused on where Claire had disappeared. Then, unexpectedly, his eyes moved to me. I saw him in my peripheral vision and I felt his glare. I held very still.

“Would you, Cletus?” Billy asked, his attention drifted back to his brother. “Would you lay it all out? Tell her everything?”

Cletus was quiet a moment before saying, “When you’re certain, when it’s the heart and mind you’re after, then you lay it all out. But if it’s empty, just physical, then there’s nothing to say.”

CHAPTER 17

“Men do change, and change comes like a little wind that ruffles the curtains at dawn, and it comes like the stealthy perfume of wildflowers hidden in the grass.”

— John Steinbeck

~Cletus~

“**Okay, now that** it’s just us three, I want to know.” Jessica turned in her seat and lifted her eyebrows at me. It was keen eyebrow lift, so I knew the next words out of her mouth were going to be a question. “What’s going on with Jennifer Sylvester and Billy? Or is she with Beau? Or what’s going on?”

I met Duane’s eyes in the rearview mirror. He was driving my new car back from Nashville. Jess sat next to him on the bench seat, and I was in the back being chauffeured. The others, including the lady in question, had already departed for Green Valley on Sienna’s plane.

Duane was—by far—the best driver in the family. I suspected he was the best driver in Tennessee. Whenever I needed a fast four-wheeled escape, he was my guy. Which meant when he left for Italy and other grand capering, I would be without a getaway driver.

A depressing thought.

Duane cleared his throat, shifted a bit in his seat, but said nothing. He quickly returned his attention to the road.

He was no help.

Or, perhaps he was also curious.

“Come on, Cletus.” Jessica reached over the seat and pushed my knee with her fingertips. “Am I going to have to guess? Don’t make me guess.”

“She’s not attached to either Billy or Beau.”

“Are you sure?” Jessica pushed. “Because Beau and she seemed mighty friendly.”

I moved my attention to the window at my side rather than allow Jessica to see my displeasure at this news. Truth was, I'd been preoccupied by thoughts of Jennifer for weeks.

I was . . . attracted to her.

Physically.

A lot.

Her image haunted both my day and night dreams. Most were of the dirty variety, because the woman's body drove me to distraction. But some fantasies were just flashes of us being together, talking and touching. Always touching.

I'd been fixating on her since our last lesson. Matters weren't helped by her unexpected delivery of the most delicious muffins ever conceived in the history of muffins.

"Beau is friendly with everybody." I forced calm into my voice and schooled my expression before turning back to Jess.

"Then what was she doing here today? And the other day at the house?"

"She's a family friend."

The woman definitely had an effect on me. Her voodoo had me doing and saying things without premeditated forethought. We had conversations. We spoke of events and our lives. I was *sharing* things about myself without conducting a mental chess game or deliberating how to best leverage information she communicated for my benefit.

I wanted to be with her, spend time in her company for the sake of her company—a sentiment that was both novel and entirely unwelcome.

Jessica's eyes narrowed on me. "Since when?"

"Our grandfathers were friendly. So, I suppose she's been a family friend since Don Donner and Grandfather Oliver first met."

Jess huffed impatiently and smacked my knee. "You're being evasive, Cletus. And when you're being evasive, it means you don't want to talk about something. And when you don't want to talk about something, it usually means that something is really interesting."

I nodded somberly. "What a fascinating theory."

Jessica eyeballed me for a stretch and I met her meddlesome glare with an easy one of my own.

But then Duane—the turncoat—said, “I think Cletus is helping Jennifer.”

“Duane.” I suffused my tone with warning and shook my head.

He refused to meet my eye in the mirror, instead subtly smirking and adding, “Billy took her out a few weeks ago, a practice date or something. She’s never had a boyfriend, I don’t think. You’ve seen how her parents have her locked up like Rapunzel. My guess is Cletus is helping her figure shit out, so she can break out from under her parents’ crazy.”

I gaped at the back of my brother’s head. “Well hello, Garrison Gossip.”

He shrugged. “We’ll be in Italy next month, Cletus. Who are we going to tell? Besides, maybe Jess can help.”

“I want to help!” Jessica bounced in her seat, giving me a giant, pleading smile. “Oh please, let me help. I’ve always thought she was so cute and sweet. It’s a shame her momma dresses her like a banana. But she’s, what? Twenty-three now?”

“Twenty-two,” I corrected.

“Twenty-two is too long to live under the thumb of her parents. It’s about time she broke free. I could teach her so much. Please, Cletus? Please?” Jessica folded her fingers under her chin and flapped her eyelashes at me.

I frowned at Jessica and her unexpected offer. I didn’t like unexpected offers as a rule, but Jessica was good people. And she definitely had a backbone.

“I’m not saying yes,” I held up a cautionary finger between us, “but, if I did, what would you teach her first?”

Jessica’s eyes moved up and to the right, as though she was retrieving information stored in some secret woman-center of her brain.

Meanwhile, I was thinking on my hike with Jennifer down to the Yuchi stream. Telling her about my half-brother hadn’t been planned. It just . . . happened. Her father’s affair, his disregard for his marriage vows, reminded me of my own adulterous father.

The two men were a pair of assholes.

“Don’t freak out,” Jessica ordered, finally bringing her gaze back to mine.

“Why would I freak out?”

“Because, honestly, the first thing I would do is get that woman a vibrator.”

The car descended into a stunned silence. At least, I was stunned and I was pretty sure Duane was stunned. But then Duane barked a laugh. Jessica didn’t laugh. She smiled hopefully. I didn’t laugh. I was plagued with sudden and vivid images of Jennifer pleasuring herself.

This suggestion was almost as bad as Claire’s heartfelt appeal earlier in the evening—that Jennifer should seek love rather than experience—as well as the visuals that conversation conjured.

Dammit.

“Just hear me out.” Jess waved her hands between us, as though telling me to simmer down. “When I was a teenager and didn’t know what the hell I wanted, looking back I wish someone had given me a vibrator.”

“I would have given you more than that,” Duane mumbled.

“Oh good Lord,” I said on a breath, rolling my eyes.

Jess slid her attention to Duane, her grin growing sly, then brought it back to me. “I’m serious. Girls don’t know what’s up. My momma never talked to me about it, so I guarantee Diane Sylvester hasn’t said a word to Jennifer either. That girl was homeschooled, so she likely knows even less. And, her daddy checks the search history on her phone and laptop all the time. He used to brag about it to us teachers. I’m convinced that man is a sociopath. The Sylvesters make my parents look progressive.”

I didn’t find this news surprising. The main difference between my father and Kip Sylvester was that Darrell never pretended to be a pious saint. Jenn’s father, however, spread his holier-than-thou manure all over the place. My momma once told me—with the fire and ire—that Kip often misquoted the Bible to keep his kids under control.

Jennifer and Isaac had deserved better than growing up with their father’s judgmental hypocrisy. And their momma deserved better than the man’s betrayal.

“Your parents are very nice.” I leaned forward in my seat. “I’ve always found the sheriff to be reasonable.”

“He likes you, Cletus.” Duane glanced at me then back to the road. “Jess’s daddy thinks the world of you.”

I was surprised by this information, not because the sheriff ever treated me poorly, quite the opposite. He always treated me equitably, just like he treated everyone.

An odd twinge of guilt struck me between the ribs. I’d been funneling evidence out of Sheriff James’s station for months, replanting it in strategic locations along with forged listings of money laundering and loan sharking activities.

In my defense, the lists were an accurate accounting of the motorcycle club’s actual money laundering and loan sharking activities; but the Wraiths were irritatingly disordered. Their record keeping was unsystematic. So I’d recorded the details in an effort to make the club appear more organized. The stolen evidence just tied everything together in a nice big obstruction-of-justice bow.

On its own, if I hadn’t interfered, the evidence stolen might’ve led to the arrest of several members of the Iron Wraiths. And those arrests would have been minor wins for the sheriff. But the wins would’ve been fleeting, because none of the evidence would have led to the club’s downfall.

I had my eye on the big picture. Helping the club appear more organized in their criminal endeavors would lead to their destruction, because RICO charges didn’t just remove the head of an organization. RICO charges brought everyone down.

When I was done, everyone was going to prison for a long, long time.

Every. Single. Member.

Even Isaac . . . This realization gave me pause.

“Cletus?”

I refocused my attention, seeing that Jessica’s pleading smile hadn’t dimmed.

“You might think I’m crazy, but I’m not. I’m right. And you’re smart. So you know I’m right. Give a man a fish and you’ve fed him for a day, but—”

“Give a woman a vibrator, and she’ll orgasm for life. I get it.” I waved Jessica off, looking out the window to my left, while I debated her advice.

It felt like a big step. I didn't want to frighten the woman with sex toys. "I don't know, Jess. I have no idea how she'll react. Put yourself in her shoes."

"You want to help her? Empowering her is key."

"I know that." I did know it. That's why the second homework had been for her to make changes, but only changes she wanted to make.

Jess continued to push. "She's different already. How she's dressing, wearing her hair, speaking up for herself. And that's wonderful, it's great to see. She's taking control of her life with baby steps."

"But me showing up with a genital stimulation device doesn't seem like a baby step."

"Then let me do it."

I glanced at her askance. "What?"

"Let me do it. You bring her to Big Todd's and I'll walk her around. She can even choose the color."

I groaned, a new and vast smorgasbord of lurid images assaulted my psyche: Jennifer standing in the bathroom using her toy; Jennifer standing in the bathroom using her toy in front of the mirror; Jennifer standing in the bathroom using her toy in front of the mirror while I stood behind her and .

. .

I groaned again.

Forget whether or not Jennifer could handle the introduction of a vibrator. The real question was, could I?

"What are you planning to do with that?"

"Pardon?"

I glanced at Shelly. The woman stood before me, arms crossed, sharp gaze moving between my face and my hands.

"The torque wrench. What are you doing with it?"

I glanced at the socket wrench in my hand and discovered Shelly was right. It wasn't a socket wrench. I'd mistakenly grabbed the torque wrench.

Dammit.

I needed to focus.

The last two days had been excruciating. Not only had Jessica been a plague, but the idea seed she'd planted in my brain took on a life of its own.

I spent the whole drive back to Green Valley Saturday night thinking about Jennifer. Wondering if she'd gone to the bakery to prep for the next day, or if she'd gone home. I'd tortured myself with images of her slipping into bed. What would she wear? What did she dream about? Was she getting enough sleep? Was she gardening in overalls? What was she gardening? Had she gone hiking again?

It rained on Sunday, and I knew she liked reading while it rained. Had she read a book? What book? Did she like it? What did she think about it?

Jessica showed up after church on Sunday and hadn't quit her harassing until I'd agreed to her plan. But I hadn't agreed because of her pushing, I'd agreed because it was a good plan. It was time for Jennifer to broaden her horizons. It was time for her to be pushed out of her comfort zone. This was a big step.

But the sooner Jennifer Sylvester stood on her own, the sooner I could remove myself from her life and establish normalcy and calm in mine.

I was still fixating.

Meanwhile, important things—like nailing the coffin shut on the Iron Wraiths, the arrangements for Jethro's wedding in two weeks, Thanksgiving, and preparing for my boar hunt in Texas—required my attention. Not to mention my regular work, various and sundry projects, fund management of my momma's trust, ensuring Shelly was adequately trained and prepared for Duane's departure while managing Beau's temper, and all the other irons in the fire.

I tossed the torque wrench to the toolbox where it made an angry clatter. "We were just visiting."

"You were visiting with your torque wrench?" Shelly asked deadpan.

"Yes. We've been through a lot together."

She continued to peer at me. This was her way. She didn't frown much, and she smiled even less. She was cool and collected, and brutally candid.

"There's something wrong with you." Her tone was even, but not robotic. She was making an observation, not a judgment.

I nodded, but didn't answer. Shelly Sullivan's frankness didn't agitate me, not like Beau, who seemed to take it personally.

There was still work to do and the big clock above the stairwell told me it was well past closing. My productivity recently had been disappointing and still I'd spent the day clockwatching, anxious for eight o'clock to arrive. Jennifer didn't know what machinations I had planned for the evening, as I hadn't given her a heads-up. This was one of those instances where a sneak attack was in order.

"I need to leave." I stood from where I'd been bending over my workbench. "Can you lock up?"

Shelly nodded, wiping her hands with a cloth. She stepped forward and used the cloth to pick up the torque wrench I'd haphazardly tossed and set it neatly in the toolbox. Then she quickly rearranged the sockets from smallest to largest and placed the wrench attachment at a perfect ninety-degree angle.

I blinked at Shelly and her arranging, then glanced around the shop with new eyes born of suspicion. The garage wasn't pristine, but it was damn close. Everything was put away in its place, *neatly*.

My eyes cut back to her, a notion dancing in my forebrain. "Shelly?"

"Yes?"

"Why are you still here?"

Her jaw flexed and she swallowed, her eyes remained fixed on the top of the toolbox she was rearranging. "I was waiting for you to finish."

"Why?"

Shelly lifted her cool gaze to mine. "No reason."

She really was a beautiful woman—beautiful and aloof. Not beautiful and sweet, like Jennifer. Shelly was brutally honest and her honesty was armor, a shield to keep others at arm's length.

Whereas Jennifer's honesty was kindly meant and came from a place of trust and hope.

Perhaps because I'd been wrestling with my own fixations, I sensed an undercurrent of turmoil in Shelly this evening despite her outward show of detachment.

“Shelly.” I gentled my voice. This made her squint. “You’ve been waiting for me to finish so you can straighten up, right? You need things to be tidy?”

She gritted her teeth. Her eyes fell to the floor, then lifted again. The volume of hostility within her glare startled me.

“I don’t need it.” Her tone reeked of defensiveness and insolence.

I lifted my hands, wanting to communicate that I wasn’t one to judge. Furthermore, I didn’t care. Let her be tidy, if she needed it.

But I was also severely frustrated with myself. I couldn’t believe I’d worked with Shelly for almost two months and had no idea she was suffering from an obsessive-compulsive disorder. How could I miss something so obvious?

What else was I missing? What else was I not seeing? *These were things I should know about my future . . .*

My well-ordered world was in chaos, undone by a short woman baker.

“I’m leaving now.” I backed away. “So you do what you need to do, then feel free—or don’t—to tidy as you see fit.”

Some of the hostility behind her glare dissipated and she nodded once.

I left Shelly to her cleaning, walking straight out of the garage without checking out of the office first. I was restless and irritable and still in my grease-stained coveralls. There was nothing for it, so I would have to unzip them and tie the arms around my waist. Otherwise I’d be leaving grease smudges all over my car.

On the drive to the bakery, I forced myself to obey the speed limit. I had no reason to rush. No reason at all. Duane and Jess would be meeting us at Big Todd’s, the least sleazy adult shop in Knoxville, at 9:30 PM. I wasn’t nervous. I was . . . anxious, on Jennifer’s behalf.

Despite obeying the speed limit, I was five minutes early. I hated being early. It was like having to wait for the same thing twice. Jenn’s car was parked in the spot closest to the kitchen door and I could see her shadow moving around the kitchen. Rather than waiting for the appointed time, I walked to the back entrance and knocked.

I heard some rustling from within and then ignored the anticipatory jump in my pulse. I liked how she looked, that was it. I was not excited to see her.

I hadn't been counting the hours. I was looking forward to the end of our arrangement. I did not need her in my life distracting me.

I was going to take her to Big Todd's. She was going to get a sex toy. She was going to feel empowered. She would use it and I would not think about her using it. And then, with any luck, this big step would be the last help she needed from me. She'd be standing up to her momma, speaking her mind, and getting off on weekdays.

. . . Getting off work. Not *getting off* getting off. Work. Getting off work. Yep.

Jennifer opened the door and I stepped back, gulping in air and crossing my arms over my chest. I was ready to get this over with.

"Hi, Cletus." She smiled, soft and open. Her big, bright eyes moved between mine, and her whole face lit up, as though illuminated from within by sunshine and angel dust.

I lost my train of thought because it was replaced by, *It's too soon. I'm not ready.*

"Come on in. I have cookies." Jennifer reached for my arm and pulled me into the kitchen, shutting the door behind me. "It's cold outside, where's your jacket?"

"I didn't—"

"Oh, never mind." Jennifer walked around to face me and rubbed her hands up and down my arms. She then entwined our fingers together and brought my palms to her cheeks, pressing them there. "Goodness. You're so cold."

She grinned up at me, shivering, sharing her warmth as though I had a right to it. I stared at her. In truth, I stared at my hands on her face. I was experiencing a strong sense of *déjà vu*. I'd had a dream like this, where I held her face between my palms and then we'd devoured each other.

Instinct had me licking my lips and the movement drew her eyes to my mouth.

Her grin waned.

I tilted her chin.

She let me.

Her breathing changed.

I stepped forward.

She smelled like vanilla and nutmeg.

Her eyes drifted shut.

And I marveled at the beauty of her trust as my mouth laid claim to hers.

CHAPTER 18

*“Love at the lips was touch
As sweet as I could bear;
And once that seemed too much;
I lived on air”*

— Robert Frost

~Cletus~

Her lips were soft and delicious. So fucking delicious.

If I'd been in a thinking state of mind, I would've been surprised by her responsiveness, how she wrapped her arms around my neck, stepped fully into my space, and pressed both her mouth and body flush against mine. How she wanted to be as close as possible even though I was cold and dirty and she was warm and clean.

But I was not in a thinking state of mind. I was in a covetous state of mind. And a wish fulfillment state of mind.

I lifted my head to nip lightly at her bottom lip, sweeping my tongue across it. I wanted to taste more of her, every part of me demanded it. She moaned, tilting her chin, parting her mouth and shifting restlessly. I licked between her lips and her sweet tongue darted out, touching mine.

And that was basically it. That's all it took for me to lose my mind.

Recapturing her mouth, heedless to her lack of experience, I devoured her like I'd wanted to do for weeks. I tasted her from every angle. I slid my hands down her body, taking pleasure in the feel of her curves and yielding suppleness.

I backed her into the kitchen, halting when her legs connected with the counter. Grabbing her backside, I lifted her to the tabletop and stepped between her open knees. She was gasping, breathing heavily, and digging her nails into the back of my head and shoulder. She was excited, and her excitement fueled my madness.

In my imaginings, the next step would be slipping my hands under her skirt, lifting it by trailing my fingertips up her thighs while she unbuttoned

the front of her dress. Then I'd bend forward and . . .

Well.

Then things would progress.

Sinful flashes of fantasy were an excellent reminder of the old adage *too much, too soon*. Maybe she'd let me touch her. If she did, then she would come, legs spread, dress open. She'd pulse around my fingers on the kitchen counter where she baked her cakes.

And afterward, would she regret it?

Probably.

I would regret it . . . mostly.

But part of me wouldn't. Part of me would treasure the memory. Part of me would push for more, laying her back while she was still confused and overwhelmed. Lifting her legs up and over my shoulders, skimming my fingers down the backs of her thighs and making her shiver, tasting her arousal on my tongue, her pulse against my lips, and bringing her to climax again. I would treasure that, too.

And perhaps I'd want even more.

Perhaps I'd push down my pants and fill her, take her, claim her.

Because she trusts me, and she'd let me, and she would feel so very good, and hot, and wet, and mine . . .

"Fuck."

I turned from her, wrenching my mouth from hers, and barely escaping the momentum of my bad intentions. I was shaking, scorching hot, and so very hard. The kitchen was too close, the space suffocating; her breathing filled my ears, a gentle and alluring beacon.

I didn't quite have control of myself, not yet, and I hated not having control.

I stalked to the door, opened it, and stepped outside. The frigid gust of late-autumn wind a welcome and sobering diversion. Ironically, the very fixation that brought me to this moment had been responsible for my eventual sobriety.

It was time for a stern talking-to. Clearly I required a harsh lecture and firm reminder as to what in the hell I was doing.

The entire point of me being here, of these lessons, was to help this woman learn how to stand on her own, make her own choices, not make them for her. I wasn't going to be another person she trusted who took without asking, who made her decisions and perpetuated the vacuum of ignorance.

You will not be an asshole, Cletus Byron Winston. You will not take advantage. You will not.

"Why'd you stop?"

A short burst of laughter escaped my lungs. She was right behind me. I hadn't heard her approach. My guard was down, so I answered without artifice.

"Believe me, if you were any other woman, I wouldn't have." Once the words were out a dull ache radiated outward from my chest. I had an odd, fleeting notion that my heart was hurling itself against my ribs, seeking hers.

"Practice . . . right." Jennifer sounded like she was speaking to herself and I heard her take a shuffling step backward.

I shook my head, but didn't correct her. A tense moment followed, during which I pulled my bottom lip through my teeth, tasting her there. I briefly considered telling her a falsehood—specifically, that she still required more kissing practice.

She broke the silence by clearing her throat. "Come back inside. I, uh, have something to give you. Do you want coffee or tea?"

My stomach soured at the sound of her forced cheerfulness. When I was certain I wasn't in danger of mauling her again, *as long as I keep my distance*, I turned and followed her into the kitchen, closing and locking the door behind me.

Jenn pushed a cat-shaped cookie jar toward me, then turned and set a kettle to boil on the stove. "I need you to eat these cookies."

I eyeballed the cookie jar. "This looks like one of those Japanese good luck cats."

"A maneki neko. Yes. The paw moves—see?" Jennifer touched the paw lightly and sure enough the cat cookie jar waved.

“Where’d you get it?” I asked, surprising myself because I actually wanted to know.

“Eat the cookies. I received it from one of my pen pals.” She hadn’t yet made eye contact with me, instead busying herself with random tasks, like wiping down the counter or ordering me to eat cookies. I didn’t like the ashen cast to her skin or the stiff line of her mouth.

“Did she visit? Japan?” I selected a cookie from the top of the jar and took a bite, but stopped myself before I moaned. The cookie tasted just like Jennifer. It tasted like vanilla and nutmeg and awesome.

“No. She’s from Japan. She lives there. You’re going to have to eat all the cookies.” Jenn’s tone was uncharacteristically flat, and her eyes were on the teapot in front of her.

A spike of something odd, like longing but also heavy with frustration, had me debating my next words. I wanted to see her eyes but she wasn’t giving them to me.

“Why?” I asked.

“Why what?”

I grabbed two more. “Why do I have to eat all the cookies?”

“Because.”

Because.

She offered no other explanation. And now she was frowning at the teapot. Her chin wobbled and the sight had my heart hurling itself against my ribs again. I gritted my teeth and she pressed her lips together in a stubborn line.

She was unhappy. I’d made her unhappy. Making Jennifer unhappy was officially the worst feeling in the world, right up there with disappointing my brother Billy and seeing my sister cry.

So I blurted, “Have you ever done a cookie stand?”

She shook her head, sniffing, turning away from me to grab two cups.

“What’s that?” Her voice was rough.

“It’s like a keg stand, but with cookies.”

Jenn’s movements stilled. She blinked. A new frown formed, but this one was thoughtful, not miserable.

“You mean where those people do a handstand and drink beer?”

“That’s right. But with cookies.”

“That sounds awful.”

“At least you don’t get crumbs on your shirt.” I bit into the third cookie.

“Yes, but,” Jenn shook her head, a hesitant smile claiming her luscious lips, “then they’d go up your nose.”

“That’s the best part. You can save them for later.”

She made an amused face of disgust and shook her head. Her eyes flickered to mine for a split second then away, turning to the stove to retrieve the water.

Another minute passed before she said, “If you want to do a cookie stand, I’ll hold your legs. Because you have a lot of cookies left.”

I lifted an eyebrow at the jar. She was right. According to her mandate, I had about a dozen cookies to consume. It wasn’t a metric ton, but it was more than plenty.

“Explain to me again why I have to eat all these cookies.”

“There’s something at the bottom I want to give to you.”

“Why don’t you just dump them out?”

Jenn twisted her lips to the side, her downcast eyes flaring with some emotion, and then she huffed. “Fine. If you don’t want my cookies, I’ll just dump them.”

I got the sense she was referring to something more than her cookies. But before I could question her, she picked up the jar. Her movements were jerky and agitated as she dumped the delicious vanilla cookies on the counter, picked through them to retrieve four gray inch-long thumb drives, and then swiped the cookies with her arm into a waiting trash bin.

I gasped.

“Good God, woman. Did you just throw those delectable cookies away?”

She ignored the question, gritting her teeth and shoving the thumb drives toward me. “These are yours.”

“What are you talking about?” My mind was still on the loss of those exceptional cookies. *I might never recover.*

Finally, finally, she lifted her eyes to mine, and what I saw felt like a punch in the stomach. They were both fire and ice, red and blue, livid and sorrowful.

“The video of you taking the evidence is on these thumb drives. I hid them here, in this kitchen. They’re yours now. I don’t want them.”

My mouth parted and I felt my eyes go wide. I gaped—which was not a common expression for me—glancing between her and the inch-long pieces of technology that could have spelled my doom.

“You kept them on thumb drives.” It wasn’t a question; it was a revelation of how utterly wrong I’d been.

I thought my friend in Chicago had erased the evidence from all sources. That was not the case. She’d been in control the whole time. And she was in control now. She was deciding when our deal was over. Not me.

Not me.

My heart thundered between my ears, fueled by panic. The sensation was similar to the seconds before a head-on collision, when you can see the other car coming, but you can’t do anything to stop what happens next.

Jenn angled her chin defiantly, placing her hands on her hips. “I don’t want your help anymore.”

I winced, unable to catch the reaction in time because my heart was hurling itself against my ribcage again. But I did manage to imbue my tone with gentle calm when I asked, “What if I want to help?”

“No, thank you,” she said firmly, shaking her head and lowering her eyes to the teacups. “I appreciate you giving me a good start, and taking the time out of your busy life to . . . to . . . to show me that what I want matters. I know I have a ways to go. As Claire put it, I’d like to try flying on my own before I look for a new cage.”

I stared at her, unable to move, dually proud and dejected.

I’m not ready.

I’m not ready to let her go.

“Since the cookies are gone, there’s no call for the tea.” She sounded distracted and was frowning again. Abruptly, she turned and placed the

teacups back on the shelf, wiping her hands on her apron unnecessarily. “I have a few things to finish up front, so I’ll let you see yourself out.”

Jenn gave me a polite smile, but didn’t lift her eyes higher than my neck. With light steps, she left the kitchen for the main bakery.

I stood very still, staring at the spot where she’d disappeared, listening. Unlike the last time she’d unceremoniously abandoned me to see myself out, I heard chairs scrape against the floor, keys jingle, and the telltale sounds of glass cases sliding open, then shut.

I searched for words, but couldn’t find them. So I left, dazed, and confused as to why I was heartsick. But not really confused. Rather, I was heartsick and too stubborn to admit the reason.

On the drive home, I couldn’t stop thinking about her. I thought about her smile when I’d arrived and her frown when I’d left. I thought about the dress she was wearing. It wasn’t yellow. I thought about our kiss and why I’d stopped. For the first time in a long time, I second-guessed myself.

But mostly I couldn’t shake the notion that Jennifer had discarded something vitally important to me when she’d thrown away those vanilla cookies.

And even though I wasn’t completely sure what that thing was, I might never recover.

CHAPTER 19

“I love you as the plant that never blooms, but carries in itself the light of hidden flowers.”

— Pablo Neruda

~Cletus~

“You’re tense. You can’t do yoga if you’re tense.”

I broke form and frowned at my yoga partner. “Would you quit henpecking me?”

Sienna lifted an eyebrow. “Only if you stop crowing.”

My mouth twitched, but I caught my smile before it could spread. “Next you’re going to call me cocky.”

“I wasn’t. I was going to call you a chick magnet.”

I gave in to a laugh and shook my head at Jethro’s fiancée. She was good at puns, and I liked this about her. She always put me in a better mood.

Sienna flashed a smile and her trademark dimples made an appearance. “Did you enjoy that one?”

“It’s better than being called a motherclucker.”

Now she laughed, tossing her head back. “Oh, that’s funny. I’m using that for one of my movies.”

“Go right ahead. I ain’t using it for anything profitable.” Readjusting myself on my mat, I closed my eyes, breathed in and out—clearing my mind—and tried the pose again.

It was Monday morning, and happened to be Halloween, one week after my last and final lesson with Jennifer Sylvester.

I was . . . unhappy. And that’s all I have to say about that.

Sienna and I were outside on the back deck of the homestead, facing the national park where it backed up to our land. It was mid-morning, chilly but not too cold, and the sun was just peeking above the Smokies. Mist still clung to the wildflower field since our place was deep in the Valley; this time of year, the sun didn’t touch the house until after 9:30 AM.

Sienna and I had done yoga together a few times before she and Jethro had left to film her last movie in Washington State. Since she'd returned, we'd been meeting for yoga three mornings a week. I didn't want her doing any positions that might hurt the baby, so I'd drafted a pregnancy-safe routine. She told me I was ridiculous and a hovering uncle, but she did them anyway.

"So," Sienna interrupted the quiet, "about Jethro's bachelor party . . ." She ended the sentence on a leading high note, as though I was expected to fill in the blank.

I shook my head, refusing to look at her. I knew what she was after.

"I don't know what you're talking about. And you can tell Jethro to stop asking his woman do his dirty work."

"What if I'm curious?"

"I'll share the pictures after the fact."

I felt her eyeballs on me, considering. "Is it true you've hired a stripper?" I heard the smile in her voice. "Because I'm fairly certain Jessica has for mine. My sister Marta is going to be horrified."

"Your sister is always horrified."

Sienna released a surprised laugh. "You are tense." I heard her switch poses. "And you've been grumpy."

"I'm always grumpy."

I was grumpy.

Duane and Jess hadn't been upset when we didn't show at Big Todd's. But I'd been upset and still was upset.

I hadn't seen Jennifer in a week. Absence doesn't make the heart grow fonder. Whoever said that was a damn fool. Absence makes the heart suicidal. Take my heart for example. It hadn't stopped hurling itself against my ribs—at odd times, day or night—for a week.

Clearly, my heart was a danger to itself and to me because Jennifer Sylvester and I were not suited, not at all.

If I'd pursued her, assuming she even desired my attentions, things would be complicated between us. I couldn't abide complicated. Her parents would not approve, and I would not seek their approval. I wanted

predictable, and she'd never ceased to surprise me. Together we would not be perfectly pragmatic. We would be impressively impractical.

Furthermore, the intensity of my attraction was distracting and I didn't want a partner who distracted me. The last month had proved definitively that I couldn't see clearly with thoughts of Jennifer Sylvester clouding my vision.

"No, you're not always grumpy." Sienna tugged on my beard. "You'd like to think you are, but you're not. Is this because I didn't make you my maid of honor?"

"Yes. I wanted that orange dress."

"It's not orange, it's burnt umber."

"It's orange and your bridesmaids look like pumpkins."

She laughed again. "Stop making me laugh. I can't do yoga if I'm laughing."

"We do not look like pumpkins," a familiar and welcome voice behind us challenged.

I opened my eyes and turned. My sister Ashley was climbing the steps of the deck, a bakery box in her hands. I squinted to read the lettering on the side, confirming my suspicions. Donner Bakery. I grimaced.

"We're not pumpkins. We're stunning autumn gourds. Good morning, Sienna. How are you feeling?" Ashley crossed to Sienna and bent to give her a kiss on the cheek. "I brought you lemon custard cakes."

"You're a saint." Sienna shot to her feet and accepted the box from Ash.

I followed the two women with my eyes as they moved to one of the picnic tables, opened the box, and began digging in.

"Hey!" I sat up. "What about yoga?"

"Yoga can wait." Sienna waved me off. "I've been craving these since Jethro brought them home last week. It's the only thing that tastes good right now. I want to hire Jennifer Sylvester to bake them for me every day."

"You can ask her, she's coming to the wedding. I'm sure she'd do it." Ashley stuffed a bite in her mouth and her eyes rolled back into her head. "Ermergerd!"

“I know, right?” Sienna licked a bit of custard from her thumb and moaned.

“You invited Jennifer to the wedding?” I scratched my cheek, keeping my tone nonchalant to disguise the strength of my interest. I hadn’t expected Sienna to invite Jenn, especially after the way Kip Sylvester had acted a fool when first meeting Sienna. He’d made her sign twenty napkins at The Front Porch during Jethro and Sienna’s first date.

Sienna couldn’t answer because she was chewing. She looked to Ashley, her eyebrows raised in question.

“No, I don’t think Jennifer was invited. But Jackson was invited, both on account of being Jessica’s brother, and Jethro wanted to invite the sheriff. Jennifer is going with Jackson,” Ashley explained, her tone normal and calm, like this wasn’t gut-wrenching news.

Like this wasn’t the most loathsome, earth-shattering, abhorrent, and distressing news ever.

“What?” My sharp question was out in the wild before I caught it, propelled from my mouth by the angry beating in my chest. “What do you mean Jennifer is going with Jackson?”

Ashley tensed, her eyes widening. She moved them to Sienna, then back to me. “Uh, exactly that. Jackson is taking Jennifer to the wedding.”

Red tinted my vision, then black.

“How do you know this?” I demanded, standing and stalking to her.

Ashley took a step back, lifting her hands between us. “Calm down, Cletus.”

“How do you know?”

“Because Jackson told me at the bakery. He was there with Jennifer.” Ashley placed a hand on my shoulder then smoothed it down my arm, her eyes wide and concerned.

Her touch brought me back to myself, although my blood pressure was through the roof. The sound of it between my ears muffled the world beyond. I turned, pulling my fingers through my hair; they caught on the curls and tangles, and the pain was sobering.

I needed to calm down.

But I couldn't.

Jennifer and Jackson . . . they fit. In fact, even her name began with a "J."

But just the thought, just the thought of seeing them together.

His hands on her . . .

I couldn't breathe.

"Cletus?" Ashley's soft voice met my ears, the uncertainty in it shamed me.

I'd come too close to losing my temper. I hadn't lost my temper in years. I did yoga. I meditated. I composed lists. I plotted and planned. But I never lost my temper.

"I have to go." I marched to my mat and rolled it up, still seeing red.

"Hey, so, where are you going? Want company?" Sienna tried to sound natural and almost succeeded. She was a good actress.

I shook my head, unable to respond. I was still too angry and I was fixating. Images of Jackson and Jenn, together, him touching her bare skin, holding her waist, looking into her impossible eyes, kissing her . . . a repugnant collage of vile imagery flashed through my mind.

I hated this.

I swallowed, nauseous and dizzy.

I *hated* this.

I couldn't stop fixating. The images wouldn't stop.

I hated *this*.

I didn't have control of myself.

And I hated it.

"I was wrong."

Billy glanced up from his desk, his eyes were large with surprise.

I didn't wait to be invited in. This was only the second time I'd been to his impressive office. The first time was the week after our momma died last year. I brought him soup and bread for lunch to make sure he wasn't in danger of an emotional breakdown. He hadn't been.

This time, I was here because of my own questionable emotional well-being.

Billy waited until I closed the door before asking me, “What were you wrong about?”

“Billy.” I blinked at him once, maintaining a frown of intense irritation. “Really?”

He lifted his eyebrows like he didn’t know what I was talking about.

“Firstly, I’m never wrong. So it’s obvious what I’ve been wrong about.”

“I can think of at least a hundred things you’ve been wrong about. You’re going to have to be more specific.”

I shook my head at my brother, placing the food I’d brought for lunch on his conference table. “You disappoint me, brother. Teasing me at a time like this.”

The side of his mouth lifted with a commiserating smile. “Jennifer Sylvester.”

“Precisely.” I winced. Just hearing her name made breathing hard. “How could I let this happen?”

Billy’s smile deepened, though his eyes communicated pity for my situation. “You didn’t let it happen, Cletus. No one would *let* it happen, just like no person would knowingly surrender their sanity for the sake of getting laid.”

“That’s not what this is about. It’s not about getting laid.”

“I know,” he said, and he did know. His eyes and tone were sober with how intimately he *knew*.

“Although . . .” I dipped my head to the side as I considered how much of my sanity I would surrender for a lifetime of making love to Jennifer Sylvester. “Getting laid is definitely part of it.”

“Absolutely.” Billy’s eyes moved to some spot behind me and lost focus.

I got the sense Billy was fixating—insomuch as Billy fixated—and I didn’t want to interrupt. So I took advantage of his quiet, thoughtful pause to unpack the food on his well-appointed conference table.

When a full minute had passed, I interrupted his contemplative silence. “What kind of soup do you want? I have French onion and vegetable

barley.”

“Vegetarian?” He made a face, standing from his big chair and crossing to the table.

“I also brought hamburgers.” I motioned to two closed food containers flanked by French fries.

“Much better.” He claimed a seat next to mine and reached for the burger. “Tell me what happened.”

“Eh . . .” I scratched my chin. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Why?”

“It involves blackmail.”

His eyebrows jumped. “You blackmailed her?”

“No. She blackmailed me.”

His eyebrows jumped higher. “Come again?”

“She blackmailed me. Jennifer was blackmailing me. Just for a week though—or at least I thought she only had the video for a week—mostly, I helped her because I wanted to.”

“I don’t follow. You might as well start from the beginning.”

“Fine.” I unwrapped my burger and discarded the top bun. Top buns were superfluous. “She accidentally videotaped me taking evidence from the sheriff’s office.”

Billy choked on a bite and reached for his fountain drink. His eyes continued to bulge as he swallowed a large gulp, then asked with a raspy voice, “Who was it this time?”

“Pardon?”

“Who was it? Duane? Beau?” He hesitated, a flicker of intense concern flashing behind his eyes before he asked, “It wasn’t Jethro, was it?”

“No! No, nothing like that. It was evidence on . . . on—” I huffed, placing the burger back in the container. “I’m not going to tell you.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t want to know.”

Billy’s narrowed stare moved over me, assessing; eventually, he nodded. “Fine. She videotaped you taking evidence and then she blackmailed you.

To be honest, I wondered why you decided to help her. I knew it wasn't out of the kindness of your heart, at least not at first."

"You're right. I wasn't going to help her. I don't fight other people's battles anymore."

He stiffened and a shadow of apprehension passed behind his eyes. "What happened wasn't your fault, Cletus. You're not responsible for the actions of our father."

I looked beyond my brother to the window behind his desk. "He and his club brothers put you in the hospital when he found out you helped me."

"I was older than you, and it wasn't the first time he'd put me in the hospital, if you remember."

"He broke your leg. You lost your football scholarship. Everyone in town might think you voluntarily turned it down, but that's because no one knows the full story."

"What happened is no one else's business but ours. He broke your nose. And he killed your dog. You were only sixteen."

A vivid flash of memory—a memory I'd stopped fixating on years ago—held my mind hostage. "I shouldn't have tried to help her. Carla wasn't family."

"She was a friend." He waved away my remorse impatiently. "Sometimes friends are family."

"Carla wasn't, though. She wasn't that good of a friend and I've never required hindsight to figure that out." I brought my eyes back to my brother, transposing my memory of his bloodied face over his clean features. "It was the unfairness I hated. I had no particular warmth for her. But her daddy, he was a monster."

Carla's father and our father were captains together in the Iron Wraiths. I didn't add that our father was also a monster. I didn't need to. Billy, maybe more than any of us, already knew.

"You helped her run away. That was good. You did a good thing."

"And you paid for it."

"Your only mistake was getting caught. Picking fights with bullies at school was one thing; calling out a captain of the Iron Wraiths is another.

You should have kept your mouth shut.” Billy tried to keep his tone light, like we were talking about other people and their problems. His eyes were understanding, just like they’d been thirteen years ago.

My brother was a great man. He would achieve great things in his life, of that I had no doubt. His regard for us, for all of us, was humbling. I suspected sometimes that we didn’t deserve it.

“I’m so sorry, Billy.”

Billy stared at me for a stretch, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully, then he shrugged. “It’s in the past. As momma used to say, ‘Best to leave farts and the past behind you.’”

I chuckled at that. It was one of her more scandalous sayings.

“Tell me what happened with Jennifer.” Billy attempted to get us back on track. “You said she videotaped you, and then what happened?”

“I contacted Alex, in Chicago, and asked him to remove the video from her computer and phone.” I frowned, refocusing my thoughts outward. Sometimes it took me a bit to switch gears between the distant past and the present. “I thought he had, but re-reading his message, it looks like the video was never there.”

“What’d his message say?” Billy asked around a bite of food.

“He said, ‘I can confirm the video isn’t on the subject’s phone, computer, or saved to the cloud.’”

“So you thought he’d deleted it, but it turns out—”

“She didn’t save it on her computer, phone, or the cloud. She saved it on thumb drives.”

Billy’s smile was slow and small and appreciative, his eyes moving down and to the side, then he laughed. “She’s smart.”

“She is. But it turns out her father does random checks of her phone and computer—this is according to Jessica. I didn’t put the pieces together until last Monday.”

“What happened on Monday?” He picked up his hamburger.

“I kissed her.”

Billy paused mid-bite, removing the burger from his mouth. “Good.”

“No. That’s bad. She thinks I did it just to help her practice kissing, like you helped her practice dating.”

“Oh. Bad.”

“Yeah. And then she gave me the thumb drives and told me I was dead to her.”

“She said that?” Billy was mid-bite again, and had halted again to ask me his question.

“In so many words.” I pushed my food away. I wasn’t hungry.

“Cletus.”

“Billy.”

“Don’t embellish. What did she say?”

“She said, ‘Thanks for your help. I don’t need you anymore. Here is your video. Go away.’ More or less, that’s what she said.” Despite not being hungry, I munched on a French fry. The saltiness of the French fry distracted me from the ache in my chest.

“Hmm.” Billy finally took another bite of his burger, his eyes sliding to the left as he chewed things over. “Things could be worse.”

I picked up another fry, glanced at it, then set it back on the table. “They are worse. She’s going to Jethro’s wedding with Jackson James.”

Billy’s eyebrows jumped again. “That asshole?”

“I know,” I responded flatly, sliding my teeth to the side. “I should have given him leprosy back in September. It would’ve kept him occupied through Christmas.”

“Hmm.” Billy set his burger down, studying me and wiping his fingers with a napkin. “What are you going to do?”

“That’s why I’m here. I need you to tell me what to do.”

His eyes communicated wary disbelief. “You want me to tell you what to do?”

“Yep. Because my instinct is to go over to the bakery, toss her over my shoulder, and make her mine.”

Billy crossed his arms. “That’s a bad idea. I’ve tried that, it didn’t end well.”

“Exactly. Plus . . .” I breathed in, held the air within my lungs, and exhaled slowly, my eyes flickering to Billy, then to my burger with no top bun. “Plus there’s the small matter of her wanting to have a lot of children.”

I could feel Billy’s eyeballs on me. His eyeballs had always carried a very specific weight. Growing up, Jethro was a joker, our father a monster, and Billy was the one we looked up to. He was the one I never wanted to let down.

“Cletus—”

“I know what you’re going to say.”

“Then we can skip it and you can admit you’re wrong.”

“I can’t admit I’m wrong about two things in the same day.” I brought my attention back to him, found him smirking at me. “It might bring about the apocalypse.”

“Then admit it tomorrow.”

I swallowed past the ballooning anxiety in my throat. I was never anxious, so it took me a minute to adjust to the sensation.

“You’ve seen my temper. You know what I’m like when I lose it. I blackout. I don’t remember. Do you honestly think I should have children?”

Billy’s smirk mellowed into a sad-looking smile. “We all have Darrell in us, Cletus. I look just like him, so does Ashley. You think I like what I see when I look in the mirror? I hate it. But I’m not cutting off my face because I share it with our father. Your decision to not have a family, because you’re afraid of losing your temper like he did when we were kids—it’s admirable, but it’s also stupid.”

“And if I—”

“No.” Billy brought his palm down on the table, hitting it with a forceful *whack*. “Stop making excuses for being a coward. You want Jennifer in your life?”

“Yes,” I responded with more than my voice, the answer shaking my very foundation, coming from deep within me, from the same place I’d buried the rage along with my passion.

“Then you reevaluate your priorities, including your fears. You be better and braver. Don’t make the same mistakes I did.”

“So what do I do?”

My brother studied me for a long moment, his brow pulled together as he stewed in my situation.

Finally, he sighed and suggested, “How about you lay it all out? Tell her everything.”

I blinked once, slowly, then glared at my brother. “I don’t like that advice. That’s seriously shitty advice.”

He lifted an eyebrow at me. “It’s your advice. It’s what you’ve been telling me to do with,” his eyes dropped and he took a breath before continuing, “with Scarlet.”

Billy stared unseeingly at his half-eaten hamburger. He hardly ever said her name: *Scarlet*. She’d been born Scarlet, and when they were together she was Scarlet. But when she’d returned to town at nineteen, engaged to Ben McClure, she had changed her name to Claire.

“It’s still shitty advice. I have no idea of knowing what’s in her head. What if she rejects me?” My words pulled a small smile from him. Even so, I added, “I hope you didn’t take it.”

He shook his head. “She’d have to agree to talk to me first.”

I examined my brother. “You and I might be sharing a boat.”

“Yeah, but your boat is newer.”

“This is true.” Frowning, I grabbed a cold French fry and made it bloody with ketchup. “The question is, how do I get out of this boat?”

CHAPTER 20

“. . .[N]o varnish can hide the grain of the wood; and that the more varnish you put on, the more the grain will express itself.”

— Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

~Jennifer~

“I know you’re going through this silly phase of rebellion, and I understand wanting to try out the fashion fads, but could you please dress for work tomorrow? We have that photographer coming by the bakery and a Skype call with Jacqueline about the meeting in New York.”

My mother, looking harassed, threw herself into the chair across from me, slapping her notebook down on the counter and opening it to an earmarked page.

It was Friday, eleven days after my first kiss. My life would now be measured in days since my first kiss, because that’s how dually amazing and devastating it had been.

I hadn’t yet picked up my bananas from the store, and I had a long evening of special orders ahead of me. I was tired because I hadn’t been sleeping much.

I missed Cletus and I didn’t know how to stop missing him. Kissing him had been a mistake, a terrible mistake. Even before the kiss my feelings for him had grown tangled. I’d wanted to be with him all the time, talk to him about nonsense, listen to his ideas, likes, and troubles, and share mine.

Not helping matters: his body, and face, and voice, and eyes.

Crap.

Throwing myself into work only helped marginally, but I didn’t really have a choice. Fall was a busy time of the year for weddings in the Valley. Everyone wanted their photographs staged against the canvas of autumn colors.

“Jennifer? Did you hear me?”

Shaking myself from my musings, I nodded. “Thank you for letting me know. I’ll make sure I’m in costume tomorrow.” I made a mental note to set my alarm for thirty minutes earlier.

I’d been wearing comfortable clothes on a more regular basis since my date with Billy, both around town and to work. At present I was in a new pair of jeans and a T-shirt one of my pen pals from Germany had sent some years ago. I’d used it as a sleep shirt until just last week. This was the second time I’d worn it during the day or in public.

A fact that irked my mother to no end.

“Costume?” she asked, the sharpness of the word snagging my attention.

I glanced up from the wedding cake I was decorating—white fondant with yellow, purple, and red leaf accents—and met my mother’s glare.

“Yes. Costume.”

She made a sound similar to a huff, but it also had elements of a snort. “What are you talking about?”

“I just meant I’ll wear one of the yellow dresses, and I’ll do my hair and such.”

Her mouth fell open. “Are you telling me you think of your everyday clothes as a costume?”

I set down the tiny rolling pin I’d been using for the fondant on the counter and stared at my mother. We were alone and I was tired. And I was agitated. Therefore, I didn’t think twice about my response.

“Of course it’s a costume, Momma.”

“I thought you liked looking pretty?”

I paused, studying her, the stunned hurt in her eyes. I had two options, and neither struck me as very appealing. I could continue pretending like I enjoyed playing dress up every day. Or I could tell her the truth.

The last several weeks, fighting against her constant objections to my hair and clothing choices, had strained our relationship. But then, did we really have much of a relationship? My pen pals knew more about me—about my hopes and dreams—than my own mother.

I decided to tell her the truth. If I were in her shoes, I’d want the truth from my daughter. But I also wanted to be respectful, because she was my

mother and she loved me, even though she didn't really see me.

"Honestly, Momma? I don't like those dresses, and they don't make me feel pretty. They make me feel like a fool. They make me feel like I'm playing a part. I don't like the color yellow and I don't want my hair to be blonde. And that's the truth." I kept my tone cautiously calm because I didn't want her to think I was insulting her choices or priorities, I wasn't. I just wanted different for myself. *I wanted to be honest, and I wanted her to listen and understand.*

My mother's face fell, disappointment shining in her eyes. Eventually, the disappointment became hurt, then frustration. "I guess I'm sorry, then. I'm sorry I wanted better for you than I had for myself. I guess I'm sorry you don't like all the time and energy and countless hours I've put into building your brand, building you up to what you are."

"It's not me," I mumbled, the words slipping out before I could catch them.

"What? What did you say?"

"It's not me. I'm not the Banana Cake Queen. I don't like being a brand, I don't like the attention, I don't like having my picture taken, I don't like serving people cake and having them gawk at me. I never wanted it. I never wanted any of it!" My voice had lifted to a shout as my confession built, one truth on top of another, one frustration bleeding into the next. I was a soda bottle that had been shaken for years, and the top had finally popped off.

She gasped, wincing as though I'd slapped her, and stared at me like I was a stranger. "Jennifer Anne Sylvester. What has gotten into you? You do not raise your voice to me."

I swallowed the bubbling bitterness in the back of my throat. I wanted to honor my parents. I loved them. I didn't want to disappoint them. But how was I supposed to breathe when I wasn't even allowed to think?

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" She stood, drawing herself up, her chair scraping against the kitchen tile.

"I'm sorry I lifted my voice." I was sorry.

She nodded, looking cautiously pacified. "And what else?"

“I’m not sorry I don’t like being the Banana Cake Queen. I feel like I’m a character in the theme park of my life, and it’s a lonely place to be. That’s the truth and you wanted to know.”

My mother stiffened, lifting her chin, and staring daggers of disillusionment at me. She picked up her notebook and clutched it to her chest.

“I have nothing to say to you if you’re going to behave this way.”

With that, she swept out of the room.

I stared at the chair where she’d sat. I stared for a long time, my chest aching with fear. I wasn’t afraid she’d disown me or toss me out. She wouldn’t. But she’d never look at me the same. I’d been an achievement she was proud of for so long, and I didn’t know where I fit in her life if I wasn’t her pride and joy.

Maybe I didn’t fit. And that thought made me cry.

Or maybe I cried because I was tired of being pathetic. Maybe I cried because I wasn’t what my momma wanted, and I wasn’t what Cletus wanted. Maybe I cried because I didn’t know who I was or what I really wanted.

My plan for last Monday had been to give Cletus the thumb drives. Unfortunately, at the time, I could only find four of the five data drives I’d hidden around the kitchen. After tearing the kitchen apart, I discovered the fifth hiding in a box of gluten-free flour. No one but me messed with the gluten-free stuff, so I decided to leave it there until . . .

Well, until such time as I crossed paths with Cletus again.

If our paths cross again.

That thought made me sad.

Regardless, last Monday I was going to give him the video copies, release him from our deal, then put my pride on the line once more and ask him out on a date. The cookies had been baked especially for the occasion. It was an old family recipe. Legend was, my grandfather Donner had wooed my grandmother with his vanilla cookies.

But Cletus didn’t want my cookies.

He wanted a sex-goddess with experience. *He wanted a sex-goddess's cookies.*

I was a fool.

Since our final *lesson*, since that life-changing kiss, just the thought of him caused heart palpitations. I suffered from late-night insomnia, reliving the moment over and over. I frequently daydreamed about him, his mouth, how he'd held me, how amazing he'd felt. I'd caught myself more times than I could count touching my lips, remembering and wishing. If I had a nickel for every time I'd thought about how fantastic the kiss had been, I'd own all the nickels in the world. Every single nickel.

For Cletus, it had been tutoring. He'd been helping me practice. Poor, ignorant, inexperienced Jennifer Sylvester.

I didn't want his help. I wanted . . . Well, I wanted him. And I wanted him to want me. Me. Just as I was. I wanted us to be equals.

But that is never going to happen.

I slid to the floor and pressed my face against a kitchen towel, crying for who I wasn't. However, a while later, when the tears finally stopped, when my head ached and my eyes were scratchy, and the pity party was officially tiresome, I heard a little voice in the back of my head. *This is pointless, Jenn. What are you actually going to do about it?*

I stared at the cabinet in front of me and realized I was tired of feeling helpless. I wasn't going to be helpless. Not anymore. I was taking control. I was going to figure things out, for myself, by myself. If I'd learned anything in the last few months, it was that I couldn't live my life to make other people happy. So I was going to start there.

I needed to be true to myself.

By God, I was going to be true to myself!

But first, I needed to go pick up the bananas.

I used more bananas in a week than most people ate in six months. Usually, I picked up the bananas Friday morning and Sunday afternoon. But on this Friday I didn't make it to the Piggly Wiggly until near closing time.

Between the three wedding cakes, other special orders for Saturday, and my mother's visit—and my subsequent sob fiesta—I didn't leave the bakery until 9:30 PM and the store closed at 10:00 PM.

I threw on a black sweater over my T-shirt because it was cold. The sweater was fitted, meant to be worn over the thin material of a dress, not the thicker cotton of a T-shirt. Therefore, it was a little tight around my chest.

Jeans, black sweater, and high heels—because that's all I had with me—I quickly parked and rushed into the store. I was so singularly focused on making it to the produce department on time that I wasn't watching where I was going. Coming out of the long grocery aisle, I collided with a solid wall of person and would have fallen on my backside if the wall hadn't grabbed my arms to steady me.

"Oh, sorry. I wasn't looking." I glanced up, ready to dash past, but all thoughts of bananas fled my mind as my eyes connected with the stern visage of my older brother.

I gaped at him.

And he glared at me, some emotion I couldn't quite read flaring behind his blue eyes.

"Isaac." I breathed his name, my heart giving a painful leap just before falling to my feet.

"Jenn." He hesitated, as though he wanted to say something more. But then his eyes dimmed and he released my arms. "Watch where you're going." Isaac glanced behind him.

He didn't sound angry. He sounded carefully disinterested. And his apathy made my heart crack, a new kind of pain spreading through me like a shockwave.

"Hey, isn't that your sister?"

I tore my eyes from my brother's passive profile to the woman behind him. Tina Patterson, a stripper at the Pink Pony who worked with Hannah Townsend. But unlike Hannah, Tina was also a big fan of stirring up drama. It was well-known around town that she was frequently in the company of the Iron Wraiths.

To her left and right were two faces I didn't recognize, but from the insignias on their leather jackets, they were also members of the motorcycle club.

"That's your sister?" One of the men, a large, bald fella with the word *Drill* on his jacket, stepped forward and into my space. I backed away, but the man continued to advance.

I heard Tina laugh and the other man groan loudly, saying, "We don't have time for this, Drill."

"Just give me a minute, Catfish." Drill placed his hand to my right on the aisle shelf, caging me in. "Hey, aren't you the Banana Cake Queen?" His eyes moved down, then up my body.

"I'm . . . I'm Jennifer. Nice to meet you." I stuck my hand out between us, unable to dissociate myself from ingrained good manners.

The one called Drill glanced at my hand and cracked a crooked and oddly charming smile as he slipped his palm against mine. "You are too fucking cute, Jennifer. I'd like to eat you up."

"Oh, shit. No way."

A new voice, one I recognized as Timothy King's, called from down the aisle, drawing both Drill's and my attention.

I sucked in a sharp breath and braced myself, because seeing Timothy forced my brain to move past the hurt of my brother's indifference.

Incredibly aggressive, handsy, with a suspicious inability to hear the word "no," Timothy King was a looker. I'd never been alone with him, as I'd never had a cause to be. But he'd cornered me outside the community center one evening, placed his hands on my body, and tried to kiss me. I'd been afraid then, because it was dusk and there weren't many people in the parking lot, and I was afraid now.

"Hey." Drill tugged on my hand, drawing my eyes back to him. His sharp gaze moved over my face and his grin waned. "You don't like that guy?" He tilted his head toward Timothy who was almost even with us.

I didn't answer, instead alternating my wide-eyed stare between the giant, bald biker with sharp blue eyes and Timothy King as he approached.

"Looky who we have here." Timothy's gaze moved down, then up my body, much like Drill's had, and I tensed in revulsion.

Mysteriously, Drill's perusal felt less threatening. It didn't make much sense, since Drill was almost twice the size of Timothy. Where Tim was lanky and tall, Drill was even taller, but with the addition of rippling corded muscle. To put things into perspective, I was fairly certain his neck was the size of my waist.

"Back off, King." Drill straightened, stepping slightly in front of me. "The lady doesn't like you."

"But I like the lady, and we're old friends." Timothy smirked, dipping his head to the side as though to catch my eye.

"Both of you, fuck off," Isaac growled, his hand wrapping around my upper arm and tugging me to the side. I looked up and found my brother glaring at both men. "She's off limits. Both of you."

Drill held his hands up. "Hey, I get it. If my sister had that rack and those eyes, I wouldn't want someone like me near her either."

Timothy King crossed his arms, his eyes still moving over me, but remained silent.

Isaac frowned at the bikers, looking frustrated, then dragged me out of the aisle and away from their cluster. "I'll meet y'all outside."

"Twilight, we need to go." This reminder came from the one called Catfish.

My brother nodded. "Yes, sir. Let me just see to this."

This? Did my brother just call me a "this"?

"Fine. We're leaving in five minutes, with or without you."

Isaac didn't answer, he just kept tugging me by the arm away from the other bikers. Five rows down, he made a sharp turn and released my arm. I twisted, backing away, sidestepping down the aisle. Movement behind him caught my attention; Tina had followed. She stood at the edge of the aisle, watching us with a smirk on her face.

"What are you doing?" Isaac scowled. He lifted his hands from his sides and shrugged. "What is wrong with you?"

"I'm picking up bananas," I said dumbly, explaining myself.

He huffed a frustrated laugh, shaking his head. "At ten o'clock at night? By yourself?"

I nodded.

His gaze flickered over me. “And then what? Why are you dressed like that?”

“Like what?”

“With no modesty. Like a loose woman.”

I gaped, struggling to make sense of his words. “I’m not. There’s nothing wrong with this. I’m not dressed—”

“What the fuck would you call what you’re wearing?” Isaac spoke through clenched teeth, making me flinch.

Somewhere behind me a new voice chimed in with, “Clothes.”

I glanced over my shoulder and found Cletus peering around the end cap, a mask of clueless affability firmly in place. I blinked at him, stunned by his sudden appearance.

Cletus then added unnecessarily, “I am also wearing clothes.”

Isaac’s jaw ticked and he crossed his arms, refocusing his enraged glower on Cletus.

“Hey, Cletus.” Tina stepped forward, sliding next to Isaac and pressing her body against his. “How’s Duane doing?”

“Disease free,” Cletus responded easily. I felt him step just behind me—his presence hovering and reassuring—but still, *what in tarnation is he doing here?*

“Has he grown tired of Jess yet? Tell him I say hi,” Tina purred, ignoring Cletus’s implied insult. Or maybe she didn’t understand it.

Tina Patterson and Duane Winston had a long history of an on-again, off-again relationship. Over a year ago, Duane had called it off for good.

I heard the irritation in Cletus’s voice as he remarked, “You know what your biker name should be, Tina? Dirty Pie.”

“Don’t you mean cutie pie?” She slid her hand into my brother’s jacket.

“Nope. I mean Dirty Pie.”

“This is none of your business, Winston.” Isaac disentangled himself from Tina and stepped forward, grabbing my arm again. I was so stunned by the action, I stumbled forward. “This is between my sister and me.”

“I thought you didn’t have a sister.” Cletus quickly moved to my other side, but he didn’t put his hands on me. His gaze narrowed on where Isaac held my arm. Cletus’s mask of affability slipped, his eyes burning blue and hot.

“Fuck off,” Isaac growled to Cletus, then lowered his furious face to mine. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? Does our father know you’re running around town, in the middle of the night, dressed like this?”

I flinched, confused and hurt and overwhelmed by his outrage. My brother hadn’t spoken to me in eighteen months. I’d been daydreaming about what we might talk about when the time came, how I might get through to him, reach him, the person he used to be.

Looking at him now, I saw no trace of the sweet boy I used to know, no trace of the boy who used to take me on hikes, the boy who was my best friend.

“What are you—”

“You are disgrace, Jennifer Anne. I can’t believe our parents are okay with this. God tells women, you are responsible for the lust you inspire in others.”

These were words I’d heard my father say on more than one occasion. From my father they were hurtful, but I could handle it. I was used to it. But from my brother, the words felt like barbed weapons, piercing my heart.

“I’m pretty sure God never said that,” Cletus announced flatly, reaching for Isaac’s hand, swiftly prying it from me, and inserting himself between us.

“Yes, He did,” my brother ground out.

“No. He didn’t,” Cletus continued. “God wouldn’t say something so stupid. The Creator of the heavens doesn’t care what her hair looks like, and He doesn’t care what she’s wearing. I’m pretty sure He’s got his hands full with more weighty matters, like dark matter, and black holes, and ISIS, and ignorant bikers of the criminal variety.”

“Winston, this is the last time I’ll ask you nicely to mind your own damn business,” Isaac seethed, his hands balling into fists.

“Besides,” Cletus went on philosophically, “you think those dresses your parents have her in don’t inspire lust? You think men all around these parts

aren't daydreaming about bending her over and lifting her skirt and—”

I gasped and, clearly forgetting myself, quickly covered Cletus's mouth with my hand. But I was too late. Isaac shoved me to the side and lifted his fist, intent on pummeling the words from Cletus's brain. A sound of fear and despair escaped my throat before I could catch it, and the world lurched forward in slow motion. I braced for his fist to make contact, wincing in terror.

But it didn't happen.

Cletus blocked him, then leaned to the side in a remarkably agile movement for such a large man. Isaac ended up putting his fist through the shelf of canned goods, hitting his forehead in the process. Incensed and undaunted, he spun and walked right into Cletus's left hook, and the sickening sound of bones crunching filled my ears. I covered my mouth to suppress another gasp as Cletus followed the first punch with a second, the momentum of which threw Isaac backward and against the shelves.

My brother fell to the ground, his head banging against the bottom shelf on the way down. Blood gushed from his nose, mouth, and a cut on his left eyebrow, flowing to his white shirt and leather jacket.

Tina stood to one side, gawking at Cletus.

But instinctual worry for my brother sent me rushing forward. “Oh no!”

Before I could reach Isaac, Cletus wrapped his arms around my waist and lifted me from the floor.

“I have one more thing to say,” Cletus growled, my back pressed to his front, his beard against my temple. The quality of his voice—low with scarcely restrained rage—made me stiffen and grow still in his arms. The dangerous intensity behind his words sent a shiver of apprehension down my spine.

“Do you honestly think God would make a creature as lovely and talented and good as your sister, and then make the way she looks something sinful? Something to be ashamed of? No. He wouldn't. If anything, your sister—her face, her body, her mind, and her heart—give glory to Him. And she shouldn't be hidden. You don't hide something that remarkable away from the world, like your parents have done, like you want to do. That's the true sin.”

Then, immediately, Cletus turned me in his arms, tossed me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, and announced, “Time to go.”

CHAPTER 21

“Love makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place.”

— Zora Neale Hurston

~Jennifer~

Cletus exited the Piggly Wiggly like the hounds of hell were at our ankles. The suddenness of being thrown over his shoulder knocked the wind from my lungs and I gasped for air, unable to find purchase as I endeavored to cough. But I was never in danger of falling. Even though he moved swiftly, I didn’t budge or slip from his shoulder.

He carried us straight to the parking lot, set me in front of a car I didn’t recognize, then opened the passenger door.

“Get in,” he ordered, glancing over his shoulder.

I was dizzy, black spots moving in and out of my vision, but the time spent in the store—being tossed about by Drill and my brother and eventually Cletus—had finally registered in my brain.

“I’m not getting in.” I gasped, coughing, a surge of something dark and ferocious climbing to the surface and making my bones feel rigid and cold.

I was just so . . . I was just so incredibly *angry*. And I was tired of people telling me what to do.

“Dammit, woman, please get in the car.” Cletus pulled his fingers through his long hair.

“I’m not getting in your freaking car,” I screeched, shoving at his chest, needing to scream.

Cletus flinched, visibly startled by my outburst, but the very next moment he stepped into my space, bent his mouth to my ear, and said, “We are being watched by seven members of the Iron Wraiths—don’t look! They’re two rows over and behind me. I have just assaulted one of their brethren. You need to get in this car before Twilight emerges with his rearranged face or Tina screams bloody murder. I’m not going to force you to get in the car, but there’s no way I’m leaving you here.”

Sobering dread cut through my cloud of anger and my hands automatically lifted to Cletus’s arms, the feel of his solid strength beneath my fingertips reassuring.

He leaned a few inches away and glared down at me, his eyebrows raised just slightly. I could almost hear his voice in my head saying, “*Get in the fucking car right goddamn now. Please.*”

Without another word, I slid into the passenger seat and shut the door after me, hastily fastening my seatbelt. The urge to look at the bikers was strong, but I didn’t. Instead, I kept my eyes studiously affixed to the dashboard as Cletus rounded the back and entered the driver’s side.

He turned the engine, placed it in reverse, and pulled out of the spot like nothing was amiss. But then I heard a scream. Fright had me sucking in the breath as Tina Patterson’s form emerged from the grocery store and pointed at us.

“Get him! He knocked out Twilight! He’s taking his sister,” she bellowed, waving her arms.

Unable to help myself, I twisted in my seat and—to my horror—watched as the fleet of bikers glanced between Tina and us. Her words sunk in, spurring them into motion.

“Hold on.” Cletus peeled out of the parking lot, no need for clandestine maneuvers at this point, and set off at neck-breaking speed down the main thoroughfare. I did as instructed and held on to the door and the back of the bench, relieved I’d already buckled my seatbelt.

His car was fast, but it was big. And the bikers were more nimble on their motorcycles. Several cut across the lot, chasing at a diagonal when Cletus was forced to take a turn. Two were almost directly behind us, the others some distance back.

“My phone is in the glove compartment. I want you to call Duane and put him on speaker.” Given the situation, Cletus’s voice was remarkably calm. He split his attention between the rearview mirror and the road ahead.

With irritatingly shaking fingers, I fumbled for his phone.

“The password is one, zero, one, zero.”

I nodded, quickly typing it in, navigating to Duane in his contacts, and highlighting the speaker button.

The phone rang and I searched behind us. The two bikers hadn’t come any closer, because Cletus was driving like a maniac, still accelerating while he weaved through the sparse traffic.

“What’s up?” Duane answered on the third ring.

“Are you at the house?”

Duane hesitated for a moment, then said, “I’m nearby.”

“How close?”

“Real close.”

“Listen to me. I have seven Wraiths on my tail, I can’t tell you why right now. I need your help.”

“Anything.” Duane didn’t hesitate, but his tone held an odd edge that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up straight.

“My keys for the Buick are in the top drawer of my side table. Take the Buick to the end of the driveway, leave the lights off, and wait for me to drive by the house. I’m in its twin and will be there in approximately five minutes. After I drive past, pull onto Moth Run and turn on your lights. I’ll cut mine and take the side road behind the house. You lead them away.”

“Where do you want me to take them?”

“Lead these gentleman to the police station and get out of the car, so they can see they’ve lost me. They’ll back off when they see it’s you and where you are.”

“Or I could take them on a goose chase.”

“No. If they catch up, it won’t be good.”

“They won’t catch me.” Duane made a scoffing sound.

“Duane, just do as I say.” Cletus reached over and ended the call.

I gripped his phone and glanced anxiously at my side mirror. I didn’t say anything, because Cletus could likely see for himself, but one of the bikers was almost flanking my side. It was so dark, and I couldn’t decipher what the man was doing. He might’ve had a gun.

The next several minutes were terrifying, but I remained quiet, not wanting to distract him from what he needed to do. My heart was beating in triple time when the Winston place came into view, set back from the road and lit up like an old, stately mansion. The end of the driveway was dark, but I knew Duane would be there.

Cletus hit the accelerator and I was pressed back against the seat, my eyes on the side mirror. The motorcycles’ headlights diminished to small dots as

he placed distance between us. Clearly they'd expected his destination to be the Winston house.

As soon as we passed the end of their drive, Cletus switched off his lights. Almost immediately after that, he slammed on the brakes and yanked the wheel to one side, pulling onto a road I'd never noticed. Or maybe it wasn't a road. Either way, it was too dark for me to see. We were surrounded by blackness and forest and the car jostled violently. For all I knew, we were about to hit a tree.

Rather than give voice to my uncertainty and fear, I rolled my lips between my teeth and braced.

The car came to an abrupt stop. He cut the engine and silence fell like a blanket around us. Then I heard the roar of a car engine pass, followed closely by the reverberations of several motorcycles. Less than a minute later I heard several more; they reached a crescendo, then began to fade. And then nothing.

He unbuckled his seatbelt, the suddenness of the sound startling me, and I listened as he did the same to mine. He reached for me, tugged me across the bench, and pulled me into a tight embrace. Cletus's hands moved over my body as though he were searching.

I felt his heart hammer in his ribcage, the first real sign that he was anything less than calm and collected. Strangely, realizing that he wasn't impervious to fear helped mine feel less cumbersome.

"Hey, hey." I pulled away, just slightly because his arms wouldn't let me go far. "Are you okay?"

"Are you?" he returned, his hands coming to my face and tipping my chin back. I couldn't see a thing, but I got the sense he could see me. His thumb traced the line of my jaw, then skimmed down the side of my neck, making me shiver. "That last stretch was rough on the shocks. You hurt?"

I shook my head, not quite able to speak because where I was—in the middle of nowhere—plus who I was with—the man I'd been thinking about non-stop—meant my body was responding and reacting in ways I didn't have much control over.

Despite the lingering adrenaline, or maybe because of it, I couldn't help notice the intimacy of our position. How I sat straddling his lap, how our

chests were pressed together, how he smelled like mint and soap and aftershave and Cletus.

He released a breath; it fell over my face and sounded relieved. “Good. I didn’t know. You were so quiet. I can’t believe how quiet you were, the whole time you didn’t say a word.” I felt his eyes on me, but he remained in shadow. “Are you in shock?”

I shook my head again, sliding my hands from his shoulders to his biceps, liking how his muscles felt under my fingers. Touching him, feeling him beneath me, being surrounded by Cletus made my stomach twist and release, an aching warmth pooling low in my belly, between my legs.

“Cletus,” I whispered, climbing higher on his lap, wanting to press closer, wondering—quite suddenly—what his skin felt like. I wished—with equal suddenness—that the barrier of our clothes didn’t exist.

He grew very still and I sensed his breathing change. He could see me. Maybe he couldn’t see me perfectly, but he obviously could make out my features.

“Jenn . . .” My name was a low rumble, not quite a whisper, not quite a breath.

“I miss you,” I said, instinct had me rocking against him, trying to ease the ache at my center.

“Oh fuck, don’t do that.” He grabbed my arms as though to hold me still.

I didn’t want to hold still. I wanted to kiss him. So I did.

I covered his mouth with mine, shaking his grip from my arms as I wrapped them around his neck. At first he did nothing, but I didn’t care. He still tasted good, and his mouth was hot and soft and wonderful. I wanted him, so I took him. I swept my tongue out and licked him, like he’d done to me eleven days ago, loving how he parted lips and moaned in response.

Suddenly and quite forcefully, he was participating. He grabbed my ponytail and I gasped. He captured the sound of surprise, his tongue expertly loving mine, and he used his leverage to tilt my head to the side, opening me, consuming me with his kisses.

I felt him lengthen and harden against my inner thigh and my body shuddered in response. Unthinkingly, I pressed down, shifting my hips. His legs tensed, the muscles like granite, and he tore his mouth away.

“Jenn—”

“Don’t stop.” *I know I’m not what you want, but don’t you dare stop.*

I moved my fingers into his jacket, pushing it off, searching for his lips. Instead, I found the side of his face, but I didn’t care. I kissed his cheekbone, his jaw beneath his beard, and his neck.

“I’m not going to stop,” he growled, pulling his arms from his coat, sounding ill-tempered and impatient. His fingers immediately returned, digging into my backside.

I bit his neck again, liking the way he tasted, loving the texture of his skin on my tongue.

Cletus’s hands slid under the hem of my shirt, up the side of my waist to my ribcage, massaging and grabbing, each touch sending a thrill of nerves and awareness racing through me. Then higher, bunching the sweater under my arms, moving to cup me through my bra. I shivered and a short, hot breath of surprised wonder escaped me; he pulled my bra down and rubbed a tight circle around the center of my breast.

“Don’t stop, don’t stop,” I chanted, arching, reaching for the clasp of my bra. “Touch me.”

I could offer no other direction, but that paltry demand seemed to be enough. With deft fingers, he unhooked my bra much faster than I ever could, and pushed my sweater and top over my head. He grasped my naked torso and brought his mouth to my breast.

My hips bucked at the sharp sensation of his teeth closing over my nipple, an instinctual movement. The aching heat had become a painful, restless thing.

“Shhhh,” Cletus said, blowing a cold breath over the wet patch left by his mouth, then scraping his teeth back and forth over the sensitive peak, sending a frenzied wave of goosebumps over my skin.

I tugged on his shirt, wanting the heat of his body. He lifted his arms obligingly, then immediately began lavishing my breasts with hungry, biting kisses, fondling and caressing with his big hands.

Everything felt so good. His mouth and hands felt essential. I could only push my fingers into his long hair and hold him to me, arching and straining for . . . something more.

As fantastic as this felt, it only served to increase my restlessness. “Cletus, touch me.”

“I am,” he said between frustratingly fantastic kisses.

“Please, Cletus. Please.” I couldn’t withstand this torture, this agonizing longing. I moaned, sucking in a needful breath followed by pleading words tumbling from my lips. He was holding back, I could sense his hesitation. I was dying and he gave me only raindrops to quench the thirst.

He stiffened, his hands moving to my sides and back. Hastily, he drew me from his lap.

I swallowed a groan of protest as he clamped a hand over my mouth and whispered, “Someone is outside.”

Cold fingers of fear unraveled the thread of desire, tugging me harshly back to reality. Deftly, he found my shirt and placed it in my hands while I strained to listen. A twig or a branch cracked. Leaves rustled and crunched under a booted foot. I held my breath and tugged the shirt over my head. It was too big. I was braless, swimming in soft cotton and the intoxicating smell of him. It was Cletus’s.

A flashlight moved through the trees, its beam passing over the car. But then it continued to move. They—whoever they were—hadn’t spotted us yet.

Then, Cletus’s phone rang.

He had it set to silent, so it buzzed and flashed. He lunged for it as though to reject the call, but then he stopped short, his frowning face illuminated by the small screen. His eyes lifted to the windshield, to the searching flashlight, then back to the phone.

He swiped his thumb across the touchscreen and brought the phone to his ear, whispering, “Hello?”

“Cletus It’s Jess. Where are you?”

I heard her voice in stereo, both dimly through the phone as well as distantly from outside the car.

He breathed out, switching the phone to his other ear.

“We see your flashlight. We’re not quite to the cabin, still on the side road.”

“We?” Her voice was still audible, and she made no attempt to lower it. The flashlight stilled, then moved in a slow, horizontal arc. “Who is with you?”

“We’ll come to you. Don’t move.” He removed the phone from his ear and ended the call, the screen fading to black.

“Cletus,” I fumbled for his hand, “I have to tell you something.”

The hand I searched for cupped my jaw just before he covered my mouth with a sweet, devastating kiss. His lips were amorous and cherishing; the slow slide of his tongue made me dizzy and breathless. I was reminded of drinking champagne two weeks ago at the talent show. Cletus left me fuzzy-headed and warm, wanting more.

Pressing our foreheads together, he said, “If you could just keep your thoughts to yourself for five minutes, I’d really appreciate it.”

“What? Why?” I asked automatically, covering his hand with mine.

“Give me five minutes to live the fantasy.”

I tried to see him, but it was too dark. His words sounded like a riddle and flooded my mind with questions.

Was I a fantasy? Or were we? Did that mean he wanted me? Or that we could *only* be together in a fantasy situation?

I cursed the dark, needing to see him to know better what he was thinking. My stomach fluttered with nerves, because—if we only had five minutes left in the fantasy—I wanted to kiss him again.

Before I could, I was blinded by the sudden beam of a flashlight shining directly into the car. I recoiled back and shielded my eyes, squinting at the shape hovering outside Cletus’s window.

“Dammit, Jess. I said we’d be right there.” Cletus released me and tugged his jacket out from behind him.

“What happened to your shirt, Cletus? And who is that with you? Are y’all making out? Did I interrupt?” The laughter in Jessica’s voice helped to ease my mortification.

Her light shone directly on him, dimly illuminating his body in high relief, and my gaze dropped to his naked torso. I felt my eyes widen, marking my surprise but also my appreciation.

I couldn't help myself. I stared at him.

I don't know what I thought he would look like without a shirt on, but the reality of his bare chest, arms, and abdomen affected me like another glass of champagne. He was . . . well, he was beautiful. I wanted to touch him again, and this time I wanted to do it in a well-lit room.

And I want him to lie perfectly still while I kiss and lick and touch and bite and do whatever I want to his gorgeous body.

"What's wrong?"

The irritated edge to his words yanked me back to the present and I blinked at him, startled.

"Nothing is wrong," I said too quickly.

Jess tapped impatiently on the glass of his window. "Come on, Cletus. Put the condom down and let me meet your lady friend."

His gaze flickered to mine, then away, his expression grumpy but otherwise unreadable. "You're going to pay for that, Jess."

She laughed, the flashlight swinging away from the window. Actually, she cackled.

Cletus zipped his jacket to his neck and moved as though to exit. Remembering that I had on the wrong top, I reached for his hand.

"Wait. I'm wearing your shirt."

"I know," Cletus said, not looking me as he popped open the driver's side door. "I wanted to see what you'd look like wearing it."

"So . . ." Jessica was beaming. Her big brown eyes bounced between Cletus and me. "Good to see you, Jennifer," she gushed. Again.

She'd brought us to her cabin—or Duane's cabin, I didn't quite know—and Cletus sat on one of the chairs adjacent to a small table. She asked us to remove our shoes, so we did, placing my heels and Cletus's boots by the front door.

I sat on the second chair, the table between us, and tried not to twist my fingers while I stared at the dichotomy of our shoes: my high heels and his muddy work boots. For some reason the image of them together sent a thrill through me.

Meanwhile, Jess was sitting on the bed. The cabin was one room and quite small. Just the aforementioned table, two chairs, a bed, and a fireplace. It was cozy and meant for two. I liked it.

“Thank you. And thank you for your help.” I returned her big smile.

“Has Duane called?” Cletus—who wore his red and black-checkered jacket zipped over his bare chest—glanced at his phone. “He should have called by now.”

“He texted me before I left to find you. He made it to the station.”

Cletus nodded once, slipping his phone into the pocket of his jacket. “Good. That’s good.”

“Do you want to tell me what happened? Why were those bikers chasing you?” Jessica’s gaze bounced between us.

“They were upset I switched their tampons with Depends.” Cletus sounded so serious and reasonable, I almost believed him. And I’d been there.

“Cletus.” I shook my head and wrinkled my nose at him, then turned to Jessica. “My brother was there and he—” I swallowed, the words catching in my throat, so I cleared it. “He was being unpleasant. Cletus appeared and things escalated.”

“I punched him in the face,” he explained, his tone pragmatic like he’d just admitted to clipping his toenails. “Also, Tina says hi.”

Jessica’s mouth dropped open and her eyebrows lifted high on her forehead. “You punched Isaac?”

“I did.” Cletus nodded. “In the face. And Tina says hi.”

“Cletus, I don’t care about Tina,” Jess sputtered for a moment, blinking and frowning. Her gaze moved to me and softened with concern. “I guess Isaac must’ve been saying some real ugly things?”

“He did.” Cletus’s jaw ticked, his eyes narrowing just briefly. “But he won’t be saying much of anything for a bit. I think I broke his jaw.”

“Oh my God.” Jess covered her mouth and addressed her next question to me. “Are you okay? That couldn’t have been easy to see.”

“I’m okay. Just a little,” *emotionally exhausted*, “tired.”

She gave me a sympathetic nod and sighed. “Well, if y’all want to stay here, feel free.” Jessica stood and reached for her coat on the end of the bed. “The sheets are clean and there’s plenty of firewood.”

Heat crawled up my neck. My cheeks flared at her words. I couldn’t decide if her assumption—that Cletus and I were sleeping together—inspired embarrassment or pleasure. Either way, I felt hot, oddly delighted, and agitated.

Cletus stood and I stood in unison. Jess turned to us with a small smile.

“I’m glad you’re okay and I’m glad you called Duane.” She gave him a tight hug. “Sorry for giving you a hard time.”

“You’re not sorry.” He lifted an eyebrow at her as she pulled away.

“You’re right. I’m not.” Jessica shrugged, grinning.

“Hmm. Well, regardless, thanks for letting me borrow Duane’s driving skills.”

“You know he loves to help.” Jessica turned to me. “I’m sorry about your brother saying nasty things, but I’m glad Cletus was there to break his jaw.”

A small burst of laughter tumbled from my lips. I didn’t know how to feel about Isaac or his broken jaw. The things he’d said . . .

Her eyes moved over me, then she *tsked* and gathered me into a snug hug. “Let me know when y’all are ready for Big Todd’s. Duane and I don’t mind going back, whenever.”

My expression was both a smile of gratefulness and a frown of confusion as she pulled away. “What’s Big Todd’s?”

Her gaze jumped to Cletus then to mine, her eyes wider than before and her voice an octave higher. “Uh, it’s a shop. And, when you’re ready to go, just give me a call. Cletus has my number.” She tossed her thumb over her shoulder and walked backward to the door. “I have to get out of here now, before I’m late for the thing.”

With that Jessica turned and fled, shutting the door firmly behind her, and leaving us alone.

Completely and utterly alone.

. . . *yep*.

After a full minute, I slid my eyes to the side and up to his profile. He was staring at the door with a thoughtful frown, and his gaze appeared to be unfocused. My attention dropped to his neck, where his jacket met his bare skin. I licked my lips. Now I knew what his skin tasted like.

The evening had been a turbulent ride of emotion and crazy. I was tired, but I was also wired. And sad, because of Isaac. And elated, because of what had happened in the car with Cletus. But then, sad again, because . . . what did it mean?

I thought about the words he'd said to Billy at the restaurant in Nashville, while everyone was pretending not to listen. *If it's an empty, physical attraction, then there was no point in pursuing a relationship with the person.* Paired with his comment in the car moments ago, about living in the fantasy, my heart hurt at the possibility that Cletus didn't much like me.

He liked the way I looked, the thrilling grope-fest moments ago had made that fact abundantly clear; but how he felt—or didn't feel—about me as a person remained a mystery.

Well, that wasn't strictly true. His words at the Piggly Wiggly were still on my mind, but I hadn't had the time to process them. *Do you honestly think God would make a creature as lovely and talented and good as your sister, and then make the way she looks something sinful? Something to be ashamed of? No. He wouldn't. If anything, your sister—her face, her body, her mind, and her heart—give glory to Him. And she shouldn't be hidden. You don't hide something that remarkable away from the world, like your parents have done, like you want to do. That's the true sin.*

Yet even though he'd said those lovely words in my defense, I wasn't what he wanted. He'd made that abundantly clear.

Instinct and experience had me preparing my heart for rejection. But then a flare of anger surged and sent a spike of determination down my spine. I straightened, standing as tall as I could, and crossed my arms. I angled my chin, resolve chasing my fear away. I wasn't going to twist myself into knots, try to be something I wasn't. I wasn't crying over him or anyone else.

I am who I am. I am who I'm becoming.

"I'd like to go home now," I announced to the room.

Cletus flinched just slightly, as though I'd startled him. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, and then turned to me. He didn't touch me, just moved his eyes over my face as though it might've changed in the last hour.

"Jennifer," he started, stopped, pressed his lips together, frowned, swallowed, then began again. "We need to talk."

"Fine. Talk."

He gathered a large breath and adopted his thoughtful frown, it was the face he used when delivering bad news. "Here are the facts: you and I aren't suited, but I—"

"Fine. I'd like to go home now." I lifted my chin higher, calm detachment permeating every syllable. My heart hardened further, growing cold in my chest. If he didn't like me for who I was, then . . . *he can keep his bull, because the cow just died.*

"Wait. I'm not finished."

"I don't care."

"Hear me out." His frowned deepened, looking more genuine, and his hand rose to my arm as though to hold me in place.

I shook off his fingers and took a step back. "No, I will not hear you out. I will not stand here and listen to you tell me that we were just practicing, or that we're not suited, or that you don't feel for me what I so clearly feel for you. So save the shit for your garden and drive me home."

Something sharpened behind his eyes as they narrowed on me, and he gained the step I'd placed between us. "What do you feel for me?"

"None-none of your business," I stammered, the look in his eye unnerving, "Now either you take me home, or back to my car, or—"

"I hypothesize that you're in love with me."

My mouth fell open. "Pardon?"

"You're in love with me." He nodded, like I'd said the words.

I stared at his handsome face, gawking. My mind now completely devoid of thought because he'd chased it away with his hypothesis.

"I'll take your silence as an implicit agreement." Cletus's voice lowered an octave and he gained another step forward, his eyes on my lips.

“You-you-you will do no such thing.” I backed away. “I’m not in love with you.”

. . . am I?

I shook my head, scrunching my face with frustration. Maybe now wasn’t the best time to be having this conversation.

“Really?” His gaze grew softer, his voice echoed the gentle and vulnerable quality of his eyes. “Because I’m in love with you.”

My mouth dropped open. Then it closed. Then it opened again. An explosion of sensations rocked me back on my heels. Those were not the words I’d expected him to say. Not at all.

Not ever

All the air left my lungs on a whoosh and frenzied heat slid up my neck and chest. “I don’t . . . I don’t understand you,” I whispered, shaking my head, rejecting his words while attempting to make sense of the moment.

We’re not well suited

Confusion clouded my vision, I couldn’t see.

“I’m not surprised. I’m not very understandable,” he said softly. “But understand this.” Cletus captured my chin with deft fingers and lifted it. I braced myself, preparing for whatever handsome assault he had planned, then met his eyes.

My knees wobbled. The way he was looking at me, at my mouth . . . *Good Lord!*

I swayed, feeling light-headed. He was going to kiss me again. And this time, looking into his eyes, I surmised the only thing stopping us from consummating our bewildering relationship was me. And I didn’t want to stop us.

“What are you doing?” I flattened my hands on his chest.

“You know what I’m doing,” he grumbly whispered, sending a wave of white-hot loveliness and tension through my body, making my toes curl.

I shook my head, panic and hope picking fights with each other, causing a ruckus. “I don’t. I honestly do not.”

“Then let me show you.”

“Cletus.” I bent my head to the side but maintained eye contact, moving my hands to grip his biceps. “I’m not made for this.”

“What’s that?”

“For love.” The words were out before I could catch them, before I knew I was going to say them.

I immediately regretted my honesty because his eyes both gentled and hardened. “I beg to differ. I propose it’s *exactly* what you’re made for.” An edge of anger entered his voice.

Giving into my panic, I blurted, “Because that’s what would happen. I would fall in love with you and then you’d break my heart.”

“I can’t break your heart without breaking mine, and I’m terribly fond of my heart.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to separate the act from the feeling. I can’t treat it like a sport. I’m going to burn the toast.”

He nodded thoughtfully, as though considering my words, his hand sliding down my back to cup my bottom; he rubbed my backside from hip to thigh, then squeezed.

“I’m good with that.” His tone was maddeningly pragmatic.

I moaned as he pressed my body to his and I felt the evidence of his desire. “Be serious, Cletus.”

“I am serious, Jenn. I need to finish what I started when we were prematurely interrupted earlier. Nothing is going to happen tonight beyond some serious touching.” He paused, then tilted his head to the side in a considering manner. “Depending on what your definition of ‘serious’ is.”

“This is not a game!”

He loosened his grip, his eyes turning earnest but no less desirous. “You’re not a game to me.”

“Then what am I to you, Cletus? Because you can’t possibly expect me to believe that you’re in love with me,” I scoffed, shaking my head.

But then he looked at me.

Just simply looked.

And I blinked my surprise.

The many different “Cletuses” fell away. No artifice, no mind games, no jokes, no walls—it was just the man. The raw truth of him—of his soul—was beautiful. It was precious to me.

He was precious to me.

“You want to know what you are to me? Fine. You’re my beginning, middle, and end.”

The words hit me square in the chest, through the heart, straight to my soul.

Our gazes clashed and held. I gasped for air, tears stinging behind my eyes one moment, then leaving hot trails down my cheeks the next.

Unable to help myself, I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him.

CHAPTER 22

“Perhaps there is a soul hidden in everything and it can always speak, without even making a sound, to another soul.”

— Frances Hodgson Burnett, *A Little Princess*

~Cletus~

My woman was extraordinary.

She was also unzipping my jacket, her greedy hands sliding over my chest and stomach. I tensed under her fingertips and reinitiated composing the unsexy list I’d been making in the car, before Jessica had happened upon us with her flashlight. I was detailing a list of all the old fellas I played shuffleboard with and whether I’d won or let them win. Proud old men threw the worst temper tantrums and thinking on their disgruntled faces would hopefully save my sanity.

Not much about my Friday had gone according to design, but things were certainly looking up.

I’d begun my day with a solid plan to win Jennifer’s affections. We weren’t going to rush things, just the opposite. The first phase of my plan included bumping into her at the Piggly Wiggly. I was going to play it like a happy coincidence. Then, I was going to strike up a conversation, as the people do, during which I would invite her to dinner.

I knew Jennifer stopped into the store every Friday and Sunday for a crate of bananas. Everyone knew this. So I arrived early, before they opened, and waited. By 4:00 PM I was worried. By 8:00 PM I was near a fit. I asked Billy to drive past the bakery on his way home, and he’d confirmed her car was still there.

I waited.

I watched the Wraiths walk into the store around 9:40 PM, not thinking much of it. Jenn finally pulled into the parking lot ten minutes later and jogged inside, obviously in a rush. I followed. And that’s when the plan went to Hades in a handbasket.

The original plan had several phases, all of which adhered to the commonly accepted rituals of human courtship. I'd intended to keep the depth of my feelings to myself for as long as she needed to catch up, at which point she would say the words first, I would concur, we would become engaged, buy a stretch of land, Jethro would build a house as a wedding present, and I'd insist on raised garden beds for Jennifer's overall-wearing activities.

Now, the primary phase of the plan was mostly irrelevant, seeing as how her hands were currently moving over my body like I was something brand new.

Which brings me back to my extraordinary woman.

I hadn't expected this accelerated pace of change in the emotional or physical portions of our relationship. I could and would adapt, but the suddenness required a quantity of unsexy lists.

My jacket fell to the floor and her mouth moved to my shoulder and collarbone, biting a trail to my chest. Her movements were almost frantic, and I recognized she was losing herself to the moment. I needed to be level-headed enough for both of us, and so focused on my list.

I bent and kissed her just under her ear, blowing hot breath along her neck and shoulder, allowing myself to enjoy how her body responded, how she stiffened and arched. She pressed against me and I felt her restlessness.

What she'd experienced in the canned vegetable aisle of the Piggly Wiggly had been a trauma, not only because of what her brother had said, but also due to what I had done in punching the little shit.

Let me be clear: I didn't regret it, and I would do it again. Gladly.

But we wouldn't be losing ourselves to passion tonight. I wouldn't allow it. I didn't wish to compound her ordeal by crossing a line she'd regret. I worried for her even as I lifted the cotton shirt she wore and slipped my hands up her sides, her hot, satin-smooth skin beneath my fingertips fraying the edges of my self-possession.

I gripped her and my restraint, held both close. She had my heart. I wanted hers very, very badly. And I wanted her heart for the long term. I would do whatever was required to demonstrate the depth of my regard. I wanted her to feel good.

But I would not lose control. Losing control would mean losing her.

“Cletus, touch me.” Her breath hitched, her gorgeous eyes moving between mine. “Please.”

“I am touching you.” My voice was gravelly and strained. I cleared my throat.

A sudden frown marred her features and frustration pierced the fog of desire in her stare. “Where are you? Where is your mind right now?”

I blinked at her and the allegation. “My mind is on you.” I moved to kiss her again and flexed my fingers on her skin.

She evaded my mouth. “You’re distracted, I can tell. You were distracted in the car and you’re distracted now.”

Astute woman is . . . still very astute.

“What makes you think so?” I hedged.

“Because I know what it’s like when you’re not. When you kissed me for practice—”

“That wasn’t practice.” Suddenly, I felt it vitally important that she know the truth about that night. “I kissed you because I couldn’t help myself.”

“Oh.” Her eyes grew wide, as though this was news to her. “Wait, what? You couldn’t help yourself? I thought it was practice.”

“No, Jenn. That’s wasn’t practice. That was me wanting you.”

Her eyes grew a little hazy and a small smile arrested her features, but then almost immediately she blinked, as though clearing her head, and said, “Well, it was different the first time. Why was it different?”

She studied me with eyes now shaded a deep, rich purple. Almost indigo. But I hardly noticed the color because I was too preoccupied being captivated by the woman. A stirring in my chest, a sudden longing had me tightening the leash on my restraint.

She was so beautiful, my Jennifer. And not because of her eyes, or face, or any other outward attributes. The person she was held me transfixed. How could I have disregarded her? How could I have looked at her with anything but wonder and respect and desire?

“It wouldn’t be prudent for our continued longevity to do anything you’re not ready for.” I had to swallow, my voice again rough and unsteady.

Her frown deepened, her body growing stiff. “You’re holding yourself back because you’re worried about my lack of experience.”

Jennifer drew an inch away and I stopped her, bringing her body back to mine. “No. Not precisely that. You’ve been through an ordeal this evening, and I’ve just made a confession I’m not sure you were ready to hear.”

“So . . . what?” Her tone held a hint of irritation and desperation. “You tell me you love me and want to, what? Shake hands?”

“No. I don’t want to shake hands.” I didn’t catch my grin in time—her prosaic suggestion struck me as both funny and depressing. I captured her cheeks in my palms and pressed a slow, savoring kiss to her mouth, leaning away to whisper, “Like I said, serious touching.”

“It doesn’t feel serious. It feels safe.”

I lifted an eyebrow at this. “Don’t you want safe?”

She shook her head, more desperation bleeding into her voice. “No. I don’t.”

I scrutinized her, clenching my jaw, burying the rising passion. Crushing it. “Jenn, I won’t lose you to regret.”

Her soft exhale fluttered over my lips and chin. She regarded me silently, still frowning, her eyes darting between mine. She seemed agitated.

So I added, “You tell me what you want, and I’ll make it happen. But think carefully before you do.”

She licked her lips. “Anything? You’ll do anything I want?” Something sharpened behind her eyes, an idea or a thought, and her jaw and neck relaxed beneath my fingers.

I held very still, because the question sounded like a precursor to a trap; I tried to pull her intentions from her mind but encountered a brick wall. I dropped my hands from her face and slid them to her shoulders.

“I’ll do anything within reason.”

“Fine.” She nodded once, crossing her arms and gaining a full step backward. “Take your clothes off.”

I blinked at her. I blinked at her request. It was not what I’d been expecting.

“Pardon me?”

“Take off your clothes.”

My hands went to my waist, a spike of apprehension passing through me. “I don’t have a shirt on.”

She lifted her chin and ordered, “Take off your pants.”

I stared at her, fighting a rising tide of horniness induced trepidation. “Jenn—”

“You can keep your underwear on. Or your boxers. Whichever. I just . . .” she gathered a deep breath, as though gathering courage through the air, “I want to see you. I know you’re right, that I’m wrecked and muddled from the day’s events, but I also know, no matter what happens tomorrow, I’ll never regret spending the rest of this evening discovering and touching your body.”

She ended by biting her bottom lip, her eyes wide with confessing her secret want.

I stared at her, uncertain what to do.

This is a bad idea.

I was breathing heavier, my heart beat like a drum, the reverberations from each constriction shaking my chest and throbbing in my dick.

This is a bad idea.

“Please,” she asked softly, shuffling forward and placing her hands on my stomach. I flinched at the contact. “Please let me just . . .”

She didn’t finish the thought. Instead her hands slid down my body while she held my stare captivated, her fingers gripped the button of my jeans. She unfastened it, unzipped the fly, pushed her fingertips into the waistband, and pushed them down my hips.

Her fingers lifted and curled around mine. She took a step back, still holding me with her gaze and grasping my hand, as though guiding me, she motioned to the bed. “Lie down.”

I released a rough breath, resisting her pull. “This is a bad idea.”

“Step out of your pants and lie on the bed.” The command disguised as an entreaty sounded entirely reasonable; she’d paired it with a small, hopeful, hypnotizing smile.

I'd been with several women before, always discerning bakers, working professionals who were interested in a no-strings-attached arrangement. But I'd never been hypnotized before. I'd never had to remind myself to maintain my control. I'd never even come close to losing control.

If Jenn had glanced down she would have seen my obvious erection, jutting from my hips and tenting my boxers, hard and near painful. But she didn't. Her attention held me transfixed. My good judgment was strangely silent.

I pulled my feet out of the jeans and allowed her to lead me the short three steps to the bed. Her eyes hadn't lowered since she'd made her initial request. They didn't move from mine as she placed her hands lightly on my shoulders and directed me to the mattress, pushing me until I lay flat on my back.

It wasn't until she reached for the button of her jeans that I disentangled myself from the trance.

"What are you doing?" I asked sharply, preparing to sit up.

She placed her palm flat on my chest and pushed me back. "The cuffs of my jeans are dirty. I don't want to get the bed messed up."

Jenn made quick work of unfastening her fly. My eyes dropped to her legs, bared inch by inch as she removed her pants. She still wore my shirt and it fell to her thighs, just above her knees. The sight of her, standing at the edge of the bed, dressed only in my shirt, had me swallowing desire and a plea for more skin. Instead, I fisted my hands at my sides.

This is a very bad idea.

As though sensing my imminent movement, Jenn hastily moved to straddle me, her hands coming to my wrists.

"Don't you dare get up."

Every one of my muscles tensed, lucidity persisting and reminding me that I was in love with this woman. I loved her both rationally and irrationally. And I wanted her with a ferocity that had kept me awake at night and tortured during the day.

I was halfway upright when her mouth came to mine and she kissed me.

"Please, Cletus," she beseeched between hot kisses, her fingertips sliding up my ribs, then unexpectedly whipping off her shirt.

Jennifer pressed her breasts against me and wrapped her arms around my neck, shifting her hips higher and providing tortuous friction, unknowingly shredding my restraint. "Please, I want to touch you. Let me touch you."

The sound of her begging, the hot, searing contact of her skin, her greedy mouth, snapped my thin leash of control. I easily rolled Jenn to her back, shoving her away so I could slide my hand down her luscious body, so I could capture her nipple in my mouth.

She bowed and arched, straining beneath my touch; her nails dug into my back, anchoring us together.

"You want to touch me?" I growled, grabbing her hand, bringing it to the front of my boxers and under the waistband. I pressed her palm against my erection, wrapped her fingers around it, showed her how to squeeze and stroke. A rush of breath escaped my lungs, segmented and savage desires closed the curtain on rational deliberation.

I was lost to her, to the moment, to passion. My fractured thoughts all began and ended with *need* and *want*. My fixations focused on how to most meritoriously bring her pleasure, how to best guarantee she screamed in ecstasy. I couldn't tear my mind from the preoccupation of her bare skin and the essential gratification of her fist around my cock.

I lifted my mouth from her breasts, relinquished her hand in my shorts, and slipped my fingers into the front of her underwear, combing through her curls, petting the soft hair until I found what I sought.

"Oh, oh, oh God!" She shuddered, her lips parted, her eyes wide and foggy with lust. She tilted her hips forward and threw her head back.

I'd never witnessed anything so sensual, so goddamn sexy. She was seduction and sin, excess and decadence.

"Is this what you want?" I demanded, rubbing her slick center and slipping my fingers into her luxurious heat.

She didn't respond, and I hadn't expected her to.

The compulsion to devour gripped me, the craving raged within me as I stroked her supple body and she mirrored my maneuverings with clumsy movements, holding and stroking me with no finesse. That too felt essential. It felt exactly right.

I felt the first pulsing of her release and I slowed my pace, drawing a confused whimper from her lips.

“Cletus, oh, please, don’t stop. Please. It feels . . . it feels—”

“I’m not going to stop.”

I wanted to prolong the moment, indulge myself. I wanted immersion in my primitive and possessive thoughts. From now on she would be mine: her skin was for my eyes only, for my mouth to cherish, my hands to touch. Her body was made for my body and I would claim her as she’d unknowingly claimed me.

“Cletus!” she cried out, trembling, twisting on the bed, unable to catch her breath in her orgasm.

She squeezed me reflexively and I pumped into her hand, coming along with her on a low roar of satisfaction and transitory fulfillment. I captured her mouth and her screams. Her heart beat along with my heart, our skin sliding together and she endeavored to press closer, as though she wanted to climb inside me and live within.

I know, because I feel the same.

Claire was right. Love negated experience. Completely and utterly. Love negated so many things. I was satisfied by my woman, by her unskilled touch, in a way I’d never been before. Because I’d been making love, and the person touching me had been Jennifer.

My Jennifer.

She was still out of breath, but I kissed her anyway. I wanted her hot mouth, the taste of her on my tongue. I wanted her naked and beneath me. I wanted her on her knees. I wanted her bent over and gasping. I wanted her on top, using me to pleasure herself. *I wanted . . .*

Sanity didn’t arrive all at once, it drifted, reaching the surface by degrees.

The first moment of clarity arrived when Jennifer pulled her mouth from mine and said, “Wait.”

I blinked at her, at her profile. She’d turned her face away, chasing air. I leaned an inch or two backward, my eyes moving over her cheeks, jaw, neck, then lower. My hand was still in her panties, stroking her. She moaned and shivered, the air she needed hitching in her lungs.

I swallowed, tasting not quite remorse, not quite dismay, but rather a sobering mixture of both.

Maybe she sensed the shift in my mood. Or maybe it was just a coincidence. Regardless, her eyes sought mine. They were still glazed and hazy.

They were also bright.

And happy.

And she was smiling.

“Mmm . . .” she hummed, cuddling closer, tucking her forehead into the crook of my neck. She placed a kiss on my chest. “When can we do that again?”

My woman was extraordinary.

CHAPTER 23

“Morality, it could be argued, represents the way that people would like the world to work, whereas economics represents how it actually does work.”

— Steven D. Levitt, *Freakonomics*

~Cletus~

“Where were you on Friday?”

The question startled me. My eyes shot up. Jethro stood on the other side of the counter, wearing a nice dress shirt that made his eyes look green. He was looking at me as though nothing was amiss.

He was up to no good.

I frowned at his sudden appearance. “You look nice. When did you get here?”

“Just now.”

I squinted at him. “Just now?”

“Yep. I let myself in.” He tossed his thumb over his shoulder, indicating the door.

I blinked at this news. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Really?” He leaned his elbow on the counter. “I wasn’t particularly quiet.”

“Hmm . . .” I shifted my attention back to the quote for service I was reviewing. Shelly had initiated it. She’d done a good job.

“Cletus?”

“Yeah?” I double-checked her figure for labor, comparing it to the dealer’s website. The labor amount seemed high, but it checked out.

“Where were you on Friday?”

I stilled, bracing for the flashes of memory: Jenn’s eyes as she pressed me back to the bed, her mouth on mine, her hands on me. The images and sensations had been playing on repeat since Friday night. As had the aftermath.

She'd climbed on top of my body and snuggled close, kissing my chest and neck and chin, saying, "I want us to be like this always."

"Cletus?" Jethro snapped his fingers in front of my face. "Hello? Where'd you go?"

"Someplace nicer than here," I mumbled. I'd meant it to be a joke, but it didn't sound like a joke. Maybe it didn't sound like a joke because it was the truth.

Being with Jennifer, just the two of us, was preferable to double-checking service quotes. Being alone with her was more preferable to anyone, anywhere, and anything else.

And there's the rub.

We had no place to be alone. For the first time in my life, I wasn't so keen on living at home and keeping tabs on my brothers. They could keep tabs on themselves.

"Speaking of nice places," I cleared my throat and endeavored to appear nonchalant, "do you know if Claire is still looking to rent her place?"

"I think so, why? You know someone?"

"I might." This glimmer of an idea had occurred to me on Saturday and was quickly becoming a wildfire. "I guess I'll give her a call."

Claire's place would be a good temporary fix. It was halfway between Jennifer's house and the Winston homestead. The old farmhouse sat on two acres of land, plenty of room for Jenn's garden beds. I'd have to invest in a writing desk for her, someplace close to a north- or south-facing window so she'd have the best light.

"You never answered my question," my brother pressed.

Jennifer Sylvester loved me. I loved Jennifer Sylvester.

A fact.

Surreal.

She hadn't said it yet, but I knew the truth. I could tell. Yep.

She loves me.

"Did you ask a question?" I was still thinking on Claire's place, the ideal privacy it would afford, and the *fact* that Jennifer loved me.

After cuddling for too short a time, I drove Jennifer home. I held her hand as we walked to the car. I held her hand while I drove. I held her hand as I walked her to her porch. And then I was forced to let go of her hand.

I'd had indigestion since. Not real indigestion; I was suffering from a type of heartburn caused by missing a person.

Agitating matters, I'd spotted an article in *The New Yorker* on Saturday morning about verbing and wanted to share it with her.

Saturday afternoon, I'd been forced to call Repo—the highest ranking member of the Iron Wraiths other than Razor St. Claire—and request a sit down for the week after Jethro's wedding. Repo knew us Winstons as kids and used to insist we call him Uncle Repo. He and my daddy used to be good friends, but I had no idea if they still considered each other brothers.

Also of note, I suspected Repo was—in fact—Jessica James's biological father. I hadn't shared this theory with Duane about his woman, but I was fairly certain. However, that's a different story for a different day.

The good news was Repo sounded amused by the whole business with Isaac Sylvester. The bad news was I could hear Catfish in the background making threats.

Then on Sunday, the pastor's wife had cornered me after church and asked if I knew anything about roses. I did not. But I knew who did.

"Yes, I asked a question. Where were you on Friday?" Jethro asked again.

I scratched my beard. My phone buzzed in my pocket, so I pulled it out and read the screen.

Jenn: *I had a lox bagel for lunch and thought of you.*

I studied her text for a full minute, re-reading it several times. Jenn and I had sent each other a quantity of texts since Saturday morning. I'd never sent a quantity of texts to anyone. Up to this point in my life, text messaging was for relaying grocery lists and status updates.

But now they were mini-conversations, each holding weight and importance, yet none adequately satisfied the missing-person perpetual indigestion. I wanted to see her. We had too many things left unsettled. It was time to impose order on the chaos and plan our course. It was time to move forward together.

And, in the interest of full disclosure, I couldn't stop thinking about her body. I couldn't stop thinking about all the things I wanted to do to her, all the ways I wanted to monopolize her time and space

"Cletus?" Jethro asked hesitantly.

"Just a minute." I held my finger up and typed a quick response.

Cletus: *Why'd you think of me? Because I'm fishy? Cheesy?*

Jenn: *Because it had capers; lox bagels give a whole new meaning to the word "capering."*

I grinned at that. She had this effect on me. Was my case was terminal?

"So, Friday?" Jethro prompted again.

"I was, uh . . ." I scratched my jaw. "None of your business."

He was quiet for a stretch and I could feel his eyes on me. Finally, he said, "Fine. Suit yourself. I'm here on a mission."

"What's that?"

"Are you bringing anyone to the wedding?"

"Yes," I said, but then frowned. I'd forgotten to ask Jennifer to the wedding. My frowned deepened because, last anyone heard, she'd agreed to go with Jackson James.

"Well?"

"Well what?" My eyes flickered to his, then away.

"Who is it?"

I slipped my phone back in my pocket and glowered at my brother. "Why do you want to know?"

He gave me a patient smile. "It's Shelly, right?"

"What's Shelly?"

"Who you're bringing. You're bringing Shelly, right?"

"Why would I do that?"

Two lines of surprise and consternation formed between Jethro's eyebrows. "Because you said—I mean, last I heard you'd decided she was it."

I thought back over the last several months to my conversation with Jethro in early September. And then I decided I'd been a damn fool.

“No. Not Shelly. Shelly Sullivan is my employee and I’ll thank you not to speak of her in such terms.” I glanced at my watch, remembering that the last time I’d spotted Shelly she was trying to replace a leaky radiator. I needed to check on her progress. It was almost closing and I didn’t want her staying late. She always stayed late. The woman needed to find some sort of work-life balance.

Jethro sounded like he didn’t know whether to frown or laugh. “Are you serious?”

“As an armadillo in a laundry mat.” I turned from the counter and marched to the door at the back of the office.

“Hey, where are you going?”

“I need to close the shop,” I called over my shoulder.

I heard his footsteps follow around the counter and he hastened to keep up. “What happened to finding your life partner?”

“I changed my mind.”

“You changed—”

“My. Mind.” I stopped short and faced him, placing my hands on my hips. “It’s like underpants, Jethro.”

“Dirty and dark?” He smirked.

“No.” I scowled at his facial expression. “A mind is like underpants because people change them all the time.”

“But you don’t.”

“I do change my underpants all the time, Jethro. And, for the record, I think it’s mighty rude of you to assume I don’t.”

He almost rolled his eyes, but caught the urge. “I meant your mind, Cletus. You don’t change your mind.”

I spotted Shelly over by the basin sink. She was scrubbing her hands. “Do as the song says and let it go. You have your answer.”

“So, you’re bringing someone, but it’s not Shelly?”

“That’s right.” I nodded, stepping around my brother.

“Who is it?” he called after me, bringing me to a halt.

I hesitated, giving him my profile. I shrugged. “She doesn’t know she’s going with me yet.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes.”

His green eyes flickered over my person with unveiled curiosity. “How can you be sure she’ll say yes?”

“She’ll say yes,” I answered too quickly, and then caught my mistake too late. Jethro’s smirk was back.

“Fine. I’ll let Sienna know you’ll be bringing a plus-one.”

“Good. Now leave. You could’ve sent me a text to ask me about this.”

“Yes, but then I wouldn’t get a chance to talk to you about the bachelor party.”

My eyes bulged before I could catch the involuntary response. I stared at my brother.

He’d caught me.

Dammit.

“Yes, Cletus. I know all about the bachelor party.”

Schooling my expression, I picked an imaginary piece of lint from my sleeve. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You do too, liar.” Jethro gave me an easy smile, laughing, and stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Duane let it slip.”

“Duane?” I couldn’t believe my ears. “Duane doesn’t talk. How could he have let it slip? Did he do an interpretive dance?”

“No. But speaking of interpretive dancing, I know you’re planning on strippers.” Jethro’s tone was flat and edged with displeasure.

I didn’t laugh, but I wanted to. Jethro had no idea. No. Idea.

“It’s just one stripper, Jethro. I think you can sit through one stripper. Besides, you might learn something. We all might pick up some good moves.” With that I clapped my hand on Jethro’s shoulder, gave him a squeeze of assurance, which did nothing to ease the discontent in his expression, then left my oldest brother to his ignorance.

I crossed the shop to where Shelly was scrubbing her hands, smirking to myself. I wasn’t typically a smirking to myself kind of person, but this situation definitely called for clandestine smirking.

She glanced at me, her eyes sliding to me, then away. “What do you want?”

I opened my mouth to respond but Jethro shouted from across the shop, “I am so afraid, Cletus.”

So I shouted back, “Think of Sienna. She’ll thank you.”

Then I turned my attention back to Shelly. She’d lifted an eyebrow at me. I wiped my expression.

“When do you think you’ll be done for the day?”

“Now. Why?” Shelly moved her attention back to her scrubbing.

“Oh.” I nodded. “Good. That’s good.”

Apparently I didn’t need to lecture her about work-life balance. For now.

“Also, I’m taking two days off next week.” She turned on the water, rinsing the suds from her fingers.

“That should be fine. Duane is leaving a week from Thursday, so if you have any questions for him before you go, make sure you ask before then.”

“Why do you need the days off?”

Both Shelly and I looked to her right, finding Beau with his arms crossed and a thoughtful frown on his face.

I noted that her back and neck stiffened at his question and she tilted her chin an inch, like she was preparing for a fight. She didn’t answer straightaway, but when she did her voice was more aloof than was typical.

Which was very aloof.

“My brother had a baby. He wants me to see it.” Shelly picked up the soap and began scrubbing again.

I frowned at her hands. They were already red from her washing and, from what I could see, completely clean.

Beau blinked at Shelly’s cold response. “Don’t you want to see the baby?” His tone was patient and gentle and surprised the heck out of me. I’d never heard him speak to her with anything but contempt.

She didn’t reply. As the time stretched, I lifted my eyebrows at her then shifted my attention to Beau. My brother continued staring at her profile. Waiting.

Something was off. Something about the way he looked at her . . .

He fancies her.

I saw it, clear as day in the set of his jaw and the complete lack of pretense in his expression. He wasn't being smooth or flirtatious. But, if I reflected on the matter, smooth and flirtatious would likely be completely lost on Shelly Sullivan. The more I studied the tension between them the more certain I became. If I had to place a bet, I'd even say he fancied her against his will.

Meanwhile, she was ignoring him.

Silence mounted, growing heavy, and still he waited.

As elucidating as the last five minutes had been, I couldn't spare any more time as a bystander. Plus I didn't have any popcorn to eat while I gawked. I had things that needed doing and not enough time to do them.

"Well," I said suddenly, making Shelly jump just a hair. "I'm sure I'll see you again between now and your trip, but if I forget to say so, safe travels, Shelly."

I turned and I left, making a mental note to clear the air with Beau as soon as possible, inform the man I had no interest in Ms. Sullivan.

Consequently, his interest in Shelly—willingly or not—was excellent news. Not only would it be good for business, but she would also be good for Beau. She was unique in many ways, not the least of which was her imperviousness to his charm.

I couldn't wait to meddle.

Shelly left the shop.

Then Beau left the shop five minutes later.

I ignored the transparently suspicious timing. I needed to set my own affairs in order, and that meant calling Claire McClure about her house.

She didn't pick up her phone, so I left a message, told her I'd be stopping by her place and would let myself in. I knew where she kept the spare key as Jethro and I had been maintaining the place since she'd left town.

I'd just left the office to lock up the garage when I heard footsteps, gravel crunching under shoes. I turned and spotted Kip Sylvester in his suit, approaching from the parking lot.

Instinctively, I straightened my spine. I had no business with Kip Sylvester. He had his family's BMWs maintained by the dealer. That meant he paid retail on all repairs and only a fool paid retail.

"Evening, Cletus." He stopped at the edge of the garage, giving me a practiced smile. "Long time no see."

"Mr. Sylvester." I nodded once, somberly. "What brings you out to the shop tonight?"

"Oh, I was just in the area and thought I'd stop by."

"I see."

He was quiet as he glanced around the shop, the tools lining the walls, various toolboxes and machinery. Then his eyes lit on the car to my left.

"Holy smokes, is that a—"

"Yes, sir. It is. A 1956 Jaguar."

"Whoa. That thing's a beauty. Are you working on it for somebody?"

"Yes. I'm working on it for me." That was a falsehood. It was a wedding present for Sienna, but he didn't need to know that. Kip Sylvester had once made an idiot of himself in front of my future sister-in-law. He was beyond star-struck whenever he spotted her.

"For you?" he questioned, like he found this information remarkably surprising.

"Yes."

The man looked between my automobile and me. He was confused, that was clear. What wasn't clear was why he was here. I didn't want to guess.

"Why are you here?" I asked with a hard voice and gave him a hard look. Chitchatting with banal Kip Sylvester was like being interrupted by a pack of diuretic dogs.

"Oh, you know, just . . ." he started, stopped, sighed, smiled and shrugged like he gave up. "I'm here because of Jennifer."

My eyebrows lifted on their own accord, without my consent. "Jennifer. Your daughter, Jennifer?"

"That's right. I heard about what happened . . . the other night."

Schooling my expression into an affable mask of bemusement, I scratched the back of my neck. "You'll have to be more specific."

He sighed again. "I was afraid of that. Look, Cletus, you're a nice boy."

I'm not. I'm really, really not.

"Thank you, Mr. Sylvester."

He continued as though I hadn't spoken, clearly having rehearsed a speech prior to his arrival. "But Diane and I, we have big plans for our daughter. You know she has over one million followers on the Instagram? And lots more on the other social media sites."

I knew this. Even so, I said, "I did not know it was so many."

"Well, she does. That little girl carries a lot of star power, and her momma has worked real hard to make her what she is and to keep her reputation spotless. You understand, we can't be having her acting recklessly, and getting involved where no good can come of it."

I stood straighter at his implied insult. Now usually I don't bother getting offended by people as pointless as Kip Sylvester. But, despite being bland as unflavored oats, Kip wasn't quite pointless anymore. He was Jenn's daddy. *She* thought she owed him love and respect, and unfortunately that made him somebody.

I took my time deliberating while he watched me with a tepid smile.

Then he said, "You understand," and nodded like things were settled. He turned to go.

Before I could catch myself, I asked, "You don't like Jennifer associating with me?"

He glanced over his shoulder, his eyes wide like my blunt words concerned him. Kip lifted his hands between us, like he might do with an angry dog.

"Now, don't take offense, but it's not you we have a problem with, not precisely. It's her associated with young men in general."

"Really."

"Yes, really. She's been sheltered, doesn't understand things the way someone her age usually would, and that's on me, but—"

"What about Drew Runous?"

Kip snapped his mouth shut so fast his teeth clicked. He blinked several times before asking, "Dr. Runous?"

“Yeah. If memory serves, there was a story going around a while back about Jenn driving out to the ranger station, dropping off some baked goods, and then—”

“Yes. I’m familiar with the story and it’s true. Bless her heart.”

Did he just bless his own daughter’s heart? My blood pressure spiked.

He continued, “But Dr. Runous comes from a quality family. His father is a senator in Texas. It wasn’t an association we’d shy from, if the opportunity had presented itself.”

“And my family isn’t? Quality?” I fought to keep my tone even and my expression benign.

Rationally, I knew what Kip Sylvester thought didn’t matter. It didn’t. As Jennifer’s somebody, if he made trouble for me, I’d make trouble for him. He didn’t know it yet, but he was going to bless my union with his daughter and then he was going to support my wishes in all things, including but not limited to forcing his wife to back off my woman.

So why his opinions made my temples ache wasn’t entirely clear. All I knew was, with every foul sentence he’d uttered, my anger swelled.

Kip shook his head quickly, denying my last question. “Not at all. That’s not at all what I meant. Your momma was an Oliver. Your family is as old as the Paytons and Donners in these parts, on your momma’s side. In fact, I haven’t discouraged Jennifer from your brother Billy. He’s got a good head on his shoulders and has always shown the kind of ambition I’d like in a son-in-law.”

Wow . . .

WOW.

He is more of a narcissistic parasite than I thought.

I nodded and ground my teeth, plastering on a faint smile. I began drafting a mental list of all the pie I’d eaten over the last year, who’d baked it, and whether it had been seasonally appropriate. It was a complicated ranking, because I liked pie, and the only thing keeping Kip Sylvester from my temper.

I was angry. A lot angrier than I should have been.

“Look, Cletus. Here’s the crux of it. We don’t like the idea of Jenn having . . .” he seemed to be struggling for the right words, finally settling on, “casual *male friends*. If she has a friend in you, then it might give her ideas.” The principal sighed again. He did a lot of sighing. It was irritating.

“Oh. I see. You don’t want her to have ideas,” I said, again before I could catch myself.

“Yes. Exactly. That’s exactly right.” He nodded quickly, smiling. And then, as though realizing what he’d just said, he shook his head vehemently. “Wait, no. That’s not what I meant.”

“Hmm.” I squinted at him, taking perverse delight in how his face was turning an unnatural shade of red. “I don’t know, Principal. I think that’s exactly what you meant. The way I see it, you and Mrs. Sylvester have a lot invested in your daughter *not* having ideas.”

“Now, Cletus, son. Don’t be putting words in my mouth. That’s not how it is.” He lifted his voice, growing tense.

His anxiety had a cooling effect on my temper. I was still angry, but instead of being hot-headed, the fury I felt had turned frosty.

“Oh, now, Kip, I think we’re both saying the same thing here.” I smiled and shrugged. “You and Mrs. Sylvester need your daughter with her reputation intact, her brain free of the worries that come from independent thought. Makes sense to me.”

His frown deepened. He looked disconcerted.

I reached for a rag to wipe my hands. “If she were to ‘go rogue’ and pursue a relationship with someone who didn’t bolster her image—and therefore the brand you and your wife have so painstakingly created—then that might interfere with your plans and financial well-being. Right?”

“Uh, well . . . right. But—”

I nodded somberly. His features relaxed. Seeing the somber nod usually made people relax.

“Mr. Sylvester. Sir. You don’t need to worry about me.”

He sighed again, a big exhale of relief. “Thank you, Cletus. That’s great to hear—”

“I won’t tarnish her image. Not one bit. Whereas you, on the other hand . . .” I stopped nodding, held his gaze with mine, allowing just a touch of my anger through the wall of self-control.

His eyes widened and I was gratified by the edge of fear in his voice as he asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Just that it wouldn’t look good if it was known that the sweet Banana Cake Queen’s father has been carrying on an affair with his secretary for the last—oh, let’s see—four years?”

I didn’t tell her I was coming. I didn’t even know myself until I cut the engine and discovered I’d arrived at the Donner Bakery parking lot right off the kitchen.

It was still Monday night. I’d just left her father to marinate in my threat. At first, as was typical, he’d denied my accusation. The usual order was: denial, anger, then bargaining. Bargaining was usually my favorite part. Not this time. Something about bargaining for his cooperation left my mouth tasting like sawdust and lemon.

I wanted him to accept that Jennifer’s decisions belonged to her and her alone. Who she associated with, what she wore, what she did wasn’t up to him, or his wife, or their son.

He refused to accept that his daughter was capable of making her own decisions. However, in the end, he conceded to my demands that he not interfere. We’d made terms: he would back off and support my courting his daughter and I wouldn’t filet his life.

I stared at the back of the building, knowing Jennifer was inside. Jennifer’s car was parked closest to the door. My heart did one of its kamikaze leaps against my ribcage.

I’d missed her. I was asphyxiating with how much I’d missed her.

She’s busy. You should let her work . . .

Instead, I set forth.

After the unpleasantness with her daddy, I needed to see that she was well. I decided there was no harm in stopping by for a few minutes. Maybe I would show her *The New Yorker* article on verbing. Maybe I’d just stare at her and listen to her talk. That sounded nice.

I strolled with purpose to the back door. I knocked. I waited. There was no answer. I knocked again. Still no answer.

Finding the door open, I frowned. The door shouldn't have been unlocked. I would have to remind her to lock it when I left and make sure it was locked from now on.

"Jennifer?" I called, closing the door behind me, locking it, and searching the kitchen. The lights were on, a mixer sat on the counter with ingredients and such scattered about, but she was nowhere in sight.

I was just about to search the front when she appeared from the back pantry, carrying a bag of flour. I stopped dead in my tracks as my eyes moved over her form. Her back was to me and it was completely naked from her neck to the tie around her waist.

Jennifer had on an apron, red lace underwear, stockings, and nothing else.

I must've made a sound, though I didn't recall doing so, because she spun, her eyes wide, and gasped.

"Oh my God!" Jumping, she dropped the bag of flour and it spilled over the floor. Her hands flew to her chest—which was mostly covered by the apron. *Mostly*.

She breathed out, closing her eyes, then her next breath was a relieved laugh. "Oh my God, you scared me. I didn't hear you come in."

I didn't speak. I couldn't. I was too busy re-memorizing every curve of her luscious body, barely concealed by the thin layer of cotton. My mouth watered. I wasn't fixating on a fantasy or memories from Friday because the generosity of reality drove every other thought from my mind.

Silence both stretched and thickened . . . and so did other things.

But then she lifted her lashes, looked at me with her impossible violet eyes, and said in her sweet way, "I missed you."

CHAPTER 24

“Civilized people must, I believe, satisfy the following criteria. . . Their hearts suffer the pain of what is hidden to the naked eye.”

— Anton Chekhov, *A Life in Letters*

~Jennifer~

“I missed you.” The words erupted, slipping from my lips before I could catch them. They’d been running through my mind for the last three days.

I miss him. I miss Cletus.

Actually, the sentiment had been running through my mind before Friday, but I’d been shushing the thought, pushing it away. Before Friday, I’d thought missing Cletus was futile, because I thought it would be endless.

But since Friday . . .

Happy sigh.

I’d gone back to the Piggly Wiggly first thing on Saturday morning to collect the bananas. I didn’t want to be a scaredy-cat or ask Cletus to come with me. I’d been picking up the bananas on my own for years, no reason to stop now. But I did conduct a sweep of the parking lot before leaving my car. And I asked Mr. Johnson—the produce manager—to walk me out to my car.

Presently, I was smiling at Cletus, like a goof, lost in his chaotically handsome features.

Cletus’s eyes moved over me slowly, as though he hadn’t seen me in a long time. “I missed you, too.” His voice was gruff and had my stomach erupting with butterflies. Beautiful, lovely, velvety butterflies. He swallowed, cleared his throat, and twisted his lips to the side. “That’s an interesting outfit.”

I glanced down at myself and that’s when I saw—to my horror—that I was basically half-dressed.

“Oh my God! Look at me.” I endeavored to cover myself with my arms, trying and failing. “Wait. Don’t look at me! Crap! Turn around!”

Cletus lifted an eyebrow at my demand. “Really?”

“Yes. Really, Cletus,” I said on a rush, then lowered my voice to a whisper. “I don’t have a bra on under this apron.”

“I know.” He shrugged, his eyes skimming down, then up. Undaunted, he took a step forward.

My mouth fell open and I stared at him, frustration and embarrassment warring for control. Recognizing that Cletus had no plans to turn around or avert his eyes, I jogged past him to the back door. I felt his gaze on my backside as I slipped on my big coat and pulled it closed, holding the edges together.

When I turned I found him frowning. “You didn’t have to do that.”

A sound of disbelief tumbled from my lips.

“Yes. I really did.”

He shrugged, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “Suit yourself. No pun intended.”

My eyes flickered over him and I felt my cheeks heat, feeling the need to explain why I’d been baking half naked. “I sometimes take off the dress when I bake late at night, especially if it has a built-in corset. It hurts my ribs.”

“Makes sense.” He nodded once, twisting his lips to the side again. He was doing a bad job of fighting a grin, and the way his hooded eyes moved over my form made me feel warm and flustered.

My throat worked and my neck was burning hot as I searched his eyes. “I suppose you have lots of experience, with half-dressed women. It’s probably no big deal to you.”

“A half-dressed woman is always a big deal.” A smile lingered behind his eyes, it felt dark and delightfully wicked.

“Even at the Pink Pony?” I asked out of nowhere, surprising myself with the non sequitur.

I didn’t know what made me ask other than the fact that Beau and the owner of the Pink Pony were good friends; everyone was aware Cletus went fishing with them from time to time. I’d been having all kinds of crazy

thoughts since seeing him last, usually involving best- and worst-case scenarios.

Or best worst-case scenarios, like—if Cletus went to the strip club—best-case was that he did so blindfolded and against his will. See? Crazy.

Cletus made a face. “I don’t much like those kinds of places.”

“Why? Don’t all men like looking at naked ladies?”

His eyes dropped to my coat and they heated. “I like to unwrap my own presents.”

The butterflies ceased flapping their wings and instead stripped naked. I liked that thought. I liked the idea of being unwrapped, like a present. But only if I could unwrap him, too.

“Did you come here to unwrap me?” I asked hopefully, relaxing my hold on the coat.

He smiled, his clever eyes narrowing just a bit. “Are you my present?”

Yes.

My embarrassed blush became something else. Heat still circled my neck, my heart still pounded, but the atmosphere shifted. My hot flash was no longer mortified at having been caught baking half-naked. Our smiles gradually waned as we stared at each other.

He took a step toward me, his eyes dropping to my jacket. Cletus inspected the edges, his expression thoughtful, then slipped his fingers inside the coat. I released my grip on the material as his hands parted the jacket and pushed. It fell to the floor.

“I didn’t come over here for this,” he said distractedly. His eyes studied the front of my apron as he pulled the tie at my back.

Meanwhile, I was a mess. I was a mess of wanting to tear his clothes off, and wanting to kiss his face off, and wanting more of what we’d done three nights ago. I simultaneously had the urge to shove him to the floor and attack him, and stand still to see what he would do next. Ultimately, I decided to stand still. I could always attack him later.

The bow holding the apron around my neck unraveled and the apron joined my coat on the floor, leaving me in just my panties and stockings. He

looked at me. He looked at my body like I was his present. Like he had lots of ideas how he would play with me. I wasn't cold, yet I shivered.

His eyes lifted, hot with intent, and he took a step forward. Instinctively, I took a step back. He gave me a barely there smile and continued to advance until my back met with the counter. Then he stopped.

"My dearest Jennifer," he grumbly whispered, his fingers looping into the waistband of my underwear, "in case you're making a list, this is the only thing I want for my birthday." He lowered as he tugged the lace down my legs. I trembled again as his hands traced a light touch on the backs of my knees and calves.

I stepped out of my panties and watched as he pocketed them. Leaning forward, his eyes on me, he breathed a hot breath against the apex of my thighs.

I swayed, my hands coming to his shoulders for balance, my heart thundering. I was hot and cold all over, the ache of longing sharp and deliciously painful low in my belly. He used the leverage of my hands to cup my bottom, lifting me onto the counter. I sat perched on the edge and he spread my legs, his fingertips tracing my inner thighs until he parted me with his thumbs.

My brain was rioting, in chaos, and I was embarrassed, yet enthralled.

My pen pals had told me—in French, Japanese, and German—what having sex was like. They'd described what it felt like to have an orgasm, so I knew what we'd done on Friday had resulted in an orgasm for both of us. But nothing they'd described revealed the true intimacy of the act. How it was something beautiful and terrifying, to be naked and vulnerable, to be touched.

My breath hitched. I leaned backward at an angle and fought the urge to press my knees together. He was looking at me. His exhales falling across my exposed center made me clench and tense in anticipation and anxiety.

"Cletus?" I asked, with a mixture of uncertainty and eagerness.

He licked his lips and lowered his mouth to me. The air left my lungs as his wet, hot tongue connected with my wet, hot center. His tongue moved and my body gave a reflexive and inelegant lurch. I gasped. Unthinkingly,

my fingers threaded through his hair and I pressed him to me, afraid he would stop.

It felt so good.

So good.

So. Good.

SO. GOOD.

My body shuddered again and I widened my legs, my hips rolling instinctively. He moaned, like I was delicious, like he'd been starving for me. His hands wrapped around my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh, his beard tickling the sensitive skin of my thighs.

Then his eyes lifted to mine.

"Oh God," I breathed. The force of his gaze was both sobering and intoxicating, and potent with knowledge. Knowledge of me, of my body, of my taste. He watched me, drinking in this secret sight of me.

He watched me while his mouth was on my body.

He watched me as he did sinful things with his tongue and lips.

The hunger in his eyes as his possessive gaze moved over my breasts and neck and mouth sent a sudden spiral of need and greed straight to where he devoured me. Suddenly I was coming in a powerful pulsing, quaking, and piercing release.

I threw my head back, the force of the tremors too unwieldy and strong. I existed only as a feeling. He held me in place, lapping and savoring, as though my mindlessness fed a need in him.

He held me still until it hurt—wonderfully, tremendously, spectacularly—and then he slipped his fingers inside me and I came again, crying out sharply with desperation and thoughtlessness. I couldn't stay upright. I couldn't hold my own weight under the force of my climax, so I fell backward.

His hands were suddenly there, he was suddenly there, standing and pulling me forward into his arms. He lifted me from the counter and I was limp in his arms, spent. A force field of warmth and satisfaction encased me, made me boneless. I snuggled my forehead against his neck and gripped his shirt weakly.

“The couch,” I sighed. “Let’s go lie on the couch.”

He squeezed me, and turned. He glanced to the left, then the right, hesitating. “Where is this couch?”

I chuckled lightly, then nipped his neck. “In the back.”

Is that my voice? Good Lord. I sound sexy.

It was deeper than usual, which I liked it. I liked how I sounded after Cletus unwrapped me. I liked how I felt. I liked my body in a new way that made me feel powerful and knowledgeable.

And I now understood why some people were “indiscriminant bakers.” Everything about the act felt good and right and necessary. Or maybe it was being with Cletus that was good and right and necessary.

On our way to the couch, Cletus retrieved my coat from the floor in an impressive display of flexibility and strength. Upon arriving in the back room, he kissed me on the forehead.

“I have to set you down so I can put this jacket on the couch.” He sounded like releasing me was something only to be done out of necessity or under duress. “Can you stand?”

I nodded and he tipped me to the side until my feet hit the ground. Quickly, he removed the back pillows, spread out my coat, then his, leaving the sofa mostly covered. Then he guided me to my side and moved to join me.

“Wait,” I stopped him, kneeling on the cushions and gripping the edge of his shirt. “Take this off.”

He frowned, hesitating. “Jenn—”

“Just your shirt. I miss your skin.”

His expression cleared as his eyes heated and he removed his white cotton tee. I resumed my reclining position and he joined me, pulling my body halfway on top of his. I kissed his shoulder and sighed.

“As I was saying, I missed you.” I ran my hand up and down his chest, threading my fingers through the sparse hair. I loved the hair on his chest and I loved the ridges of his muscles. I loved how different our bodies were, the texture and feel of him. “When can we do that again?”

He chuckled, his hands caressing my body like he was greedy for the feel of my skin. “Ten minutes?”

We both laughed and I rested my elbow on him, my chin in my palm. “So do I get to give you a blow job now?”

He tensed and his eyes narrowed on me. “Not yet.”

“Why?”

His gaze moved to my back, where his fingertips trailed light lines between my shoulder blades. “I’m shy.”

I laughed again, and so did he. A good, rumble laugh. A mischievous laugh. I loved it.

“You are not shy.”

Cletus shrugged, still not meeting my eyes, his grin becoming something else, and said, “I’ve never done that.”

My lips parted in surprise. “You’ve never had a blow job? No one has ever done that to you?”

He shook his head, his lips pulled to one side in a wry smile. “There’s a lot of teeth in a mouth.”

“So, you’ve never trusted anyone enough to do it,” I guessed.

His eyes cut to mine and his fingers stilled. Cletus stared at me for a long moment, pointedly not answering, then cleared his throat.

“I’d like to come over tomorrow again, if you’re around after work.”

“That sounds good. Come by every day this week if you want.”

I decided to let him change the subject, but secretly I was planning my attack. One day soon, I was going to seduce him. Now I just needed to figure out how to go about seducing a man. Maybe my pen pals had some ideas.

“I can’t,” he sighed, but his eyes twinkled. “I have Jethro’s bachelor party on Thursday and I’m responsible for the entertainment.”

“Entertainment?”

“Yes. Remember I told you about my stripper friend, George? The retired Navy SEAL? He’s the entertainment.” Cletus wagged his eyebrows.

I gaped at him, not sure whether or not he was serious. Seeing he was, I burst out laughing.

“They have no idea.” He chuckled evilly. Truly, it was an evil chuckle, full of malicious intent and wicked anticipation.

“Too bad you didn’t tell me earlier, I could have made a cake for him to jump out of.”

“No, no. He’s going to repel from the ceiling. Ropes are part of his routine.”

“Well, good luck with that.” I wiped my tears of hilarity away with the back of my hands. “Tell me about your day. How was work?”

Cletus lifted his head and blinked, like I’d said something surprising.

“What?” I placed my chin on the back of my hand and stared down at him. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head slightly. “Nothing’s wrong. I just don’t remember the last time someone asked me about my day, not since my momma died.”

“Oh.” I frowned, because this struck me as sad. My family wasn’t perfect, but we always asked about each others’ days. Granted, I knew there were some parts of my day that my parents didn’t want to hear about, but they still asked. I was surprised the Winstons didn’t do the same. “Doesn’t your family ask?”

His lips curved into a rueful smile. “No. They know better.”

“Know better? They know better than to ask about your day?”

“Yep. I typically end up saying something they don’t want to hear.”

“That’s true with everybody. My parents never want to listen to me talk about my pen pals or my garden. Or my essential oils. Or teaching the scouts.” I frowned. Mostly they liked hearing about new recipes. “Or any other non-baking hobbies and activities.”

“My brothers don’t want to hear about my plans and activities. At all.”

“I know you have all these sinister irons in the fire, but every day can’t be that bad.”

“It is. They are.”

“Okay, so what kinds of daily plans and activities? What don’t they want to hear?”

“Like . . .” He thought for a moment, his eyes moving to where his hand was rubbing circles on my back. “Like about how I’d like to give Jackson

James leprosy.”

I wrinkled my nose at this, scrunching my face to show my disbelief. “You do not want to give Jackson James leprosy.”

“I do. And if you see him scratching around the collar it’s because I blackmailed someone into putting itching powder in his dry-cleaned shirts.”

I was about to laugh and call Cletus on his silliness, but something about the way he was looking at me, as though he were bracing for a reprimand, gave me pause.

He stared at me. I stared at him. My mouth fell open.

He’s serious.

“Cletus Winston. You did not.”

“I did. And I don’t regret it.” His tone was flat and insolent.

“Why on earth would you do it? That’s just mean.”

“Jackson James has been harassing me and my brothers—specifically Duane and Beau—for years. He pulls us over for no reason, causes delays, and so forth. He’s a little shit and I’m tired of it.”

I studied him, saw that he believed he was in the right.

Are you surprised? Didn’t you already know he’s vengeful? Didn’t he tell you himself?

“See? That’s why people don’t ask me about my day.” His hand drifted lower on my back, caressing my bottom possessively.

“Why don’t you report him? Go to the station and file a complaint?”

Cletus gave me a grumpy side-eye. “I’m not a rat.”

I barked a disbelieving laugh. “So you’ll blackmail someone into putting itching powder into his shirts, but you won’t work through proper channels to resolve the issue, because you don’t want to tattle. Do I have that right?”

“It’s more complicated than that. But yes, that’s the gist of it.” His grumpy expression persisted. “I like deciding how to deal with those people who insist on being assholes.”

“You like control.”

Some of his grumpiness was replaced with suspicion. “That’s one way of putting it.”

I examined him, the unhappy set of his jaw, then spoke without premeditation. "I'd like to understand you."

"I told you, I'm not very understandable." He wasn't meeting my gaze in a way that felt like avoidance.

On a hunch, I said, "Your brothers said that you don't like bullies."

Cletus's hand stilled. He took a breath, then responded, "I don't."

"Maybe your vengeful impulses stem from your dislike of bullies. Speaking from firsthand experience, bullies can make you feel like you don't have any control. And, if that's the case, you are exceedingly understandable."

He lifted his eyes to mine and our gazes held. I sensed he wanted to say something. I remained quiet, hoping the silence would drive it out of him.

He turned me such that my back was against the couch and we were both laying on our sides facing each other. His fingers dug into my hip.

"Jenn . . ." He stopped, as though he didn't know how to continue.

I cupped his jaw and placed a soft kiss on his lips, then leaned away to gaze into his eyes.

He gathered a large breath, clearly torn about proceeding. I waited and offered a small, encouraging smile. Instead of speaking, he kissed me. He kissed me, and he tasted like me, and that thought had me warm and tingling all over.

Eventually, he pulled away, shaking his head. "Never mind. Never mind about that."

I pressed my lips together to hide my disappointment, but said pragmatically, "One day, Cletus. One day you'll trust me enough to speak your mind."

His gaze moved over my face. "I already trust you."

"But not enough." I scratched his jaw through his beard. "One day."

"Jenn, some of my secrets won't make you happy. In fact, they'll horrify you."

"I know." I continued threading my fingers through his bushy beard, liking the texture just as much as the hair on his chest. "Remember how

afraid of you I was? When I first came to you? I know you have dark corners, and I think I know why.”

Cletus’s expression became carefully blank, but his eyes communicated a depth of sadness that felt like a punch to the stomach.

“Oh, honey.” I gave him a small smile of compassion, then kissed him again, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing my body to his. “You take your time. Anything you want to share, I want to hear. But something you taught me over these last few months is that no one can control who you are—fundamentally, who you are in your heart—except for you. The decision is always yours.”

His arms came around me tightly, holding on as though I might disappear. Or I might leave.

“No matter what happened in your past, what ghosts might lurk there, the road you take is ultimately up to you,” I squeezed him back, “but—selfishly—I hope it’s always the road I’m on.”

CHAPTER 25

“Three things cannot hide for long: the Moon, the Sun and the Truth.”

— Gautama Buddha

~Jennifer~

I waited as long as I could. When I could wait no longer, I blurted, “Where are we going?”

“I have an idea.” His eyes darted to me, then back to the road. “More precisely, it’s a surprise.”

It was Tuesday late afternoon. We were in Cletus’s car—the Geo, not the Buick—and we’d left the bakery so he could take me to some undisclosed location. Cletus had come to the bakery after work as promised and said he wanted to take me someplace before night fell.

Presently, we’d been driving in the direction of Cades Cove for about ten minutes.

“A surprise at four-thirty?”

The sun was setting and had set the sky on fire: puffy red, pink, and orange clouds painted even more vividly by the forty-degree temperatures. Something about cold weather this time of year made the sunsets more intense.

“This surprise isn’t dependent on time of day.” He slowed, flicking on his blinker. “And we’re here.”

I squinted out the window, recognizing the long driveway and the white farmhouse at the end of it. “This is Claire McClure’s place.”

“It is.” Cletus pulled into a spot at the front of the house and cut the ignition.

“What are we doing here?”

Not missing a beat, he said, “We’re robbing the place.”

With that, he exited the car, then walked around to my side, leaving me to shake my head at his antics. I opened my door, but he caught it, offering a hand as I stood.

“What should we take first?” I pointed to the front porch. “The flower pots or the house numbers?”

He grinned, sliding his palm against mine, causing a thrill of excitement up my arm. Cletus tugged me toward the porch steps. “Flower pots are dirty and I’m wearing my best coveralls.”

“Cletus. Your coveralls are covered in grease stains.”

“Yes. But not dirt stains. I don’t want to clutter my appearance.”

“Oh, brother.” I rolled my eyes, laughing at his silliness.

“And those numbers are both nailed and glued to the frame. How about, instead, we take the entire house?”

I stumbled on the first step, my smile slipping, and pulled Cletus to a halt. “What?”

“Claire’s been trying to rent this place since she left.” He cleared his throat and looked everywhere but at me. His eyes moved over the porch, the window boxes full of pansies, and the white picket railing. “I’d watched over things while Jethro was with Sienna for her last movie. He’s stepped back in since he returned, but they have a baby on the way. I know this house and it’s well-maintained. And it sits on some land. Building a garden wouldn’t be a problem.”

Finally, he turned back to me, and his voice lowered, gentled. “It would give us a place, just you and me. You don’t have to move in, unless you want to.”

I gaped at him; my brain required several seconds to absorb his words.

Actually, my brain required a full minute.

Less than a week ago I thought he didn’t want me, now he was in love with me and wanted to move in together. Isaac’s words had hurt, plagued me. The car chase had left me shaken. Some fallout or retaliation from the Iron Wraiths—as far as I knew—was still a concern.

I couldn’t keep up with all the changes.

“You want us to move in together? Here?” I squeaked disbelievingly.

A thoughtful frown settled between his eyebrows; beneath the waning sun his clever eyes glittered with a fierceness of longing. He guided me up the remaining two stairs to the front door and under the shadow of the porch.

“I’m not going to be satisfied with stolen moments at your family’s bakery. I’m not just talking about spending time with your body,” his hands slid up my arms then down to my waist, tugging me closer, “though that’s a consideration. I want true privacy, a place where we can talk and be.”

Talk and be.

Well, when he puts it like that . . .

If it were possible to be infatuated with an idea, I was infatuated with this idea. Waking up every morning next to Cletus? Talking over my day with Cletus every evening? Spending every day with him?

YES PLEASE, MAY I HAVE ANOTHER!

And yet.

And yet, was I okay with us living together? And not being married? Was that something I wanted? I’d always pictured myself married before taking that kind of step. But why? Why had I always pictured myself married? Was it because marriage was what I wanted? Or was it because my living with someone before marriage was something my parents would hate?

I didn’t know how to answer these questions. Things between us were moving at a breakneck pace. As much as I wanted to be ready to fling myself into a serious relationship with this smart, beautiful, complicated man, I had other considerations. Trying to think rationally, other than determining my own mind on the matter, the biggest issue was that my parents had no idea Cletus and I were involved. Yet.

I was planning on telling them, but I’d wanted to speak to Cletus first.

Plus, there is the small matter of money . . .

“Jennifer?”

I lifted my eyes to his. The bracing uncertainty in his eyes and the sound of my name on his lips sent a rush of warm tenderness through me.

Quickly, I reassured him. “I like this idea. I like it a lot.” I cupped Cletus’s jaw with one hand and marveled at how natural and right it felt to touch him, to be in his arms. “But before we consider this, things need to settle down. And I need to solidify some outstanding issues first.”

I felt his eyes on me, assessing, before he guessed, “Your parents.”

“Yes. My parents.” However, more than my parents—although definitely related—my finances. Of course I wanted their blessing, but I wasn’t fooling myself into thinking it would be given willingly. I would have to fight for it and I was prepared to do so—including leveraging my place at the bakery and as the Banana Cake Queen.

As per Anne-Claire’s advice, I’d reached out to an accountant in Knoxville, leaving a message Saturday morning about setting up my corporation. My French pen pal had been right all along. I needed to formalize the business relationship with the bakery, because without a formal relationship, I had no freedom. I had no choice.

I wanted to trust that my mother would be fair. However, in light of the fact that painting my nails a different color was seen as an insult (at best) or an aggressive act of rebellion (at worst) worthy of recriminations and hysteria, I needed to take my financial future more seriously. I needed to start planning, rather than allowing others to dictate my path.

“I don’t think your parents will give us much trouble.” Cletus slipped his hands around to my back, adding conversationally, “The Olivers are just as old in these parts as the Paytons and the Donners. I’m sure your parents will be reasonable, when it comes to it.”

My eyebrows bounced high on my forehead and I stared at him with plain disbelief. “Cletus, I love my parents. But they are not reasonable. My mother had a fit last week when I told her I didn’t like wearing yellow dresses. And my father has always had a very particular idea of what kind of man he wants me to marry.”

The dimness and shadow of the porch meant I couldn’t see him very well, but I sensed him stiffen, his hands flex on my back. “What kind of man is that?”

“It’s a combination of things,” I said flatly. “First and foremost, I think he’d like someone who has, or is capable of, achieving impressive wealth and notoriety. If not impressive notoriety, then abundant wealth would do just fine. Now I know you could do both, if you set your mind to it, but I have no desire for abundant wealth or notoriety. And I like—well, I mostly like—that you don’t either.”

Cletus was a talented musician, but he never put himself out there. He never allowed the spotlight to shine too brightly on himself. If he didn't want the spotlight, that was one thing. But if he feared the spotlight, if he feared rejection or lack of control . . . well, that was another.

Cletus examined me. Eventually, his hands slipped from my back and he recaptured my hand, leading me toward the front door.

"You think he'd be happy with anyone who has money?"

I sighed sadly. "When I was younger, I had a different view of his priorities. He used to tell me that he was going to find me a prince, someone to take care of me." I swallowed, inexplicably the back of my throat felt hot and uncomfortable. "I think he's always considered me weak."

"Isn't that what you want now? Isn't that what all this husband business was about? Someone to take care of you?" Cletus reached above the front door and seemed to be fiddling with something I couldn't see.

"No! That wasn't and isn't the point at all. I wanted someone—I want someone—I can take care of. Not the other way around. I have all this energy and affection and I've had no one to share it with, no one to give it to. I spend my days at the bakery, and my nights, too. My mother doesn't need anything from me but to play a part. My brother pretends I don't exist. And my father thinks I'm an idiot."

Cletus turned, as though he were going to contradict me, but then remained silent.

"You know it's true. He thinks I'm simple. He's not the only one in town who thinks as much, either." I studied his back, or what I could see of it in the low light. "I bet you used to think I was missing some marbles, too."

Retrieving what he'd been searching for, Cletus turned back to me. "I didn't think you were simple."

"Then what did you think?"

His silhouette moved and I could sense he was struggling. I heard him slide the key in the lock.

Helpfully, I supplied, "The wheel is spinning, but the hamster is dead?"

"No."

"If she had another brain, it'd be lonely?"

He faced me. “Jenn—”

“An intellect rivaled only by garden tools?”

“Would you—”

“The elevator doesn’t quite reach the top?”

Cletus wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me forward, his mouth easily capturing mine. He turned me back against the outside wall of the house, kissing me thoroughly.

When I was officially fuzzy headed and hot under the collar, he leaned away and explained gruffly, “I never thought you were simple. I felt sorry for you.”

My stomach fell to my feet.

I didn’t like that. I didn’t feel sorry for myself, not anymore. That party had officially ended. I took responsibility for my inaction, seeing things clearly now. Yet the fact that I’d been a person he’d pitied made my throat tight with angry embarrassment.

But before my chagrin could crystalize completely, he added, “But now I realize, I should have felt sorry for myself.” He dipped his head again, brushing a cherishing kiss over my lips, then whispering, “I was the one missing out.”

Claire’s house was awesome. And being there with Cletus was awesome. And the entire evening after was awesome.

Cletus drove us back to the bakery after giving me a quick tour of Claire’s place. While I worked and baked, we discussed everything from new chemistry experiments he’d found for me to attempt with the Girl and Boy Scouts, to a recipe I’d spotted in an old cookbook for sausage pie.

We decided to make the sausage pie together. I would make the crust, he would make the filling.

I wouldn’t let him help me bake my orders. His beard was a health code violation, and that notion made him grin.

“I’m a health code violation,” he repeated, like his status was something delightfully ironic. I caught on, remembering one of our early conversations

about being a discriminate baker and avoiding those with health code violations.

Just past 11:00 PM, as he was helping me put the ingredients away, he jumped out of the back pantry, and snapped his fingers. “Oh, I almost forgot.”

“What?” I was wiping down the counters. The cleaners would be by before 3:00 AM to sterilize the space, but I liked to leave things tidy. My batter was prepped for the next day and all the dough was ready for the early morning crew.

“Jennifer Anne Sylvester,” his tone was exceedingly formal and made me grin, “will you do me the honor of accompanying me to my brother’s wedding?”

“I would be—”

“And thereby withdrawing your promise to the contemptible and itchy Jackson James.”

I pressed my lips together to show my disapproval, bringing my hands to my hips. “You need to re-think what you’re doing to Jackson.”

“I can’t. It’s already been done. And I’m not sorry. He deserves his plagues. I lived with a bully for many years, undoubtedly, Darrell Winston has shaped who I am. I cannot abide people taking advantage of positions of power for their own petty wishes.”

“Do you think Jackson is evil? Irredeemable?”

He didn’t answer right away, instead choosing to scowl at me. So I scowled back.

Finally, he said, “No. But he’s too big for his britches. So I made them itchy.”

“You can’t know what your actions may cause, how they might affect someone. And consider this: what if you talked to Jackson? What if you talked it out and established peace? You’re taking the choice away from him, and not giving him the benefit of the doubt. How about, instead, you try talking to him first? Then, if he refuses to hear you or he acts like a bully, then unleash your plagues. Go ahead. You’ll even have my blessing.”

We traded scowls again, but he blinked first.

“Fine. I will pause the plagues. I will talk to Jackson James. I will give him the chance to choose.”

“Good.” I suppressed my smile of victory, instead giving him a placid head nod.

“You never responded to my original request.”

“Which request?”

“You. Me. Jethro’s wedding. Drinking a little too much. Making sweet love in my room while other people dance the funky chicken outside. That request.”

“Oh, yes. The answer is yes. I called Jackson last Saturday and broke the date.”

His eyebrows jumped, showcasing his surprise. “You did?”

“Of course I did.” I gave him a disbelieving once-over. “I can’t even fathom it. I’m afraid everyone else is tedious in comparison. That’s like offering me frozen chicken nuggets when I could have sausage pie.”

Cletus’s smile claimed his features slowly and his eyes moved over me, warming greatly by degrees until he was beaming. He closed the distance between us and gathered me in his arms. He didn’t kiss me. He just looked at me, like I was something wonderful and amazing.

“I’m madly in love with you, my Jennifer,” he said.

I opened my mouth to tell him that I was in love with him, too. But he stopped me with a slow, cherishing kiss.

A kiss that made my knees weak.

A kiss that made my tummy flip.

A kiss that made my world better and brighter than it had been before.

Cletus Winston is madly in love with me.

Cletus walked me to my car and watched me drive away. My lips were still tingling from his excellent kisses. I both loved and hated that every time he kissed me, I couldn’t wait for him to do it again. Just like every time we left each other, I couldn’t wait to see him again.

Despite always wanting more of him, I still floated on a happy cloud and couldn’t stop grinning. I felt so blessed, so lucky. I had to be up in less than

three hours, but I didn't care.

I'd been sleeping for twenty-two years. I felt like, for the first time in my life, I was finally conscious. Life was finally happening. I was making it happen.

I quietly removed my shoes at the front door and tiptoed into the house—much like I'd done the night before—but was surprised to find my father awake in the kitchen. I frowned at him and he frowned at me from his spot at the table.

I glanced around the room, searching for some sign as to why he was awake. My father had to be at work by 6:00 AM and I never saw him up this late.

"I called Momma and left a message earlier," I explained, feeling the urge to defend myself proactively. Staying late at the bakery was not unusual. As long as I called, I didn't wake my parents to let them know I was home. "I told her I would be home around midnight."

He nodded once, two unhappy lines bracketing his mouth. "I know."

I frowned my confusion. "Is everything okay?"

"Come. Sit down." He motioned to the chair next to his, his face grave. "We need to talk."

I hesitated, my mind loud with all the things he might want to discuss. I couldn't remember the last time my father and I had talked about anything. Maybe once, when I was sixteen and I'd won the state fair baking contest for the first time. He reminded me that pride was a sin.

My mother told him to hush, giving him the evil eye when she overheard, then proceeded to tell me how proud she was.

But at present, I couldn't think of anything he'd want to talk to me about.

Maybe the New York trip? Maybe he wants to remind me that pride is still a sin.

I dismissed this theory. As long as my success brought in money to the family, he didn't seem to care whether or not it was sinful.

"Jennifer, come sit down." His tone was hard. He was angry.

I hesitated. What had I done to make him angry? I tried to think.

Unless . . .

And suddenly I knew. The room tilted just slightly and I leaned a hand on the counter at my side. My father knew about Cletus. Dread and fear pumped through my veins.

But you will not allow fear to control you. You are in charge of yourself and your decisions. No one else.

“Jennifer!”

My name was a demand and it made me jump; it also spurred me forward. I crossed to him with slow, shuffling steps, gathering my courage and resolve along the way. I walked calmly to the proffered chair and sat down, folding my hands on the table.

“What would you like to talk about?” I asked, my gaze even, my voice steady. Nevertheless, my nerves were taut and I braced myself for extreme unpleasantness.

I think I surprised him, because his frown intensified. “I want to talk about your behavior over the last few months.”

I gritted my teeth and pressed my lips together so I wouldn’t say something nasty.

When I was fairly certain I could trust myself to speak without being disrespectful, I said, “I’m moving out.”

I hadn’t decided until just now. But this moment, coming home to my father’s displeasure—his perpetual displeasure—was enough to answer the question. I was moving out.

Something flickered behind his eyes, a flash of something like mockery and disdain. “Oh? Is that so?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“With Cletus Winston?”

I nodded again. “That’s right.”

“And how will you live? Or is he going to be your sugar daddy?”

I didn’t flinch, but his words felt like a slap. “I’m going to what I always do. I’m going to bake.”

He leaned forward unexpectedly, shoving his face in mine. “Your momma will not be paying you a single cent, young lady. You leave, you move in with that boy, then you’re dead to us. Do you understand?”

I blinked at him, my face suddenly hot, my hands suddenly sweaty. I struggled to swallow. This was the only home I'd ever known. I thought about what it would mean, to be disowned.

My father had disowned Isaac. He never spoke of him. My momma still did. I could tell she pined for her lost son.

But, to my father, it was like he'd never existed.

I loved my parents.

I loved my father.

But for the first time in my life, I questioned why. *Why* did I love this man? I didn't know. I didn't know why I loved him. He'd never particularly liked me. He'd never been especially loving.

I stood, clearing my throat, and backed away from the table. I pushed in my chair. All the while my father followed me with his eyes, rage making the veins rise in relief on his forehead.

The last several months had led me here and it was a terrible moment. But I knew what I had to do. I lifted my chin, holding on to my composure by sheer force of will.

"If that's what you want, then so be it." My voice was uneven, shaky, but I didn't cry. I wouldn't cry. "I'm not going to allow you to control me. Not anymore."

His eyes widened and his mouth fell open. I'd surprised him.

Hastily, gathering his wits, he pointed at me. "I don't think you understand. You leave here with nothing. You take that car, I'll report it stolen. You're walking out of here with those disgraceful clothes and nothing else."

"I understand perfectly. I'm not stupid."

"Yes. You are stupid." His tone was flat and hateful. "You've always been stupid. Why do you think your momma had to homeschool you? Do you really think Cletus Winston, *Cletus Winston*, is going to stand by you? Be a good provider? Do you think he's going to stay with you? He won't. He'll leave you high and dry—just like his daddy did to their momma—and then you'll have nothing. Nothing."

I shook my head, my insides growing cold and numb. “I don’t need him to provide for me. If momma doesn’t want me at the bakery, then I can go elsewhere.”

“You think so?” His jaw ticked with frustration and his eyes narrowed threateningly. “We’ll sue you. We’ll sue you and you’ll never get a job. Never.”

“I don’t understand you. I don’t understand why you’re so hateful. Why are you this way?”

“He’s blackmailing me,” he shouted, banging his fist on the table, every syllable dripping with fury. “That stupid bastard is blackmailing me and he will not win.”

I winced, the violent volume of his oath made me stiffen.

My father used to use the belt on us when we were kids, but my momma made him stop when I was ten. He hadn’t raised a hand to me since, but the madness in his gaze gave me reason to suspect he might try.

“Do you want to be with a man like that?” He stood and charged toward me, forcing me to take several stumbling steps backward. “Huh? A man who would blackmail your own father? You say I’m controlling? I’m nothing, *nothing* in comparison to that evil son of a bitch.”

I crossed my arms, holding myself, inching away from him. “What do you mean? How is he blackmailing you?”

“That’s not important.” He covered his mouth with a shaking hand, wiping his lips. Something about the movement struck me as panicked. “Can’t you see? I’m trying to save you.”

“I don’t need to be saved.” I backed up another step, so ready to leave. So ready to be done with this. “I’ve never needed to be saved.”

“Oh yeah? Then what do you think you need, Jennifer?”

“Nothing you can give me.”

He flinched, standing straighter. My father struggled for words, finally saying softly, “Your momma and I, we love you. How can that mean so little to you, after everything we’ve done?”

I stared at him and, for the first time, I felt like I was really seeing him. He didn’t love me. He used the word *love* like a weapon, as a means of control,

as a way to ensure my blind obedience. He made it ugly.

He didn't love me.

He loved the money I made for the bakery.

He loved the comfortable lifestyle my momma had built.

He loved his stature and reputation.

Cletus's words came back to me from so many weeks ago: *Your father is ugly, and I'm not just talking about his exterior.*

He was right. He was so right. I was done with him and his ugliness.

"Goodbye," I said simply, meaning it.

My father must have heard the truth in my farewell because he blinked at me, rocking back on his feet, dumbfounded. His mouth opened and closed, like he was too shocked to respond.

Taking advantage of his astonishment, I left quickly. But I barely held on to my tears long enough to stroll out of the kitchen, run to the front door, and sprint down the driveway.

I started to cry on the main road when I realized I'd left my shoes behind.

And all the letters from my pen pals.

And my mother.

And the only home I'd ever known.

CHAPTER 26

“And thus the heart will break, yet brokenly live on.”

— Byron

~Cletus~

I was going to miss the quiet of this house. Memories, both good and bad, were loudest late at night, when everyone was asleep but me.

Presently, I was sitting in my grandmother Oliver’s favorite chair next to a fire, covered by her favorite quilt, and reading her favorite book, the second volume of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. The woman loved mysteries, and she loved rereading the same ones time and time again. Even when she knew what was going to happen, she liked finding new clues, said it made her more observant.

If everything went according to plan, Jennifer and I would be moving into Claire’s farmhouse just after Thanksgiving, and everything was going according to plan. My time in this old house with these old memories was drawing to a close.

It was the end of an era.

It’s true. As a rule, I didn’t like change. My Jennifer continuously surprised me, and her surprises were a thing of beauty. She’d forced me to re-evaluate my priorities and she’d pushed me beyond the contented circle of my comfort zone. She’d changed me.

For the first time in my life, change was synonymous with hope and anticipation. I looked forward to it. And that was revolutionary.

But for now, drinking my grandmother’s recipe for moonshine and reacquainting myself with the Red-Headed League, I let the past speak—both good and bad—and enjoyed my quiet time.

“Why do you wear that thing?”

I lifted just my eyes from the page of my book and glared at Beau, the interrupter. “You’ll have to be more specific. Are you referring to my smoking jacket or my expression of concentration?”

“The smoking jacket.” Beau set a bag of what appeared to be groceries by the console and shut the front door. He was still in his work clothes.

Still in his work clothes past midnight AND his hair is wet from a shower. Ah ha! The chase is afoot.

“It’s cozy. And the lapels are velvet. You know how I like the feel of velvet.” Setting my book down, I pointedly stared at his coveralls. “And why are you still in your work clothes?”

Beau glanced at himself. “I—uh—went to a friend’s house.”

Based on the love bite on his neck and the way he was avoiding my eyes, I translated his statement to mean, *I went to Shelly’s house and we had a lot of sex.*

Usually I couldn’t abide having my quiet time interrupted, but Beau’s appearance at this late hour was actually fortuitous. It was past time to clear the air about Shelly Sullivan.

“Sit down, Beau. I think we should talk.”

He removed his jacket, hanging it on the console hook, and shook his head. “Can it wait ’til tomorrow?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

He huffed, rubbing a tired hand over his tired face. “Fine. What is it?”

I placed my book on the table at my elbow and tented my fingers. “There comes a time in every young man’s life when—”

“Oh, brother.” Beau rolled his eyes and turned for the stairs. “I don’t have time for one of your speeches, Cletus. I’m exhausted.”

“Fine, I’ll just say it plain. I’m not interested in Shelly Sullivan. But I’m happy you are. Good for you both. Go forth and prosper.”

Beau halted suddenly, his foot on the first step of the staircase. The tense line of his shoulders told me I’d caught him off guard, a suspicion confirmed by the clear shock in his eyes as he swung them to me.

“What did you say?”

At just that moment a knock sounded at our door, several urgent rappings against the solid wood. Beau looked over his shoulder and turned back to the door. We swapped confused stares.

Despite Repo's assurances over the phone on Saturday that he'd keep Catfish on a leash until we met, had the Iron Wraiths' captain ignored his leader? Except I hadn't heard any motorcycles.

"Who is it?" Beau called. I could see by his hesitation that he had the same suspicion.

"It's Jennifer Sylvester."

I jumped from my chair and jogged to the door, beating Beau there by three paces. I swung it open, revealing my woman's tear-stained face. She was still in the same clothes as earlier, jeans and a T-shirt, but she wore no jacket or sweater. Her eyes were big and sad, red and puffy from crying, and she was holding herself.

Alarm hit me square between the eyeballs. I pulled her into the house and wrapped her in my arms.

"What happened? What happened to you? Are you okay?"

She was ice cold. Her teeth were chattering. I rubbed her arms.

Jennifer nodded against my chest, sniffing. "I'm okay. I'm not hurt. Well, except my feet."

I glanced down, horrified to find her barefoot. "Where are your shoes?"

"At my parents' house. It's a—" she sobbed, her breath hitching, "a long story."

"Beau, go put on some tea." I glanced over my shoulder, but found my brother was no longer there.

Frowning at his disappearance and frantic over her state of disarray, I plucked her from the ground and carried her to my grandmother's favorite chair. I wrapped her in my grandmother's favorite quilt, constructed from her old party dresses, and placed the moonshine I'd been drinking against her lips.

"Drink this, just a little. It'll warm you up."

Her lips were blue, almost purple, and she nodded, taking a sip. I had to hold the glass because she was shaking so badly. I pushed my fingers into her hair, which was loose and tangled around her shoulders, and she leaned her cheek against my palm.

"What happened?" I pressed, unable to curtail the question.

I needed to know who to maim.

She sighed, closing her eyes. “My father was waiting for me . . . when I got home.”

Cold dread seized my heart, sending ice and wrath through my veins.

I worked to keep my tone even. “Did he hurt you?”

It didn’t matter what the answer was, I was going to tear his world apart. I was going to destroy him, grind him to dust beneath the heel of my boot.

She shook her head. “He didn’t strike me, if that’s what you mean.”

A herd of elephants coming down the stairwell—or what sounded like it—had me looking over my shoulder. Billy, followed closely by a concerned-looking Beau, crossed the room and stood at my side.

“Is she okay?” Billy asked, frowning between Jennifer and me. “What can we do?”

“You can make some tea. And put a quantity of spirits in it. Better yet, heat up some chicken broth.”

Billy nodded once and then surprised me by stepping forward and squatting next to where Jennifer sat. He squeezed her shoulder briefly then rubbed her arm through the blanket.

“Cletus will tell you, but you need to believe him. You have a safe place here and should stay as long as you want.”

She nodded, but kept her eyes closed, her mouth pressed into a stiff line. She was trying not to cry.

Billy gave her arm one more squeeze, sending me a glance of support, then stood. “Come on, Beau. Let’s give them some privacy.”

“What? Privacy? Why?”

“Because, dummy, that’s his woman and they need some privacy.”

“Wait, what?” Beau’s reply was sharp and stunned.

“Beauford Fitzgerald, close your fly trap and move. I’m only going to explain this to you once . . . ” Billy’s voice trailed off as he pushed Beau into the kitchen.

Her face was still cold, so I knelt in front of her and pressed my palms to her cheeks. I forced myself not to ask any questions. I needed to know what happened, but she needed me to be patient.

So I could be patient.

Yep.

I hate being patient.

Just when I was about to lose my battle against concern-fueled curiosity, she opened her eyes and looked at me. She'd stopped shaking, mostly. Her chin had ceased its wobbling. But her eyes were still dull and dejected. I hated how powerless I was in that moment. I needed to take away her sorrow, bury it, banish it, destroy it.

"Tell me what to do," I begged, desperate to do something.

She swallowed, shaking her head sadly. "There's nothing to do. My father disowned me, so I left."

"Without your shoes?"

She nodded.

I frowned at this news. "Why are you so cold?"

"I walked here."

"You *walked* here?" I couldn't keep my anger out of my voice and the sound made her flinch, and that broke my heart.

Yes. I will destroy him. He will be destroyed by me.

"Cletus—"

"I'm sorry. I'll be calm. I'll be that fancy iced cucumber water. Please continue. Tell me what happened."

She licked her lips and I saw that they were chapped. But they also weren't blue anymore. She covered my hands on her face with hers and brought them to her lap, staring at where our fingers were entwined.

"He said that we needed to talk. He was really angry, with me, about us. He knew about us and said," she swallowed, gathered a large inhale, then continued, "he was crazy. He said crazy things."

"Like what?"

"He said you wanted to control me. That you would leave me. That I would be left with nothing. He said that if I tried to work at another bakery, he'd sue me."

"He can't do that unless you signed a non-compete agreement, which I'm assuming you haven't."

“I haven’t. I’m not even technically an employee. Cletus,” she stared at me, worry and fear plaguing her features, “I have nothing. I don’t even have a bank account. I’ve been so stupid, trusting my parents. I should have formalized everything a long time ago.”

“Don’t worry about that.” I waved away her fear, needing her to feel safe.

“I will worry about that.” She frowned at me, her eyebrows pulling together until two fierce lines appeared between her eyes. “I need to be able to support myself. I’m going down to Knoxville tomorrow. There’s a bakery in the old district that’s been trying to hire me for years. I’ll start there.”

“Fine. I’ll drive you. But it’s nothing to fret over right now.” I tightened my fingers over hers. “What did your momma say about things? I have a hard time believing she’s willing to lose you as an asset at the bakery.”

Jennifer shook her head. “She wasn’t there. It was just him, ranting at me and telling lies.”

“What do you mean? What lies?”

“He said you were blackmailing him. That he loved me. But that he wanted to save me from you. It was so awful.”

I stiffened, and suddenly my stomach soured. I found I had difficulty swallowing past a mysterious lump lodged in my throat.

Jenn sniffled again. “So I had to leave. I had to get out of there and away from his lies.”

I sat back on my feet and studied her tired face, uncertain how to proceed. Kip may have been lying about loving his daughter, but he wasn’t lying about the blackmail.

“At first, I think he really thought he could bully me into giving you up.” She was staring beyond me, at the fire, talking mostly to herself. “I think he thought I would cave, that I would just keep doing whatever he wanted. And when I didn’t, he lied. And when that didn’t work, he tried to backtrack and guilt me into it, by saying he loves me. He’s sick.”

I had to correct her. If I didn’t, then he’d have the power.

“Jennifer. I have to tell you something.”

“What is it?” Her eyes shifted back to mine. She looked exhausted.

“I am blackmailing your father.”

Jennifer stilled. And then she blinked once, confused. “What?”

“I’m blackmailing him.”

She stared at me, her eyes growing impossibly wide until comprehension made them sharp with betrayal.

“You blackmailed my father?” she whispered, pulling her fingers from mine.

The accusation in her words cut; I had to help her see reason.

“I did. I am. I blackmailed him so he would leave us alone.”

She stood abruptly, limping to the other side of the room then spinning on me. She crossed her arms, wrapping the blanket tighter around her shoulders, glaring daggers of hurt and fury in my direction.

“I can’t believe you. I can’t believe you would do that.”

“I wanted him to leave us alone, to give us his blessing.”

She shook her head, her eyes growing distant and unfocused. “Tell me what happened.”

I stood slowly. “He came to see me at the shop on Monday. He told me to back off. So I told him I wouldn’t. And then I told him that he would give us his unconditional support or else I was going to tell your momma that he’s been cheating on her with Ms. Elena Wilkinson for several years.”

Her mouth opened, wide with shock. It took her several seconds, but eventually she choked out, “The school secretary?”

“That’s right.”

“He’s been cheating on my mother?” Her voice cracked with heartbreak and disbelief. “How do you know this?”

“I have proof. I have pictures and emails, sent between the two of them. They’ve been spending most weekends together, driving into Georgia. They have a place together.”

She shook her head, covering her eyes with her hands. “*A place together?* I can’t believe this.”

I nodded once, giving her time to absorb this information. Movement at the kitchen entrance caught my attention. Billy and Beau appeared and they were carrying a tray with a ridiculous amount of food. When they caught

sight of my expression, they stopped, then began to back out of the room slowly.

Meanwhile, Jenn shifted on her feet and I winced. They were cut and bruised and likely caused her great pain.

“You should sit down.” I moved to help her, but she stiffened, taking a step away from me.

“Don’t touch me.”

Billy halted his retreat, his eyes sharpening as they moved between us.

Jennifer released a shaky breath. “Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“Because I didn’t want to lose my leverage. If you found out, I knew you’d tell your mother.”

“Damn right I would tell her,” she shouted, clearly furious. But then she sighed and her shoulders slouched, and I watched as the fight seemed to leave her body. “I can’t believe you would do this. I thought—you said you were in love with me.”

Dammit.

Fuck.

Dammit.

“I am in love with you.”

I just wanted to hold her, but every time I took a step forward, she backed away. She needed distance, she needed space, and I needed her.

“No. You’re not. You just want to control me, like my father.”

What?

No.

No, no, no.

I balled my hands into fists of frustration.

Stubborn woman.

“Excuse me.” I barely managed to control my voice. “But that is complete and utter bullshit.”

A spark reignited behind her eyes and it was not a pleasant one. “Really? Because it doesn’t feel like bullshit. It feels like you broke my heart. I trusted you. But obviously you don’t trust me.”

“I do trust you,” I said through clenched teeth.

“But not enough.” She shook her head, her voice breaking on the words. “Not enough to trust that I would choose you over my parents’ disapproval.”

I frowned at her, startled by her claim. In truth, her words hit me straight in the heart and gave me pause. Even truer, dread filled my chest.

I trusted her.

I did.

I trust her. But her parents . . .

“They’ve been controlling you for years, Jenn. And you wanted me to, what? Trust that suddenly their good opinion would cease being the single most important factor in your life? No. I did what I had to do to ensure we would be together.”

“You did what you had to do in order to control the situation.” She pointed an angry finger at me, her face twisted in fury, making my heart feel like it was caught in a vise.

“Fine. Yes. That’s what I did. And I’d do it again. I’d do it a hundred times if it guaranteed that you would be mine and I would be yours.”

Her chin wobbled and her eyes flooded with tears. She wiped them away, huffing a laugh devoid of humor. “Well, you didn’t need to blackmail my father, Cletus. Because I did choose you.”

I frowned, time seemed to slow. “What do you mean?”

“My father gave me an ultimatum before I left. He said I had to choose—you or my family.” Jennifer redirected her eyes to the floor.

I couldn’t draw breath and my pulse strummed quickly and loudly between my ears. I watched her, waiting, fearing her next words.

“I chose you,” she whispered, turning the final screw of the vise as two fat tears left new streaks on her beautiful face. “I chose you over my family, over their disapproval, over everything. I chose you. And you chose control.”

Fuck distance. Fuck space. Fuck fighting. Fuck all of it.

I crossed to her in five steps and reached for her, needing to touch her and do something to remove her hurt. But she twisted away.

“No. Don’t touch me. I don’t want you to touch me. I can’t—I can’t do this.” She lifted her arms as though fighting me off.

I lifted my palms between us, showing her I surrendered. I wouldn’t touch her if she didn’t want me to. But then Billy was there, stepping between us. He tossed a disappointed frown in my direction that made me wince. Then he turned his back on me, gathering Jennifer into his arms giving her a tight hug.

Rationally, I knew I should thank my brother. I should thank him for comforting Jennifer when I couldn’t, when she wouldn’t let me.

Irrationally, I wanted to rip off his arms and legs and beat him to death with them.

She was crying in earnest again, the sound tearing me to shreds. I was a caged animal, listening to the cries of his mate. I was helpless. I hated being helpless.

I hated it.

Billy lifted her, carrying her in his arms up the stairs. I watched them go, took one step to follow and stopped myself. Black spots of fury filled my vision. I tugged my hand through my hair and held my forehead, staring after them.

The edges of my control were shredded and the spiral of darkness—fierce anger—and regret was upon me. My lungs were on fire. I couldn’t swallow. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think.

And I couldn’t stay here.

So I left.

CHAPTER 27

“Suffering is a gift. In it is hidden mercy.”

— Jalaluddin Rumi

~Cletus~

When I left the house, I went straight to the shed and chopped the hell out of some wood. Actually, lots of wood. Lots and lots of wood. Exhaustion followed, but the acrid taste of helplessness remained.

I rubbed my chest, setting the ax down on the stump, and tried to catch my breath. Images of Jennifer’s eyes as she pushed me away, ripe with betrayal and pain, flashed through my mind. I was fixating on the memory. I couldn’t escape it. My heart bled with it. Gushing, an endless torment.

I squinted at the dark field as I heard footsteps approaching from the house. *Billy*, and he wasn’t being sneaky as he plowed through the grass.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he hollered at me, still several yards away.

“You know what I was thinking. I was out of the boat and wanted to keep it that way.”

“You should have trusted her to make the right decision.”

“Thanks for the advice, Dear Abby. But you’re a day late and a dollar short. I did what needed being done.”

Believing in people hadn’t ever come easily to me. I was by nature suspicious and distrustful, mostly because—if the standardized IQ curve was to be believed—the majority of people were idiots.

But Jennifer was not an idiot. Jennifer was brilliant and wise, and kind and good, and everything.

And I’d just fucked everything up.

Billy’s hands came to his waist. “Blackmailing her father?”

“That’s right.” I defended myself, but my words lacked conviction. “The man has plenty of secrets, as most evil people do.” I picked up the ax and swung it at the stump. The splintering wood held no satisfaction for me.

“How many secrets do you have, Cletus?”

I narrowed my eyes on my brother. I didn't respond. If he was trying make me angrier, if he was trying to increase my misery, his plan was working.

His eyes flickered between the chopping block and me. “We don't need any more wood split.”

“Too bad.” I set another piece on the block. “Y'all are selfish wood splitters. Maybe Beau is having a hard time, did you ever think of that? Maybe he needs to split some wood. Just because you and Jethro cut down half the forest over the summer doesn't mean I can't split wood now.”

“And just because someone has secrets doesn't mean they're evil.”

Billy's pejorative tone had me straightening and meeting his stare, my lungs burning, filling with fury.

“He's having an affair, Billy,” I said, barely controlling my desire to shout in his face. “Kip Sylvester has been having an affair for several years with his school secretary. He tells Jennifer that dressing like a normal person is sinful and makes her feel ashamed of herself. He takes her money and buys himself fancy cars and boats. He calls her names, belittles her in front of people—his own daughter!”

Billy flinched, lifting his hands and showing me his palms. “Calm down. I know he does, I've seen him cut her down before. He's a terrible person. But I'm not talking about Kip Sylvester. I'm talking about you.”

I continued, ranting mostly to myself. “He's the stupid one. What was he thinking? That I was bluffing? I'm going to ruin him. I swear, we're surrounded by assholes and idiots in this town.”

“Just because someone is an idiot doesn't mean they're a bad person. And just because someone is smart doesn't mean they're good.”

I glared at my brother. This was not the first time he'd reminded me of this fact. I dropped the ax to the ground and turned, searching for a satisfying outlet for my wrath.

Jennifer had been right. I didn't trust her. I didn't trust that she would choose me over her parents. I lacked faith. I knew too much. I had too much experience. I was jaded.

Finding nothing to destroy, I growled in frustration and punched the side of the shed. “If ignorance is bliss, then knowledge is a cage.”

“But knowledge is only a cage if you dwell in isolation.” His voice was careful and controlled. “Jennifer is smart. And she’s good. Life hasn’t been particularly kind to her, but she is still kind.”

I nodded, some of my anger giving way to weariness as I thought of her kindness. “I know. Her kindness doesn’t make her weak, it makes her strong.”

“She’ll forgive you.”

I huffed a humorless laugh and shook my head. “She shouldn’t. She should hate me, plot my demise.”

“But she won’t. And that’s why you two belong together. You’re looking for a key to your cage? Well, that woman is it.”

Billy turned, not waiting for a response, and walked back to the house, leaving me in the dark with an ax and an enormous stack of wood. I tore my attention from his retreating back and eyeballed the woodpile. We had so much, we couldn’t fit it all in the shed. The overflow pile was also teetering, already too tall.

Getting rid of it was going to be a pain. If Jethro’s baby were born and older, then maybe we could arrange to sell it, teach the kid about commerce.

Maybe Jethro’s kid and my kid could sell it together . . . and lemonade . . . and Jennifer’s cakes.

My throat tightened until I couldn’t swallow because I saw my future with Jennifer and it included kids. And cousins. And baking cakes and fixing cars. I would make them a sandbox out of a tractor tire and plastic shovels out of plastic milk containers. And when they were old enough, I would teach those little rascals how to use Granny Oliver’s moonshine still to the consternation of their mothers.

It was a future worth fixating on.

And Jennifer was the key to my cage. She was the key to my future. We fit together. Her strengths counterpoised my weaknesses. If she gave me another chance, I would give her my faith. I would trust her completely. I would give her everything. I would tell her everything.

Everything.

Because knowledge is only a cage if you dwell in isolation.

The ache in my chest didn't ease. The wound festered. The torment persisted. I frowned at the woodpile, discontent settling like lead and acid in my stomach. There was still the distinct possibility that she wouldn't forgive me. But that possibility felt slim. Jennifer was a forgiving person. Because she was so forgiving, people took advantage of her generous heart.

And, God Almighty, I didn't want to be one of those people. I refused to take advantage, even though she'd probably let me.

I was at an impasse.

Asking Jennifer to be my key would be asking too much.

But I couldn't let her go.

I couldn't.

I can't.

I couldn't sleep.

Consequently, I woke up Duane and informed him that I required a getaway driver one last time. He was surprisingly cheerful about it even though it was just after 6:00 A.M.

"Are we sneaking in? Or knocking on the door?" Duane slowed as he approached the Sylvester's driveway.

"I'm knocking on the door. But if they give me trouble, I'll need to grab her stuff quickly and leave. You stay in the car until I give you the sign."

"Sounds good."

I strolled to the front door, noting that Jennifer's BMW and her momma's BMW were still parked in the drive, but Kip's car was gone.

I rang the doorbell. I waited. I rang the doorbell again.

Diane Donner-Sylvester yanked the door open and stared at me with wide searching eyes. "Oh," her face fell, "I thought you might be someone else."

I gave the woman a once-over. She looked messy. Mrs. Donner-Sylvester never looked messy. She always looked tidy.

"You were hoping I was Jennifer?"

She glanced at me sharply. "What do you know about Jennifer?"

"I know where she is."

Diane gasped, her hand coming to her mouth. “Oh my God. Is she okay? I’ve been worried sick. She left her phone.” Jennifer’s momma grabbed my arm and held on to me tightly, her eyes wide and panicked.

The woman appeared to be truly distraught. Clearly, her husband hadn’t seen fit to fill her in on the details of why Jennifer had left. I turned to Duane and motioned him forward, then gave Diane my somber nod.

“She’s just fine. Though her feet need some rest.” I led the woman into her house, leaving the door open for Duane to enter. “We’re here to pick up some of her things, so she can be more comfortable. Can you pack her a bag?”

“A bag? What? Why?” She stopped our forward progress and stepped in front of me, her eyes darting to Duane as he walked in, then back to me. “No. She needs to come home.”

“I’m afraid that’s not going to happen, not today at any rate.”

Diane drew herself up straight and tall, removing her hand from my arm. “Are you saying you speak for Jennifer? You know her mind? What she wants?”

“No, ma’am. I most assuredly do not speak for Jennifer’s mind or pretend to know what she wants. But I do speak for her feet. And she can’t presently walk on her feet. Therefore, she’s not coming home today. What happens tomorrow is up to her.”

“What’s wrong with her feet?”

“She walked from your house to ours with no shoes on. Her feet are in bad shape,” Duane volunteered, his tone accusatory.

Diane swallowed stiffly, her mouth in a tense line as she looked between us. I noticed with some frustration that Duane met her glare with a glare. He wasn’t the warm and fuzzy type.

I should have brought Beau.

Duane should have stayed in the car with his winning personality while Beau could have sweet-talked her into packing the bag.

Her shrewd eyes bounced between us and finally landed on me. “If you don’t speak for Jennifer, then why is she any concern of yours?”

Duane opened his mouth to respond, likely with something else charming and delightful, so I cut him off.

“Your daughter came to me for help,” I hedged.

“I want to see her,” she demanded suddenly, crossing her arms.

I sighed.

I was tired. And as much as I wanted to fight with this woman, this wasn’t my fight. It was Jenn’s fight. As she’d proven many times over the last few months, she was perfectly capable of fighting her own battles. I wasn’t used to allowing people to fight their own battles, especially people I loved.

Consequently, I sighed.

“Mrs. Donner-Sylvester, whether you see or do not see Jennifer is not up to me. It’s up to your daughter. So let me tell you what’s going to happen.” I paused, giving her a minute to react or interrupt. She didn’t. Instead she glared at me—half hope, half anger—so I continued. “We’re going to pack a bag for Jenn—just a few things—so she can be comfortable. And we’ll take her phone, so you can call her. How does that sound?”

A quantity of her anger dissipated, leaving mostly hope. She licked her lips, her eyes moving to Duane, then to me.

“I guess that’ll have to do. But I’ll pack her bag.”

“No yellow dresses,” Duane demanded out of the blue, scowling. “And sneakers or sandals, no fancy shoes. Her feet are bruised, so she can’t wear those fancy shoes.”

Diane narrowed her eyes on Duane and I thought for a moment she was going to tell him to go to hell. Instead she nodded tightly and turned, calling over her shoulder, “I’ll be right back.”

As soon as she was out of earshot I hit my brother on the shoulder. “Do you think you could dial back the cheerfulness, Duane? I’m getting cavities from all the sweet you’re spreading around.”

He smirked at me, shrugging. “Admit it, you’re going to miss me when I’m gone.”

Despite my tiredness, I returned his smile. “I’m going to miss those blueberry hotcakes.”

“‘Fluffy clouds of awesome.’ Isn’t that what you called them?”

I nodded once, sighing again. I was sighing a lot this morning. Chopping wood for four hours after fighting with the love of your life takes a toll on a person.

Jethro was getting married in a few days.

Duane and Jess were leaving next week.

And Jennifer . . .

“I’m going to give you some advice, Cletus.” Duane hit my shoulder. “It’s something you once said to me.”

“Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes.” He grinned, big and wide, and that was a sight to see. Duane never grinned, not really, not unless Jessica was in the room.

I braced myself for whatever nugget of excrement he was about to toss at me.

“Everything is temporary, Cletus. This,” he gestured to our surroundings, “this is temporary. Even mountains fall. Nothing lasts forever. You got a chance at happiness, even for a week, a month, a year? You grab it and hold on to it for as long as it lasts. I want you to seize.”

“You want me to seize?” I asked flatly, lifting my eyebrow at his little performance.

“That’s right. You seize that woman, Cletus. You make her yours. And then after,” still grinning, Duane dropped his hand on my shoulder and gave me a little shake, “you give that woman your sausage.”

CHAPTER 28

“Behind every exquisite thing that existed, there was something tragic.”

— Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

~Jennifer~

A gentle hand touched my shoulder, shaking me just slightly. I turned, blinking scratchy eyes at the hand’s owner.

It was Ashley. She gave me a soft smile and pushed my hair away from my forehead in a decidedly maternal gesture.

“I’m here to see about your feet,” she whispered. “You can go back to sleep, I just didn’t want to wake you while I tickled your toes and get kicked in the face.”

She’d turned on the light next to the bed. I rubbed my eyes and searched the dim room for a clock.

“What time is it?”

Numbly, I watched as she arranged disinfectant and gauze on the bed. “Just past nine thirty.”

I shot up, a spike of fear-fueled adrenaline bringing me fully awake. “I’m late!”

“Shhh.” Ashley placed her hands on my shoulders and pushed me back to a reclining position. “You’re not late. You’re sleeping in.”

I frowned at her, at the unfamiliar room, and then the events of the prior evening crashed over me and I winced, my arms instinctively wrapping around myself.

After the unpleasantness with Cletus, Billy had carried me to a bedroom. I surmised it was Ashley’s old room because pictures of her with other people dotted the surfaces, the single bed was covered in a floral quilt, and the letters A S H L E Y hung on the wall.

Last night Billy had set me on the bed and placed a hand on my back; I curled into ball and covered my face with my hands, willing the tears to stop. I couldn’t think, because if I thought about anything, I would have to

feel something. I wasn't ready. So I cleared my mind, pictured a field covered in white snow.

Eventually the tears stopped. And when they did, I drifted into a dreamless sleep, until Ashley woke me.

"That's right," I said, remembering, "I have nowhere to be." *And I have nowhere to go.*

Ashley moved to the end of the bed and began dabbing at my soles.

"They did a good job," she mumbled, peeling off a Band-Aid.

"What's that?"

Her eyes flickered to mine and she gave me a warm smile. "Billy and Beau. They did a good job cleaning your feet and trying to tape them up."

When I continued regarding her with confusion, she added, "Billy called me. He was worried because you didn't seem to notice them fussing with your feet. Said you just stared into space and didn't respond."

A mild rush of embarrassment crept up my neck. "I don't remember that."

"I don't imagine you do. From what I hear, you've been through a lot."

I didn't respond. I wasn't certain what to say. I didn't want to rehash what had happened with my father. Cletus was her brother, so talking to her about him was out of the question. Plus, it hurt to think about Cletus. It hurt to think about how he hadn't trusted me to choose him. Or maybe he didn't think I was strong enough to stand up to my parents and put us first. Maybe he still felt sorry for me. And that thought hurt most of all.

I didn't want his pity. I didn't want him seeing me as weak or feeble. I wasn't.

"I can hear you thinking," Ashley said, her eyes on my feet. "You might as well talk about it. I'm a trained healthcare professional and I guarantee you I've heard more hair-raising stories than the bartender at the Pink Pony."

I studied her, watching her concentrate with steady hands. How she spoke reminded me a lot of Cletus. She was very matter-of-fact, but with a softer touch.

I cleared my throat and glanced at the ceiling. "How do you prove to someone that you're strong?"

"Through your actions," she answered without hesitating.

The room descended into silence for a full minute while I thought about her response. A plan developed, one where I would prove to Cletus I was strong, that he could trust me, that we were equals. And the more I thought my plan over, the more I realized that this plan wasn't really about proving anything to Cletus. This plan was about proving something to myself.

Ashley broke the silence. "Now, if that *someone* is Cletus Winston . . ." Her eyes lifted and our gazes connected. "Then may I suggest you add a little sneaky in with the recipe? Because, as much as I love my brother—and I do, don't tell anyone, but he's my favorite—he needs a taste of his own medicine every once in a while. So if you can think of a way to prove your strength *and* pull one over on the puppet master at the same time, just let me know how I can help."

I stared at Ashley, unable to speak. Some overpowering emotion held me in its grip and I couldn't quite untangle myself.

Just let me know how I can help.

Her gaze flickered to mine, then back to my feet. "Are you okay? You're looking at me like I'm a loony bird."

"No. Sorry. It's just . . ." I struggled to find the correct words. "It's just, I don't think anyone has ever said that to me before."

"What? That Cletus needs a taste of his own medicine?"

"No, 'let me know how I can help.'"

Ashley's movements stilled, and her frown of concentration became something else. After several contemplative seconds, she lifted her eyes to my face and gave me small smile.

"You know, I just moved back—back to town—last spring and I've been missing my gal pals. I Skype with them every Tuesday, but I miss having good girl friends to go places with. I haven't taken the time I should to build a new tribe here in Green Valley."

I continued to stare at her, but I rolled my lips between my teeth so I wouldn't shout, *I VOLUNTEER!*

"How about this?" she continued. "No matter what happens with you and Cletus—no matter whether you split up and go your separate ways or get married and raise chickens and goats—you and I are going to be friends. We'll can our gardens together and I'll teach you how to knit."

“And I know how to make soap,” I blurted. “I can teach you how to make soap.”

“Sounds great.” Her smile widened.

“So it’s a deal?” I reached out my hand, eager to finalize this friendship.

She laughed lightly, gripping my offered fingers and giving them a small shake. “Good friends.”

“Good friends,” I echoed, my voice cracking. I tried to return her smile, but mine was a little wobbly. Overwhelmed, tears stung my eyes so I blinked them away and cleared my throat.

“It’s a deal.” She released my hand, giving me one more smile, then returning her attention to my feet. “I’m just the first of many, Jenn. It’s time you started building your tribe. But if I can make a suggestion?”

I cleared my throat, still clogged with emotion. “Go right ahead, all tips are welcome.”

“Stay away from the normals.”

“The normals?”

“Yep.” She nodded once, the side of her mouth hitching in a way that reminded me of Cletus. “Stay away from the normals, the small-minded people who fill their brains with small-minded pursuits, who blend in and keep up with the Joneses. Those people will tear you down and make you boring. Instead, surround yourself with the weirds. With the misfits, oddballs, and outcasts. Because the normals, bless their hearts, have no idea how to have fun.”

Sienna Diaz arrived just as Ashley was packing up and giving me instructions about my feet. She’d given me Ibuprofen and said to stay off them as much as possible for the day, but light walking would be fine. She said I should be able to walk normally by tomorrow, as long as it didn’t hurt. But not to wear high heels or stand for too long.

“Feet are resilient, they’re like women that way,” she said, then added with a big smile, “see you later, friend.”

Sienna flashed her dimples as Ashley left us, then turned to me with an exceptionally serious expression which was matched by her tone. “I have a

proposition for you.”

I needed a minute. I wasn’t used to being the focus of so much charisma. “Uh, okay, what—”

“Here’s the deal.” She sat on the bed next to me and grabbed my hand, cradling it in her own.

Let me repeat that. Sienna Diaz—movie star, hilarious comedian, and all-round extraordinary human being—sat on the bed next to *me* and grabbed *my* hand. And it was not an hallucination.

Life is so weird.

“I am obsessed with your lemon custard cakes,” she confessed on a rush. “Obsessed. But your bakery hasn’t been carrying them for over a week.”

“Oh, sorry about that.”

She shook her head quickly. “Don’t apologize. Here’s the deal: if and when you’re feeling up to it, I want to pay you—handsomely—to keep me well stocked in lemon custard cakes for the next six months. And maybe for the rest of my life. And my children’s lives.”

I cracked a smile because the woman was funny. “You don’t have to pay me. I’ll be happy to do it for you.”

She shook her head. “No. No, no, no. I’m paying you. You’re being put on retainer. I’ll have my lawyer draw up a contract. We’re making this official, because I *need* those cakes, and I want to be able to hold you accountable in a court of law if you don’t deliver.”

I narrowed my eyes on her, seeing through her demand. Obviously someone had talked to her about my situation.

As though reading my mind, her expression softened and she squeezed my hand. “Yes, I know what happened. These Winston boys are big gossips. But I’m being completely honest with you. Please let me take advantage of you and exploit you for your baking brilliance. Please!” She tugged on my fingers, bringing them to just under her chin as though she were praying. “I’m suffering. I have morning sickness all the time. I’ve lost twenty pounds and I don’t fit in my wedding dress. They’re going to have to use duct tape to keep it on me. I need those cakes!”

Despite everything, she made me laugh. “Fine, yes, I’ll make you the cakes.”

She dropped my hand and stood. “Excellent. Jethro is driving you over to the bank today to get you set up with an account and I’ll have the money wired in.”

“An account? But . . . but I don’t have my wallet or my driver’s license.” I’d been so distraught when I left, grabbing my purse hadn’t occurred to me.

“Cletus and Duane went to your parents’ house this morning and picked up some of your things. Your momma packed your bag, but she wants you to call her. Don’t worry, Duane made sure there were no yellow dresses in the suitcase.” Sienna pulled a phone from her pocket and held it out to me.

It was my phone. I gaped at it and then I gaped at this movie-star angel sent from Heaven to deliver only good news.

I didn’t know what to say, so I just stared at her like a gaping moron.

She flashed a smile then moved to the door, spinning back to me at the last minute. “Also, I believe the Donner Bakery was supposed to make my wedding cake and I believe it cost something like two thousand dollars if my memory serves. Which means you were supposed to make my wedding cake. I’ve called the bakery and cancelled my order. I figure, let’s just cut out the middleman. I’ll add it to your lemon custard cake retainer fee. Assuming your feet will allow it, do you think you could use the kitchen in the carriage house? It has two ovens. And once you tell me exactly what you need, I’ll make sure you have whatever top-of-the-line equipment you require . . .”

Without waiting for my response, she left. I stared at the door for a long moment. Her energy was . . . intense. I liked her, and not just because she was one of those people who are impossible to dislike. She clearly had a good heart. I decided I would take her up on her offer, but one day I’d pay her back. With interest.

The phone in my hand buzzed, demanding my attention, and a text flashed on the screen. It was from Cletus and the sight made my heart lurch and twist, a pining ache stealing my breath. As I scrolled through my notifications, I noticed several texts.

Cletus: *I’m sorry. I was wrong, you were right.*

Cletus: *I just realized you probably don’t have your phone.*

Cletus: *I think I'm going to make myself useful by retrieving your phone.*

Cletus: *I just left your parents' house. I have your phone.*

Cletus: *Clearly I had your phone, if you're reading these messages.*

I was smiling—grinning like a love-sick fool would be more accurate—by the time I got to the last message. But then my heart twisted and I was gripped by a ferocious wave of sorrow. He might have recognized his error, but he still didn't trust me to be strong. I didn't want to be pitied.

I refused to be pitied.

Sighing, I placed the cell on my lap and stared at the ceiling.

I missed him. I hated being angry with him. This state of longing for Cletus hurt, because I wasn't ready to forgive him.

He needed to prove that he trusted me, not just for me, but for him. Without trust, we had nothing.

I needed to prove my independence and strength, not just for him, but for myself.

And on that note, I called my mother.

I sat up in the bed, leaning against the headboard and testing my feet. They smarted just a tad, but not much.

My mother picked up after the second ring. "Hello? Jennifer?"

I gathered a deep breath, prepared for recriminations and hysterics. "Momma."

"Oh thank God. What were you thinking? Leaving the house like that? And you didn't take your phone. I had no way to reach you. You weren't at the bakery. You weren't anywhere. I was about to call the sheriff. And then those Winston boys show up and say you're at their house. What am I supposed to think?"

He didn't tell her he kicked me out? What a coward. A flare of disgust for my father had me shaking my head.

"Slow down. Just . . . give me a minute to respond."

I heard her huff a watery sigh. "I'm just so sorry. I think . . . I think I must have driven you away. I keep thinking about that conversation we had on Friday. You hurt my feelings, and things were getting worse instead of better, so I talked to Reverend Seymour about it and he says I need to let

you go. I need to let you fly like a bird.” She sniffled, then added on a wobbly whisper, “I don’t know if I can do that.”

Tears pricked behind my eyes. I blinked them away. “I’m not a little girl anymore.”

“I know. Well, I know that now. In retrospect, I guess, I haven’t been a very good listener. I just . . . I just wanted better for you than what I had. You know? You have so much talent and you’re so darn pretty, you’re everything I wished I was when I was your age. Your granddaddy was a selfish man, God rest his soul, and he neglected your grandma and me. I only want what’s best for you, what I never had.”

“But you’re not me. I’m me. And you don’t always know what’s best for me, because you don’t really know me.”

She was quiet for a stretch, then I heard her soft crying. I shook my head and sighed, my forehead falling to my hand.

“Momma, please stop crying.”

“I’m a terrible mother,” she wailed.

“No,” I rolled my eyes, “no, you aren’t. You’ve meant well, and have done the best you know how. But now it’s time to let me be my own person.”

She sniffled again, and I could tell she was struggling with this concept. “You’ll have to teach me how to let you be, because I’m at a loss. I really am. I feel like everything I know is upside down and backward.”

“First things first, you need to know that I’m not coming home. I’m not living at home anymore.” I couldn’t, for so many reasons, not the least of which was my father. I couldn’t look at him let alone share a house with him. I wouldn’t.

My momma was quiet again, and then she cleared her throat. “Now, Jennifer, I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Even so, I’m not coming home.”

“But how are you going to support yourself?”

“You’re going to pay me.”

Again, she was silent and I could almost picture the shock painted on her features. But I wasn’t backing down. I worked hard—all the time. There

was no reason I shouldn't be paid for my work.

At length, she sighed, sounding exasperated. "You want me to pay you."

"The bakery is going to pay me." I lifted my voice, infusing it with as much conviction as I could. "I work there, and therefore I should earn a salary for the work I do. If you feel differently, I understand. But that means I'll be working elsewhere."

"No. No need for that. We'll . . . work out something." She sounded distracted.

"Yes. We'll work something out and it'll be formalized in a contract.. An employment agreement."

She sighed again, louder this time. "That's fine. We can make it formal if you need it to be formal."

"I do. And another thing—"

"There's more?"

"Yes. I will go to New York and meet with the talent agent, but I will decide what happens next."

"Jennifer, this is a big deal." Her tone held an edge of warning.

"It might be a big deal to you, but it's not to me. And it won't make or break the lodge or the bakery."

"Baby, if you don't accept the offer it could put me in a really awkward position." She sounded a little panicked.

I fought against the ingrained instinct to soothe her and resolved to stay firm, but I kept my tone respectful. "Then you should have asked me what I wanted and listened to me when I told you. I want to be helpful to the bakery and the family business, but I truly dislike being the Banana Cake Queen. Therefore, I will continue to help within reason."

She was quiet for a beat and when she spoke next her voice was strained, frustrated. "Fine. Anything else?"

"Yes. I'm not coming back to work until the employment agreement is finalized."

"But . . . but Thanksgiving is coming up. We already have seven hundred orders for your banana cake."

“Then I guess finalizing the employment agreement sooner rather than later is a priority.”

She made a choking sound.

I quickly added, “And I’m in love with Cletus Winston.”

“What? Cletus Winston, the auto mechanic? That simpleton?”

I pressed my lips together so I wouldn’t laugh at her assessment of Cletus, and spoke slowly and clearly. “I’m in love with Cletus Winston and we’re together and I’m very happy.”

“Oh good Lord.”

“He’s what I want.”

“I don’t know if I can accept this, baby. I just . . . I just don’t know.” I could tell she was rubbing her forehead. “You’re going to need to give me some time on this one.”

“That’s fine.” I shrugged, because it was fine. If she never accepted Cletus, that was okay. I’d chosen him for me, not for her.

Yet I felt certain that once they started spending time together and actually knew each other, they would absolutely get along. My mother was single-minded, shrewd and focused, and exceptionally smart. And so was Cletus. The main differences were, my mother didn’t try to hide her intelligence and she cared what other people thought.

Cletus didn’t care *at all* what other people thought, not unless the person was his family.

Or me.

I grinned.

“Maybe,” my momma said on a sigh, “we all just need a break. Your daddy told me I needed a vacation. He’s trying to get me to go to this spa in Asheville. He wanted to leave this afternoon.”

I tensed at this news. I didn’t know why he wanted her to leave town, but I could guess. “Momma.”

“I thought I raised you and your brother right. But obviously I did something wrong, because Isaac won’t even talk to me and you’re running off in the middle of the night to be with the town oddball because you don’t like yellow dresses anymore.”

I ignored her ludicrous and willful oversimplification of the situation because I had to tell her about my father. *About her husband*. She deserved to know. And I needed to tell her before he intervened and filled her head with lies. *More lies*.

“I’m going to tell you something, and you’re not going to believe me. But there’s proof. I’m not lying to you, and it’s really important that you believe me.” I hadn’t seen the proof, but if Cletus said he had proof then I didn’t doubt him.

“Jennifer, you’re scaring me.”

“You should sit down.”

“Jenn—baby—whatever it is, I’m your mother and I love you. Granted, you might drive me crazy wearing those jeans and I might react very poorly at times. I’m just very busy trying to rebuild the family business. And I just don’t understand why you don’t like those pretty dresses, but I guess I can come to terms with your peculiar choices, whatever it takes for you to be in my life. You know how much I miss your brother. I just don’t understand why he never calls.”

“Momma, listen to me. It’s not about me.”

“Then what’s it about?”

I gathered a large breath, held it in my lungs and sent a prayer upward. I prayed for strength. I prayed my mother would believe me, because she didn’t deserve my father’s betrayal. Just like I didn’t deserve his abuse. *Just like he didn’t deserve us*.

“It’s about Dad.” I spoke calmly, because I knew at any minute she was going to launch into hysterics. “It’s about Dad and what he’s been doing on the weekends.”

Guilt had me squirming in my seat.

It was the money. The money was responsible for my guilt. I couldn’t stop looking at my bank balance. But every time I looked at my bank balance, my stomach felt hollow.

“Stop it.”

I glanced to my side, to Jethro Winston who'd taken me to the bank and was now driving me back to his family's house.

He continued, smiling, "Stop working yourself up about the money. Believe me, she'll collect on those custard cakes. They're all she talks about."

I folded the bank printout into thirds and tucked it into my bag. "She was too generous."

"I don't think you appreciate how terrible morning sickness has been for her. She's sick *all the time*. She jokes about it, but I can tell she's in pain." Jethro's hands tightened on the steering wheel and the corners of his mouth turned down. His wife's difficulty affected him. "Those lemon cakes are the only thing that helps. I'd give you a million dollars myself if I thought it would help."

I didn't need a million dollars. Between Sienna's kindness and the agreement I'd tentatively struck with my momma this morning, my cup runneth over.

The conversation with my mother went both better and worse than expected. Better because she'd agreed to pay me for my work. Worse because she hadn't believed me about my father. She said I was mistaken, that I was confused, that he would never do such a thing, and then she ended the call.

Worry for her plagued me, so I decided to give her some time, then approach the subject again.

"Sienna seemed okay this morning," I said, wanting to ease his mind.

He huffed a laugh, shaking his head. "She's a great actress."

I nodded, because she was a great actress. I'd seen all her movies. Even my momma—who didn't like movies—loved Sienna Diaz. She was America's non-conformist sweetheart.

The fact that America's sweetheart had ended up with Jethro Winston was amazing.

Sure, Jethro Winston was a looker. He had twinkly hazel-green eyes, a tall, lean build, strong jaw, impeccable beard, easy smile—the works. But he also had a checkered past. At one time he was involved with the Iron Wraiths and the rumor was he stole cars for the club. I thought he became a

member, but I later discovered he'd been a recruit. He'd left the motorcycle club before he'd pledged as a full member.

Since leaving, he'd become a straight arrow. He was always easy-going and calm, never seemed to get ruffled. I never saw him drink spirits. My momma said that he used to treat women badly; but then I overheard Naomi Winters tell the reverend's wife that Jethro hadn't stepped out with a woman since leaving the Wraiths. The reverend's wife said leaving the Wraiths saved his life and that he'd turned everything around for his momma.

And if Jethro could leave the Iron Wraiths, turn his life around and rejoin his real family, it gave me hope for my brother.

Before I thought better of it, I asked, "Was it difficult? Leaving the Wraiths? Did they make it hard on you? Or could you just leave?"

Jethro's eyebrows jumped. "Uh . . ." he started, stalled, cleared his throat, shifted in his seat, and then frowned, "why do you want to know?"

"My brother, Isaac. He's not a member yet. I just wanted to know, what could be done or how easy it would be for him to leave, if he wanted to leave."

Jethro's frown morphed into an expression of compassion. "Jenn, I hate to tell you this, but even if he wanted to leave, it wouldn't be easy. They did not make leaving easy on me and I'm one of the few who ever managed it."

"Thanks for being honest." His statement confirmed my fears.

His smile was apologetic. "I'm sorry I can't give you better news."

"It's fine. It is. I guess . . . people have to make their own choices. Even if it's not what I want for my brother, I can't force him to be something else. He has to be true to himself."

Jethro gave my forearm a squeeze. "If he does change his mind, I'll be happy to talk to him. If you want."

"Thank you. That's kind of you." I studied his profile, seeing he was being sincere. "You could talk to him about being a park ranger and what that's like."

He released my arm and shrugged. "Sure, I could. But I just let Drew know I'm giving my notice next spring."

“What? Why? What happened?”

“The baby happened. When the baby comes, I’m staying home.” His grin returned and this time it was massive. “I’m going to be a stay-at-home dad,” he announced proudly.

My mouth fell open in surprise, but also excitement for him and Sienna. “That’s so awesome. I’m really happy for you, Jethro.”

“Thank you, Jennifer.” He split his attention between the road and me. “I’m really happy for you, too.”

“You’re happy for me?”

“Yep. Look at you. You don’t look a thing like a Banana Cake Queen.”

I glanced at what I was wearing—Roscoe’s old slippers, my jeans that I’d slept in, Sienna’s Harvard sweatshirt—I’m sure I looked a mess. And that made me laugh.

“No. I guess I don’t look like the Banana Cake Queen.”

“And the world didn’t end.”

“No. It didn’t.” I lifted my chin proudly and turned my attention to the passing scenery while I considered what that meant.

I wasn’t the Banana Cake Queen. I didn’t live with my parents—though technically I didn’t live anywhere—and I had enough money to rent my own place. Life was happening and I was making it happen.

Well, technically the Winstons and Sienna Diaz were making it happen. But soon I’d pay them back.

My attention snagged on a farmhouse set off the road, white with navy shutters and well-maintained window boxes, and I grabbed Jethro’s arm.

“Wait, turn in there.” I pointed to the driveway.

He pressed on the brake. “Here? Claire’s house?”

“That’s right. Claire’s house.” I pulled out my phone and searched for her name.

“Sure, but . . . why are we stopping here?”

“Because,” I selected her contact information and brought the cell to my ear, “I’m going to rent her house.”

He frowned at me, lifting an eyebrow. “I thought Cletus was going to rent it.”

I shook my head, resolve setting my jaw. “Not if I rent it first.”

CHAPTER 29

“Love brings to light a lover's noble and hidden qualities-his rare and exceptional traits: it is thus liable to be deceptive of his normal qualities.”

— Friedrich Nietzsche

~Jennifer~

An amended plan took shape. And based on Ashley's advice, it involved blackmail.

After the quick stop at Claire's—and an even quicker phone call to the woman herself—Jethro was nice enough to swing by the Donner Bakery so I could retrieve an item from the gluten-free flour container. Then he took us back to the Winston house.

I wasn't nervous. I was anxious.

Oh, heck. I was also nervous.

But I was determined.

Jethro insisted on carrying me into the house and I knew I looked a mess, but I didn't have the energy to think about that. More important matters required my attention.

He opened the front door and we found a pacing Cletus by the fireplace. He lifted his eyes. His eyes weren't blue today. They were greenish gray and they looked tired. He was suffering. When his gaze collided with mine, I felt the contact at the base of my throat and beneath my ribs. I ached for him.

Instinct had me wanting to reassure him, to tell him all was forgiven, to hold him close and kiss away his hurt.

But reason told me to hold my damn horses.

First, things needed discussing.

Then kissing.

Then more kissing.

“Hello, Cletus,” Jethro said, his tone impressively prosaic. “How are you?”

Cletus narrowed his eyes on his brother, then crossed the room to stand in front of us.

Ignoring his brother's smirk—which was a remarkable achievement as Jethro's smirk was extraordinary—Cletus addressed me. “Jennifer, may I carry you upstairs so we can discuss what has occurred?”

I hesitated.

I didn't know if it was a good idea to be alone with him, not yet.

But then his eyes moved over my face, haunted and tortured and cherishing.

I said, “Yes, please.”

The anxiety drawing tension lines on his features eased, leaving his gaze still tortured, but mostly cherishing.

My heart fluttered in anticipation. Even though I was still holding on to my damn horses, I also still craved my man's touch. I craved the feel of him, his warmth, his hands, and his mouth. I craved it all. *I craved him.*

So when Jethro handed me over I couldn't help but snuggle against Cletus, tuck my forehead into the curve of his neck and breathe him in. This man belonged to me. He was mine. And I enjoyed every minute of the journey upstairs, especially because what would come after, what I had planned, might lead to less touching. I dreaded the aftermath, but I had to be strong.

Best to make the most of touching now, while I had the chance.

At the top of the stairs, instead of turning toward Ashley's room, he moved in the opposite direction, swiftly carrying me to and through an alternate door. Cletus's room. Before I could voice my objection, we were inside and I was distracted by being in his space. Everything was tidy and in its place, but traces of him were everywhere.

My attention caught on a chess board by the closet; it appeared to have been left in the middle of a match.

“I didn't know you played chess.” I spotted two series of moves the black side could initiate to put white into checkmate.

He nodded absentmindedly, placing me gently on his bed and lifting the pillow against the headboard and encouraging me to rest against it. “Is that

okay? Do you need another pillow? Are you thirsty? Do you need water? Or something else? What about tea? I know you like tea.” He turned from the bed and walked to his closet.

“Cletus, I don’t need anything. But I think we should . . .” I didn’t finish my sentence. I couldn’t. Because I was too confused.

Cletus began pulling gifts from the closet. Gift after gift. All wrapped in different wrapping paper with ornate bows. I gaped at him, at the never-ending pile of gifts. When he’d placed at least fifteen on the bed and the floor at my side, I finally came to my senses.

“What is all this? What are you doing?”

“They’re your birthday presents.” He placed two more on my lap.

“What?”

“Your birthday presents. I missed your birthday, so here you go.”

“Cletus, what are you talking about? You didn’t want to know me last year, why would you have bought me a present?”

He paused on his return trip to the closet and faced me, placing his hands on his hips and sounding intensely frustrated. “I should have. I should have wanted to know you, not just last year, but all your life. I’ve missed all your birthdays, and I’m sorry. I was wrong, to miss your birthday twenty-two times, so here are your presents.”

I stared at him. Actually, I gawked at him, dumbfounded. My beautiful man looked so tormented, and I could see he’d spent the last half day beating himself up.

When he’d texted me earlier that he was wrong, he’d meant it. He believed it. And I believed him.

Cletus turned, walked to the closet, and retrieved another three wrapped boxes, his expression drawn with grief and ripe with self-recrimination.

Before he could turn again, I caught his arm. “Wait. Wait a minute. Just, stop. Stop bringing me presents, you sweet, terrible, infuriating, hilarious, clever man.” I was laughing by the time I finished speaking and was pleased to see some of his misery replaced with a weary smile.

“I’m sorry,” he said, gazing at me with his sad gray eyes, his voice a gravelly whisper. “I’m so sorry. You were right. I didn’t trust you.”

I switched my hold on his hand so our fingers were entwined. “Thank you. Thank you for apologizing.”

Cletus released an audible breath and moved to sit next to me, but his way was blocked by the plethora of wrapped boxes. He frowned at them. Using his free hand, he swept them from the bed.

“None of these are breakable,” he mumbled, claiming his spot and pulling me into a tight hug.

We hugged. And it was perfection. His body, his embrace was where I wanted to be always.

I hoped—in the future, whenever we fought—we’d always end our arguments with a hug.

After a time, but only because I was still holding my damn horses and they were growing restless, I pulled away, immediately missing his strong arms. “There are things we need to discuss.”

“I agree.” He shifted on the bed such that his back was also against the pillow and I was tucked under his arm. He kissed my neck, lingering there as though he was reluctant to leave my skin. “I have a lot I need to tell you.”

I paused, frowning, because his tone sounded ominous. “Wait, there’s more?”

He nodded, straightening. “Not about your father. I blackmailed him, this is true. But I didn’t do anything else to him. You already know about the Jackson James leprosy plan—which is on hold, as promised—as well, I have a few other irons in the fire. Let’s see—”

“Wait. Stop. Stop right there.”

“What?”

I twisted so I could look into his clever eyes. “Cletus, you’re an adult. You don’t need to confess a single thing to me unless it’s something done on my behalf, or for my theoretical benefit. I trusted you and I still do. I’m not your confessor. I cannot absolve you. You have to take responsibility for your own actions and their ramifications, just like I do. Just like everybody does.”

He frowned, looking nonplussed, but then eventually nodded.

Quickly, I added, “Now, if you want to talk about your day, or your leprosy plans, or whatever, I’m here for you. Just like I hope you’re here for me when I want to talk about my day.”

“Or your leprosy plans.”

“Yes. Or my leprosy plans. That goes without saying.”

Cletus cracked his first true smile and gave me a quick kiss, like he couldn’t help himself. “I love you.”

Smoothing my palm over his beleaguered beard, I cupped his jaw. “And I love you.”

His smile grew, warmed, heated, and his hands on me tightened in a way that felt both instinctual and possessive. “That’s the first time you’ve said it.”

“I know.” My grin mirrored his. “You kept interrupting me.”

Cletus’s eyes dropped to my lips and he rumblingly whispered, “Remind me to stop interrupting you.”

I endeavored to ignore the ache in my chest, the circle of heat around my neck, and worked hard to sound serious. “Please stop interrupting me, because I have something important to say.” I tried twisting toward him to be closer, but the angle was awkward. So I huffed. “Can you just move—yes, like that. Move there so I can straddle your lap. I can’t see your face.”

“For the record, I will never turn down you straddling me.”

Shaking my head at him, I waited until he was centered on the bed, then I climbed on his lap and twisted my arms around his neck. “That’s better.”

“So much better.” His voice was low and sent a shiver racing along spine, which he chased with his hands.

I caught his fingers on their way to my backside and pressed them against my waist. “As I was saying, we have a few things that need discussing. A lot has happened.”

“Agree.” He nodded once.

“And last night, you really hurt me.”

A forlorn frown chased away his friskiness. “I know. What can I do?”

“Your apology helped. Thank you for that.” I swallowed, fighting to suppress the butterflies in my stomach. Being this close to him, in this

position, was a bad idea. My hormones wanted me to abandon my plan. They wanted me to release the horses and unwrap my presents, starting with my man.

But I couldn't.

Not yet.

"Here is how things are going to be: I am moving out of my parents' house and into Claire's house—"

"Agree." He moved to kiss me.

Ducking, I dodged his mouth. "By myself."

Frowning severely, his eyebrows pulled low into a dissatisfied line. "Disagree."

I ignored him. "And I've talked to my mother. She's going to pay me for the work I do at the Donner Bakery. I'll also be baking for Sienna while she's pregnant. I have some ideas—based on the lemon cakes she likes—that might help her."

"Let's go back to the housing part of the plan."

Again, I ignored him. "I am going to support myself, with my baking, or whatever else I choose to do. Because it is right and normal for a twenty-two-year-old woman to support herself."

"Yes, but—"

"Just like you are going to support yourself. Because it is right and normal for a man of your age to support himself."

His frown became an eye squint. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying we need to stand separately," unable to help myself, I kissed his nose, "so we can eventually stand together."

His lips flattened into a dissatisfied line and his squint intensified as he mulled this over. "And if I disagree? If I want to—let's say—get married and start making babies now?"

I gave him an indulgent smile and shook my head. "The answer is not yet. Because we're not ready. I'm not ready."

"And if I insist?" His hands slipped lower, his fingers caressing my backside. "I can be very persuasive."

I grinned, because he was right.

“I will not discourage you from using every weapon in your persuasion arsenal.” He leaned forward to kiss me and I dodged his mouth again, holding a finger to his lips. “But I have to warn you, I currently have the upper hand.”

His left eyebrow arched and a delightfully mischievous smile claimed his lips. “Do you? How so?”

I withdrew the last thumb drive from my back pocket and held it up between us. He looked at it, then at me, then at it, his smile falling by degrees.

“That night I gave them back to you, I couldn’t find this one,” I explained. “I found it the next week and planned to hand it over when—or if—I saw you next.”

“Is that . . .?”

“Yes.”

A torrent of emotions passed behind his eyes. Before he could settle on a feeling, I plucked his hand from my body and placed the data drive in his palm. Confusion claimed his features while his gaze followed my movements.

“Here.” I waited until he’d refocused on me. “Now no one has the upper hand.”

Cletus’s frown persisted as he studied me, but it became something else. Less confused, more thoughtful. More determined.

“You’re wrong. You have the upper hand, because my remarkable woman is astute, and strong, and kind.” He leaned forward slowly, holding my gaze, until our lips met. The kiss he gave me was both sad and sweet, resigned and rejoicing, and it crushed me, re-forming my body into a thousand tiny pieces of longing. I wanted to press closer. My thighs tensed on his lap. I wanted to live his kiss and touch his skin and dwell within his warmth and strength for eternity.

When our mouths parted, I chased his. But he tilted his chin to his chest until our foreheads touched. “You’ll always have the advantage of me, Jenn. Because I’m lost without you.”

CHAPTER 30

“Moral wounds have this peculiarity - they may be hidden, but they never close; always painful, always ready to bleed when touched, they remain fresh and open in the heart.”

— Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*

~Cletus~

Perhaps I was being selfish.

In fact, I was being selfish.

It was too much to ask of a person—to be my salvation, to teach me how to have faith, to balance my world-weary view with rainbows and sunshine and gardening in overalls—but . . .

Oh well.

Too late for second-guessing. I was in love with the woman.

Consequently, she was stuck with me. She wasn’t ready for marriage yet, and that was okay. I would wait. I might ask her to marry me once a month until she said yes, but otherwise I would be the epitome of virtuous fortitude and patience.

Maybe not strictly virtuous.

Sporadic virtue would do the trick, with frequent episodes of impertinence and indulgence . . . *unwrapping of presents.*

Also stuck with me, my family.

So while Jennifer was still upstairs in Ashley’s old room, asleep on Thursday morning, I called a family meeting.

“Who made this coffee?” Roscoe called from the kitchen

“Cletus did.” Duane sat next to me on the couch and sipped from his mug.

Roscoe strolled out the kitchen, mugless. “Then, no thanks.”

“Really? You’re going to be judgy with Cletus about his coffee right now?” Billy smirked at our youngest brother.

Roscoe crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t care what he’s going through. I ain’t drinking his coffee. It smells like fish oil and tar.”

“Praise for my excellent coffee notwithstanding, I have something serious to discuss with y’all.” I sat forward on the couch, wanting to get to the point.

Roscoe had arrived late last night for the wedding festivities, which were set to commence this evening, starting with the bachelor party. All siblings were present.

I’d purposefully excluded Drew, because—as a federal game warden—he was law enforcement. I didn’t want him to feel any conflict of interest. Best to leave him in the dark.

It was time for me to share my proverbial burdens.

“Let’s hear it.” Ashley drank from her coffee mug, then smacked her lips. “My, my, that is some mighty fine coffee.”

Roscoe rolled his eyes, but ignored our sister.

I stood and crossed to the mantel, addressing the room. “I have two things to tell y’all. The first is a . . . theoretical situation, and I need your advice. I’d like for all of us to vote.”

“You want us to vote on a theoretical situation?” Duane, also drinking my coffee, frowned at me.

“That’s right.”

My siblings shared a sundry array of glances, most were wide-eyed and either confused or concerned.

Billy, sitting in Grandma Oliver’s favorite chair, folded the newspaper he’d been reading and set it to the side. “Okay. What is this theoretical situation?”

I cleared my throat, knowing this was the correct course of action. And yet, I hated losing control. I hated handing this over and not having a clear idea of what the future held. But Jennifer’s words the previous day had hit home. I’d been so busy trying to save my siblings, I hadn’t stopped to check in with them.

What did *they* want?

“Let’s say, theoretically, that I’ve been stealing evidence from the sheriff’s office that implicates members of a certain motorcycle club and placing that evidence in strategic locations.”

Again, my family traded looks.

Beau was the first to speak. “What does that mean? Why would you do that?”

“Because a RICO charge requires at least two acts of racketeering activity.”

The room fell silent. Coffee mugs everywhere halted halfway to mouths, and those mouths fell open.

“Oh my God!” Ashley gaped at me: part horrified, part proud. “What did you do?”

“RICO? You’re taking them down on a RICO charge?” Billy looked like he didn’t know whether to laugh or shout.

“In this theoretical scenario, the stolen evidence will be found in the possession of low-ranking motorcycle club members along with exceptionally well-organized lists detailing names, places, and events of their racketeering activities. All information contained on these lists is entirely accurate. Just, you know, now well organized.”

“You set them up.” Duane gave me a thoughtful glare. “You organized their chaos, didn’t you? You helped them look better so every member will come under an organized crime charge.”

“That wipes them out.” Roscoe gazed at me with wonder, then huffed a shocked laugh. “That completely annihilates the Wraiths. Anyone associated with them goes to prison, all on the same charge.”

“It’s not the Wraiths. It’s a theoretical motorcycle club,” Beau corrected, smirking. Then he laughed. “I’m so happy you don’t hate me.”

My brothers and sister ended up staring into space, each lost to their own thoughts. I gave them a full minute to think the issue over. But a minute was all I could stand.

“So,” I said loudly, startling them out of their contemplations, “let’s take the vote.”

“What vote?” Duane looked to Beau, as though checking to see if he’d missed something.

“I want y’all to vote on whether I see this plan through. Everything is in place. All I need to do is make a phone call.” I glanced around the room, seeing they understood the situation. “It’s up to you.”

“It’s up to us?” Beau sounded truly perplexed. “Since when? Since when is it up to us?”

“Since he fell in love and realized meddling comes with a price tag.” Jethro set his coffee mug to one side and picked up his knitting. I noticed he was making a baby hat; it was yellow and it looked soft.

“Isaac Sylvester,” Billy said, drawing my attention to him. “You don’t want to pull the trigger because of Isaac.”

I shook my head and answered honestly. “No. That’s not it. He has to take responsibility for his own actions and their ramifications, just like I do. Just like everybody does.” Quoting Jennifer was strangely satisfying.

“That sounded very wise.” Ashley narrowed her eyes on me, heavy with suspicion.

“Then why do we get a vote?” Duane the Distrustful also squinted at me.

“Because I’m doing this because of y’all. Well, that’s not quite true. I’m doing it for me—because I’d like to see Darrell’s face when he realizes everything he ever cared about is destroyed—but I’m also doing it for all of you.”

Six sets of eyes stared at me, but it was Billy who cast the first vote.

“I say yes. Take them down.” He stood, glaring at me, his jaw ticking. His vote was not a surprise.

“I also say yes,” Duane put in, swapping a stare with Billy. “I hope they all burn in hell.”

“I say no.” Beau glanced between Duane and me. “I say let things happen naturally. If the law has evidence against them, let them use it. I don’t want any of us to be implicated. Let them make their own bed. It has nothing to do with us.”

“I agree with Beau.” Ashley nodded. “They’ll shoot themselves in the foot sooner or later. It has nothing to do with us. I don’t like you being involved,

Cletus. What if it comes back to you?” The concern in her tone warmed my heart. I loved my sister. She was an angel. A beautiful, infuriating angel.

“I’m against it.” Roscoe finally spoke up. “For all the reasons Beau and Ashley said. Plus, I know some of those new recruits. I went to high school with several of those guys. They’re not bad, they’re just lost. They shouldn’t be held accountable for the actions of guys like Razor and Dirty Dave—those two are psychos.”

I nodded, making a mental tally. Duane and Billy were for my plan; Beau, Ashley, and Roscoe were against. Everyone must’ve been counting in their heads because Jethro became the focus of the entire room.

And he must’ve felt our stares because he gathered a large inhale, yet kept his eyes studiously on his knitting.

“Jethro?” I prompted. “How do you vote?”

He shook his head. “I abstain.”

“What?” Duane growled, glancing between our oldest brother and me. “What do you mean you abstain?”

“I mean I abstain. I’m not voting.”

“Why the hell not?” Again, thank you for your input, Duane of sunshine and rainbows.

“Because I’m the deciding vote.” The sharpness and intensity of Jethro’s voice took us all by surprise. He lowered his knitting and glared at Duane, speaking through clenched teeth. “And I hate those motherfuckers more than you. More than any of you.” His gaze swung to Billy and their eyes held. “But I’m not going to allow hate to make my decisions. If I voted, I would vote to destroy them all. So I can’t vote. Because I’m not that person anymore.”

Silence hung like a noose around our necks while Billy and Jethro traded glares. But Billy was the first to look away.

“Fine. You have your answer, Cletus.” He swallowed once, then sat back down in his chair.

“Stalemate means no one wins.” I twisted my lips to the side, considering how to proceed.

“Just leave it where it is.” This suggestion came from Beau and everyone turned their attention to him. “Leave the evidence where it is, if you can. Then, if you need it, if you need the leverage, you have it.”

Jethro huffed a laugh and shook his head. “You know, Beau. You’re a lot more like Cletus than you let on.”

“Thank you.” Beau grinned at me. “In light of recent events, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Beau’s point was a good one. Insurance against the Wraiths, against their influence and violence wasn’t a bad thing. I still needed to meet with Repo about the *unpleasantness* with Isaac last Friday. Knowing I was just a phone call away from taking down the entire organization wasn’t a bad bargaining position.

When the time came to make the call—and I felt a level of confidence that sooner or later the time would come—it had to be right. I had other considerations now. I had Jennifer, *my* Jennifer. I couldn’t keep manipulating people, not caring about the consequences. I didn’t want my machinations to adversely affect her.

She was my priority.

“What was the second thing?” Ashley asked softly, her eyebrows raised expectantly.

The second thing?

The second thing.

I closed my eyes for a moment, allowing the abrupt wave of sorrow to wash over me, and then retreat. But it didn’t retreat. I needed more time to prepare. The first thing—the Wraiths and their downfall—was the easy thing. This . . . this was the tricky thing.

“Cletus?” Ashley pressed, sounding worried.

I didn’t have more time. The time was now.

I opened my eyes. I didn’t lift them beyond the carpet, I couldn’t.

“Darrell Winston had a third family.”

As expected, this news was met with a void of stunned nothingness. The stillness was so complete, it was deafening, and it propelled me to speak.

“Darrell had another son.”

Ashley made a sound, a quick intake of air, but nothing else.

I continued, surprised by how difficult this was to say. “His name was Eric and he died. He died of cancer. I found out two years ago, after he’d passed. I thought y’all should know.”

Curiously, my eyes stung. And this was curious because I’d never shed a tear over the loss of the brother I’d never met. I was not opposed to crying, I just didn’t do it often. I cried when my momma died. The wails and sobs were cathartic, until they weren’t. So I’d stopped.

But Eric, it didn’t feel right to cry on account of his passing. He’d never been mine to mourn. He’d been lost to me, lost to all of us, before I’d known he existed.

Movement out of the corner of my eye caught my attention and I looked up to find Duane walking toward me. Unexpectedly, he pulled me into a hug. After a short moment I moved to pull away, but he held me tighter, squeezed me tighter, and wouldn’t let me go.

Jethro stood next and walked over to us, along with Roscoe and Ashley. Their arms came around us and each other, Ashley burying her head against my neck and breathing, as though breathing me in, and holding me in her lungs as though confirming that I was still here and alive.

Beau and Billy joined soon after, Billy ruffling my hair and squeezing the back of my neck, drawing my attention to him. Our eyes met and I almost lost it because I’d seen pictures of Eric and he’d looked like Billy. He’d looked like Ashley. He looked like my family, like a brother.

Looking at this brother who I loved, no matter how much I tried to ignore and reason away the pain, I realized I’d lost a brother. We’d all lost him.

Roscoe was the first one to sniffle. The unexpected sound drew light laughter from the rest of us.

“Aw, come here.” Ashley separated from the group and folded Roscoe in her arms. She sniffled too.

“This is shitty news, Cletus,” Duane said, making us all laugh again. “When are you going to share some good news?”

Billy gave Duane a small, indulgent smile, then moved his eyes to me. “Any more secrets, Cletus?”

I paused, meeting his searching gaze, debating how to respond.

I loved my family and I missed my momma. I would miss Duane when he left. I missed the brother I never knew. Some burdens were meant to be shared, those that centered on loss and love.

But some burdens were not meant to be shared.

Eventually, I shook my head. “None that I want to share.”

And that was the truth.

I thought back to my good friends in the sheriff’s office, officers Dale and Evans and the mechanizations I’d put into place to ensure Darrell Winston would always be within my grasp. His fate was at my whim, as it should be.

I’d allowed my siblings to vote on what happened with the Wraiths, and I would respect their decision. Taking down the Wraiths was for my family.

But taking down Darrell Winston . . . well, that was for me.

No one expects an eighty-five-year-old Navy SEAL stripper. No one. And that was the beauty of George.

However, actions have consequences, and as of today—today being the day after Jethro’s bachelor party—my brothers weren’t speaking to me. Collectively, all attendees of the bachelor party had come to an implicit accord: I was the enemy.

Consequently, I decided it would be best to make myself scarce.

Jenn had spent the previous day baking Jethro and Sienna’s wedding cake. Then she’d spent the evening at Sienna’s bachelorette party. She appeared to be in good spirits when I found her early in the morning on Friday, reading a book in my momma’s library.

Jenn had been staying at the homestead in Ashley’s old room, but she told me yesterday before the parties that she was determined to move into Claire’s as soon as possible, ideally by tonight.

Setting out early, we swung by the auto shop and picked up the Ford 360 we usually used to tow car trailers. We spent the day in Knoxville picking up supplies for her new place, including a few furniture items. Claire had taken about a quarter of her things when she’d moved to Nashville over the summer, leaving large items like the kitchen table and chairs, a big sofa,

and an oversized recliner. The house had just needed a bed and a bed frame, a dresser, and side tables.

An efficient shopper, Jenn had known exactly what she wanted and how much she wanted to spend. I fought the urge to clandestinely pay for her purchases. I wanted to be supportive and part of being supportive—to me—meant providing material support. But when I saw the pleasure she derived from buying her new things with her own money, I didn't argue the point.

I couldn't.

It made her happy.

So I learned to support her in a different way.

After dropping the furniture off at Claire's place—now Jenn's place—we were running ahead of schedule. Jenn suggested we go to Daisy's Nut House for a late afternoon snack, careful not to spoil our appetites as we had the rehearsal dinner in a few hours. A piece of pie or two doughnuts at Daisy's sounded just right.

"Can I tell you something funny?" Jenn slid onto the stool at the counter and I motioned for the server.

"How funny is it?" I asked, not yet sitting.

"Why?"

"Because I have to go to the bathroom a little bit and I don't want to pee my pants."

Jenn laughed, scrunching her face at me like I had a screw loose, and it was cute. "Go to the bathroom then, you nut. I'll order your pie."

"Also order doughnuts. I can't decide which I want."

"Fine. Doughnuts and pie." She waved me off, moving her smile and attention to the server who'd approached to take our order.

I made quick work of my business, and turned to leave after washing my hands, but was forced to stop short. In fact, I was forced to take a step back.

"Cletus Winston." Repo gave me a sly grin, or at least a grin he thought was sly. These days his smile was looking forced. Nevertheless, forced or not, his grin was crooked, framed by his salt and pepper beard, and the curve of his mouth reminded me a lot of Jessica James.

My attention darted between the three men who'd just invaded the men's room. Repo, Catfish, and Dirty Dave—three of the highest ranking members of the Iron Wraiths—stood in my path, blocking the door to the bathroom.

Jennifer.

My first thought was of Jenn, sitting on her own at the counter, and a spike of worry for her well-being had me quickly assessing my chances of fighting all three men at once.

But then reason prevailed.

Daisy's place was extremely public. If memory served, and it always did, the diner was at least seventy-five percent full of customers. My woman was safe just so long as these guys didn't become desperate.

"Uncle Repo," I said cheerfully, and returned his smile, but mine was neither crooked nor sly, nor was it genuine. "I thought we were going to meet next week."

"There's no time like the present, Cletus. Your daddy taught me that."

"Catfish wants retribution for what you did to his prospect's face." Dirty Dave's gleefully raspy announcement had me glancing at Catfish.

The big man looked pissed.

I nodded once, a somber nod, and stroked my beard. "If we're going to talk about this now, then so be it."

"I don't know if there needs to be much talking," Repo cut in. "Just an eye for an eye, and all that. Too bad. You always did have a pretty face."

"Sure, sure." I nodded agreeably. "In that case, where's Catfish's old lady so I can manhandle her and call her a whore?"

The three men started, frowning at me and glancing at each other.

"Come again?" Catfish asked in his deep baritone, glaring at me like I'd sprouted goat horns.

"If we're going to engage in true retribution—an eye for an eye and all that—then let's do it right. Isaac Sylvester grabbed my woman, shook her, then called her a whore. So I knocked him out. Now," I rubbed my hands together, "I'm ready to meet Catfish's fist, but let's do this right."

Repo frowned at me, his eyes moving over my person as though searching for the truth of my claim, then turned to Catfish. “What’s all this?”

Catfish shook his head, appearing equally stunned. “Twilight won’t say what happened—”

“Course he can’t, his jaw is wired shut.” Dirty Dave scratched his jaw, as though experiencing sympathy pains.

Catfish continued, “But Tina didn’t mention any of this.”

“Tina wouldn’t mention it because Tina only cares about Tina.” I shrugged.

Repo cast a narrowed glare over me. “You’re saying that Banana Cake girl —”

“She’s a queen, not a girl.”

He huffed impatiently. “Her majesty of bananas is your woman?”

I gave an affirmative head bob.

The three men traded stares, silently communicating with their eyeballs. This time I didn’t mind.

Catfish’s eyes cut to mine. “If that’s the case, if this is true, then I see no need for retribution. No one touches my woman and calls her a whore. Ever.”

And there it was: loyalty.

I studied the big man, surprised and impressed by his reasonableness. We might never be friends or even friendly acquaintances, but I could understand the desire to belong to something bigger, to have brothers, people who were loyal and had your back.

Suddenly, the decision my family had made, when I’d put the Iron Wraith’s fate to a vote, felt like the right one. These guys were criminals. They weren’t all evil, but they did bad things.

If they threatened me or my people, then we’d have the means to defend ourselves. If they didn’t, then the choices they made would determine the road they were on, as well as the pitfalls along the way.

Repo nodded slowly, glancing between Catfish and me.

“I guess we’ll be going.” Dirty Dave pouted, turning for the bathroom door and leaving in a huff. Clearly he’d been itching for a fight, but Dirty

Dave was always itching for a fight.

In an extremely anticlimactic move, Catfish gave me one more head nod, then followed Dave out of the men's room, leaving me to stare after the big man and the mysterious case of his vanishing murderous intentions.

Repo moved to follow, but a notion I'd held for some years made me stop him. *And an idea.*

"Repo, before you go . . ."

He twisted to look at me, a question written on his typically slippery features, his grip on the handle still holding the door ajar. I studied him a bit closer, noting the shape of his eyes, the lines of his nose and chin.

Based on this hunch, I said, "Jessica James is leaving next week for Italy."

He winced. It was a subtle movement, but I was looking for it, so I caught it.

"Off to travel the world. She and Duane, they'll be gone for a long time. They don't know when they're coming back."

Repo let the door close and turned back to me, his dark eyes shuttered, and lifted his chin. "Why're you telling me this?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Maybe I'm feeling charitable."

His glare narrowed on me.

"Okay, maybe I want a favor," I corrected.

"Why would I give you a favor for telling me about . . . about Ms. James?"

A slow grin spread over my features and I watched the older man swallow. "You know why."

Something flashed behind his dark eyes, but he said nothing.

Taking his silence as implicit agreement, I announced, "I want Isaac Sylvester to visit his sister, apologize for being hateful, and be nice to her."

Repo stared at me, waiting for me to continue. When I didn't, he frowned. "That's it?"

"That's it."

He shook his head slowly. "No. That's not it. You've got something up your sleeve. You always do."

I clutched my chest as though the accusation wounded me. “Uncle Repo!” and then I added with a respectful head tilt and mock sincerity, “. . . I’m flattered.”

He smirked, squinting and turning for the door. “I’ll see what I can do.”

After the rehearsal dinner—during which my brothers continued to feign ignorance of my existence—I drove Jennifer home.

Home.

The thought pained me.

Tonight I would leave her. She would stay, and she would be at her home.

At some point over this last week I no longer considered the Winston homestead my home. Not anymore. Not when my woman dwelled elsewhere.

As much as I wanted her home to be my home, if Jenn was going to live anywhere on her own, I was glad she’d chosen Claire’s place. The house was basically a fortress.

Jethro and Mr. McClure—Claire’s father-in-law—had taken extra measures to ensure the place was safe. It had two panic rooms, one on each floor, an alarm and surveillance system with three redundancies, and only three entry points. Every window could sustain anything from a hurricane to a bullet. They were shatterproof. All outside doors had double dead bolts and were steel, as were the door frames.

These were my thoughts as I drove, until Jennifer interrupted the silence with a softly spoken announcement. “My mother called me during the rehearsal dinner. That’s why I excused myself.”

I split my attention between her profile and the road. “Did she?” I knew Jenn had received a call, but I didn’t know who it had been from.

“She did.” Jenn nodded, pulling out her phone. “I told you about how I talked to her on Wednesday? How I told her I wouldn’t be going back to work until we’d finalized an employment agreement? And I told her about my father?”

“Yes.” I braced myself, because her voice sounded sorrowful.

“She’s sending me the agreement on Monday to review. And she’s decided to leave my father.”

We arrived at a stoplight and I took the opportunity to scrutinize her more closely. Ruining her father was still a priority for me. Whatever Diane Donner-Sylvester required in order to ensure Kip never saw a cent of the Donner family legacy, I would do it. This news, about her mother leaving the man, was a good first step.

“What can I do?” I asked, needing to help, needing to make things better for her.

Her extraordinary eyes glittered in the darkness. “Just love me.”

“You got it.”

We were silent for a moment and I turned onto her road before she offered philosophically, “I want you to know that I’m not angry with you anymore for blackmailing my father and trying to control the situation. But I’m glad he told me about it. I’m glad he thought you were bluffing. Because now I’m free of him.”

Her words hit me straight through the heart. I blinked, off-kilter, and readjusted my grip on the steering wheel.

“I’m glad you’re free of him,” I agreed, “but I wish I’d told you from the beginning and made the choice yours, instead of trying to make it for you.”

I caught her smiling at me out of the corner of my eye. “I know. And I wish I didn’t continue to feel loyalty to a man who has treated me badly my entire life.”

“That’ll fade,” I said with certainty, because I knew. I hadn’t always despised my father and I certainly didn’t feel any loyalty to the bastard now.

“I hope so.”

I shifted in my seat and switched on the blinker, pulling into her driveway. “Uh, by the way, I meant to tell you earlier at Daisy’s, I had a discussion with Repo and Catfish about Isaac.”

“Who are Repo and Catfish?”

“Two big deals in the Iron Wraiths.”

“You did?”

“Yes. The Wraiths aren’t looking for retribution for what happened last Friday. Not anymore. So that’s resolved.”

“That’s good.” She sounded relieved and I was pleased to remove any lingering concern about the episode from her mind.

“You said you wanted to know when or if I took action on your behalf, so I need to tell you something else.”

Her hand came to my knee, warm and comforting. “Oh? What did you do?”

“I requested Isaac pay you a visit, apologize for being hateful, and make an attempt to mend fences.” My eyes flickered to hers as I parked in front of Claire’s—now Jennifer’s—house.

She was staring in my direction, but I doubted she was really looking at me.

“If Isaac wanted to know me, Cletus, then he would have come to me before now.”

Her tangible grief made me want to beat the crap out of Isaac Sylvester. Again.

“Maybe,” I said, “maybe not. Maybe he’s lost and needs the love of a good woman to help guide him out of his foolish decisions.”

She cracked a smile, teasing, “You mean like you and me?”

“Exactly.” I covered her hand on my knee and slid it higher.

Lips parting in surprise, Jenn’s eyebrows jumped and she grinned, visibly delighted.

“Let’s go inside.” Her voice was husky. I liked it.

“Sounds like an excellent idea.” I bolted from the driver’s seat, the sound of her laughter chasing me, and jogged around the hood to her door.

I helped Jenn from the car, stepped forward, and swept her into my arms.

“Cletus.” She both scowled and smiled at me, shaking her head and winding an arm around my neck. “My feet are fine.”

Jennifer’s feet had mostly healed, but I still planned to use them as an excuse to carry her everywhere, whenever possible. Holding her in my arms was one of my favorite states of being.

“I don’t want to take any chances. Get your keys out.”

She pulled her keys from her purse and rested her head against my shoulder as I climbed the stairs.

“This certainly was an interesting evening.”

I nodded my agreement, but said, “It isn’t over yet.” I bent slightly so she could unlock the deadbolts.

Door unlocked, we crossed the threshold; I shut the door with my foot and she flipped the locks, kicking off her shoes.

“Where to now?” I asked, turning left, then right. “To the kitchen? Or to the living room?”

“I think I’d like to lay down.” Jenn snuggled closer, wrapping both arms around my neck and placing a kiss on my neck. “How about the bedroom?”

I didn’t need to be told twice.

I carried her up the stairs and to her room, flicking on the light. She sighed, placing more kisses on my neck, one of her hands moving to the buttons of my shirt and undoing the first three. She was wearing a blue dress that looked like a long sweater, except it wasn’t baggy. It hugged her curves just right and had been driving me crazy all night.

“This dress,” I said, placing her gently on her feet in front of her bed, “it wants to come off.”

“Does it?” She grinned up at me, continuing her work on the buttons of my shirt.

“It does.” I frowned at the material, not certain how to proceed because I hadn’t spotted a zipper.

She placed a kiss on my collarbone, pushing off my jacket and encouraging it to fall to the floor. Then she tugged at my undershirt.

“Cletus, I miss your touch,” she whispered, pressing her body to me and brushing her lips against mine. “Won’t you touch me?”

I nodded, entranced as usual by this woman. I slid my hands under her skirt, relishing the silky skin of her thighs. Jennifer lifted her arms and I took the hint, removing the dress as one would remove a sweater, pushing it over her head.

This left Jenn standing before me in her bra and underwear, a sublimely luscious temptation.

Before explicitly telling my brain to do so, I'd unhooked her bra and bent to savor her breasts, filling my hand with one and my mouth with the other. I kneaded and massaged her flawless skin, tugging and twisting her nipple. She moaned and her breath hitched, the sounds driving me mad. Jenn slid her fingers into my hair, pressing on the back of my head, arching to get closer.

We were alone. In her home. And I wanted her. Very badly.

My lungs burned and my veins throbbed with how badly I wanted her, this woman. My woman.

Times like these, it was difficult not to take advantage. Times like these, my baser instincts fought to seize control, pushing me to tease her, leverage the advantage of my experience until she begged me to ease and fill her ache.

I wanted every inch of her perfect body. As my control slipped, I convinced myself I needed it. I needed her, to possess her, to claim her. The need gripped and suffocated me . . .

"I love you," she whispered as her hands slipped under my shirt. She smoothed her palm from my chest to my stomach, curling her fingers into the waistband of my pants.

Her words, her confession of love, sobered me. I stilled my movements, waiting for the frenzy of recklessness to recede.

Her home was not yet my home. She wasn't ready. Not yet.

I may have wanted to possess her, but I didn't need it. I needed to love her, not possess her. And she needed my love, not my trickery. Not my control.

So I breathed out. I did not possess her. I did not push her.

Instead, I eased her back to the bed, drawing the only remaining scrap of fabric down her legs, leaving her naked and vulnerable and stunning and shivering.

Lifting my greedy stare from her body—this body I coveted with raw desperation—I met her extraordinary eyes. On the floor before her I knelt, spreading her legs, and witnessed the beauty of her trust.

And then I loved her.

CHAPTER 31

“*Man is not what he thinks he is, he is what he hides.*”

— André Malraux

~Cletus~

It was a beautiful ceremony.

Jethro, unsurprisingly, wasn't nervous. My oldest brother wasn't the nervous type. But he did choke up when Sienna walked down the aisle.

Heck, I think we all did.

She appeared at the edge of the wildflower field, gussied up in a white cloud of a dress, looking like an angel. Sienna was beautiful, made even more so by the way she looked at my brother.

She took three steps toward the altar and my eyes cut to Jenn.

My Jenn.

My Jenn wasn't looking at me. She was looking at Sienna with a big, happy smile on her face, so she didn't see me as I stared at her, and imagined our wedding day. I imagined the moment she would appear, gussied up in a white cloud of a dress, looking like an angel.

Or maybe we would elope, just the two of us. Maybe to Alaska, where we'd have a private ceremony under a surprising sky.

Honestly, I didn't care.

Virtuous fortitude, I reminded myself. *Patience*. The reminders made me grumpy, so I focused on the beautiful ceremony and my brother's happiness.

After the *I dos* were over, the festivities started. I sought Jennifer as soon as the wedding party arrived at the reception site.

A large tent had been erected at the back of the property with a huge dance floor, covering a giant area both inside and outside the temporary structure. Traditional Mexican dishes and traditional Tennessee home cooking were side by side on the buffet, with vegan options also available for those lunatics that didn't eat meat.

The good news was I found Jenn almost immediately. The bad news was she was talking to Jackson James.

My grumpiness returned and intensified.

I plotted an intercept course but was stopped by a hand on my elbow. Irritable, I turned, prepared to shake off this usurper's fingers.

But it was Claire.

So I didn't.

Instead, I returned her smile.

"Claire McClure, we meet again."

Her grin widened and she laughed, pulling me into a hug. "Hello, Cletus. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm perfectly adequate." I leaned away and captured her hand, tucking it in the crook of my elbow. "Will you stay and dance with me?"

"Only if you sing a song with me."

I shook my head. "I guess we're not dancing then."

Her mouth pressed into a frustrated line. "Come on, come sing with me. You deserved that recording contract just as much as I did, and yet you insisted on playing second fiddle."

"That's because second fiddle gets all the Banana Cake Queens."

"Good." She nodded once, ardently. "I was planning on harassing you about her today, but I'm glad you finally came to your senses. You two are perfect for each other."

"We are, aren't we?" My eyes automatically sought Jennifer and I frowned. Jackson James had said something to make her laugh.

Itchy britches.

But then I caught myself smiling as my attention snagged on her mouth. I'd take her smile in any form, for any reason, even if Jackson had been the one to put it on her face.

"So there's nothing I can say to convince you to sing with me?" Claire pressed.

"No." I gathered a deep breath, turning to Claire and removing her hand from my arm, but keeping our fingers hooked together. "I aspire to different achievements than worldly success, and I know you do as well. But, Claire,

I'm glad you finally saw reason and accepted the record deal. Your star is too bright to hide in plain sight."

"You just rhymed, Cletus. I might have to steal that for a song."

"Go ahead. I ain't using it for anything profitable."

Claire's eyes moved over my features as though I were precious to her. I guess I was, in a way. I suspected we all were, even Billy.

As though reading my mind, her smile waned and her eyes fell from my face to my bow tie. She removed her fingers from mine and straightened my tie, smoothing her hands down my lapels, then lifting to her tiptoes to place a kiss on my cheek.

"Thank you for believing in me, Cletus. I'll pay you back one of these days."

I nodded, considering—studying her—then took a chance and suggested gently, "If you want to pay me back, go ask Billy to sing with you."

A flash of pain burned bright behind her eyes and her smile dropped, falling into an anxious frown. She shook her head, saying softly, "He doesn't want to sing with me."

Her denial had me huffing a laugh. "Oh, Claire. He *only* wants to sing with you. No one else. Never anyone else. Just you."

My words did nothing to ease the anxiety in her expression. In fact, it seemed to heighten it. Her eyes darted away, searching, and she pasted a forced smile over her features.

"I think Jennifer is looking for you." Claire pointed to my right and I followed her gaze.

Sure enough, Jennifer was looking at us and grinning. She waved at Claire happily, then her gorgeous eyes moved to me. Her smile grew.

"Tell her I said hi."

I felt Claire squeeze my arm, but when I turned back to my friend I was met with the sight of her back, walking away. I scowled at her, at her wrong-headedness. I didn't understand her.

Stubborn woman.

Clearly she was in love with my brother.

But there was nothing I could do about her. At least, not yet. Maybe later.

I turned my attention back to Jenn and Jackson, and continued my original course, meandering with purpose toward my woman.

“Jackson,” I said as I pulled even with them, ensuring my voice was as flat as the tires of his car.

They aren’t flat yet, but they will be.

He turned his smiling brown eyes to me and they dimmed as I wrapped my arm around Jenn’s waist and pressed a kiss to her neck.

“Hey,” I said, ignoring him.

She smiled up at me, wrapping her arm around my waist as well. “Hey.”

“How are you?”

Her smile grew and her eyes lowered to my lips. “I missed you.”

She missed me.

Life is good.

I mirrored her smile, about to suggest we sneak off, but then Jackson cleared his throat.

“Hello, Cletus,” he said, drawing our attention back to his irritating face. I’d ignored him so well I’d forgotten he was still there.

“That was a nice ceremony,” he offered benignly.

“It was,” I admitted, still flat.

He scratched his neck. I followed the movement with my eyes while Jennifer gave me a sharp squeeze.

My grumpiness flared because I knew what that squeeze meant. She wanted me to *talk* to Jackson James, that’s what the squeeze meant.

Oh good Lord.

“I’m going to grab a drink and let you two *talk*,” she said meaningfully, pulling out of my grip while issuing me a big, encouraging smile. “Do you want anything?”

I mouthed the word *you* and she narrowed her eyes, shaking her head subtly and glancing at Jackson. Again, with meaning.

“I’ll grab you both a beer,” she said. “Stay here.”

Jenn left, drawing my eyes to her departing form as she walked away. I followed her movements until she disappeared in the throng.

And then I turned my attention back to Jackson and I frowned at him. He wasn't looking at me. He was looking out over the crowd, his eyes scanning the faces of the wedding guests.

"I don't know most of these people, but I think I recognize a few," he said, apropos of nothing, as though we were on friendly chitchatting terms.

My frown deepened and I was ready to rebuff his familiarity, but then I thought of Jennifer and how she'd asked me to give peace a chance.

Dammit.

Straightening my spine, I crossed my arms, and also scanned the crowd. "That's because lots of these folks are movie stars, friends of Sienna's and such."

He nodded absentmindedly, his attention snagging on a tall brunette. "I'm not going to point, but I think that's Raquel Ezra."

He was right. The tall brunette was Raquel Ezra; she was the latest Hollywood bombshell. I glanced away, instinctively finding myself searching for Jenn again. I found her loitering by the bar, glaring at me, with her hands on her hips.

Her message was clear.

I rolled my eyes.

Resigned, I turned to Jackson. "Here's the deal, Jack."

His eyes cut to mine and I saw either my tone or my words had surprised him.

Ready to put this farce behind me, I launched into my complaint. "I don't like you pulling me over for no reason, wasting my time. And I don't like you pulling over my brothers either. And I don't like the way you treated my sister in high school, but I guess nothing can be done about that now. So, moving forward, you need to stop abusing your power and start acting more like your father."

He peered at me, turning his face slightly to one side. "More like my father?"

"Yes. More like the sheriff. You know. Like a badass officer of righteousness and awesome." I nodded once, considering the description, then added, "And humility. He's good at the humility, too."

Unexpectedly, the side of Jackson's mouth hitched and his eyes—instead of dimming and growing sullen, as I'd expected—warmed with respect.

"Fine. I'll stop pulling you over and wasting your time."

I squinted at him, at this Jackson James person who did not behave as expected. "Really?"

"Yep."

"And what about my brothers?"

"Duane is leaving with Jess this week, so I won't be pulling him over anymore." He shrugged. "But I do maintain it was my prerogative to harass Duane as I saw fit, since he is dating my sister."

I considered his logic, but before I could decide if I agreed with it, he continued.

"But since Duane is leaving, there's no reason to pull over Beau," he added thoughtfully, his attention moving back to the movie star Raquel Ezra. He lifted his chin in her direction. "What do you think my chances are there?"

I glared at him, suspicious of his easy acquiescence. Then I glared at Ms. Ezra, automatically sizing up the situation.

"I don't know," I answered honestly. I'd overheard Sienna tell Jessica that Ms. Ezra was extremely open with her sexuality and was notorious for her proclivities involving handcuffs and sex toys. I decided not to share this information with Jackson. "She doesn't appear to have a date, so you've got that in your favor."

He stared at the woman, then—again, apropos of nothing—said, "You're a lucky man, Cletus. Jennifer is a beautiful woman."

I nodded my agreement, but said, "You're right and you're wrong."

Jackson's eyes searched mine. "How so?"

"Well, you're right. Jennifer is a beautiful woman. But you're wrong, because that's not why I'm lucky."

His eyebrows jumped, clearly not expecting my response, and I clapped my hand on his shoulder, giving him a small shake.

"Good talk, Jack."

“It’s Jackson,” he corrected, stepping out of my grip but giving me an amused smile.

“We’ll see,” I said, then turned, walking straight for Raquel Ezra, debating the perplexing events of the last few minutes.

I didn’t trust Jackson much, but he’d seemed sincere. And if he was sincere, then Jenn had been right. And if Jenn was right . . . well then, that just proved how amazing she was.

“Excuse me,” I said, tapping Ms. Ezra on the arm.

The woman flipped her long brown hair over her shoulder. Her gaze made a quick perusal of my form and features, then finally lifted to mine.

“Yes?” she asked, a smile curving her painted lips; she stepped closer.

I returned her smile. “I’m Cletus Winston, Jethro’s brother. Sienna has spoken of you with great esteem.”

“Sienna is the best.” Raquel said, with feeling.

I turned, pointing to Jackson James. “My friend over there is a police officer, local law enforcement.”

Her attention moved to Jackson and I saw his eyes widen, bouncing between Ms. Ezra and me.

She conducted the same swift once-over of Jackson that she’d employed on me. “Oh? Is he?”

“He is. And he’s got handcuffs with him.” I gave her an even smile. “Just FYI.”

Her lips twisted to the side and her brown eyes danced with laughter. “Thanks for the tip.”

“No problem. Have a nice evening.” I administered a short bow and turned for the table where I’d spotted Jennifer last.

I was determined to kiss her. We hadn’t kissed properly since the night before. Then maybe we’d dance. And then maybe I’d whisk her away and tell her she was right. I didn’t think I’d ever get tired of telling her she was right.

“Think of your feet.”

“There is nothing wrong with my feet. Put me down.” She laughed, and her laughter was heaven.

I craved it.

As of two hours ago, Sienna and Jethro were declared wife and husband. Jennifer had made the cake—which was not a banana cake, since Jethro hated bananas—and the wedding festivities were ongoing outside.

But we were inside, and had both had three glasses of champagne, and were presently on our way to my room. And she was still laughing.

As much as I enjoyed her laughter, I also enjoyed the other sounds she made. Consequently, as soon as we entered my bedroom, I sought those other sounds.

I kissed her as we crossed the threshold and she laughed against my mouth. “Are you trying to distract me? Because it’s working.”

“Not at all.” I kicked the door closed and let her slide from my arms, smoothly placing her feet on the floor. “I’m just really concerned about the health of your toes.”

“Why is that?” Jennifer turned her bright and brilliant eyes to me while she smoothed down her dress. It was a deep purple that clung to her body, making me want to peel it off. I wanted to unwrap her.

“Because I think I’d like to suck on them.”

She stood a tad straighter, lifting an eyebrow at me. “What?”

“I want to suck on your toes.”

“That sounds unpleasant. For both of us.”

I grinned, but not too wide, advancing on her until the backs of her legs met the bed. “Let’s just see, shall we?”

“Are you serious?” She caught herself before she fell backward, her eyes betraying her disbelief. “You’re joking. This is a joke.”

“It’s not. I am as serious as . . . as—”

The sound and feel of Jennifer undoing my belt buckle had me frowning at her. “What are you doing?”

Her fingers made quick work of my zipper and soon my pants and boxers were around my ankles. Saying nothing, she turned us, then pushed me to a sitting position on the bed. Kneeling between my knees, she gave me a

frantic kiss, grabbed my hands, and pressed them to her breasts through her dress.

Jennifer broke our kiss just long enough to say really essential things like,
“I love you.”

And,

“I want you to touch me.”

And then,

“But first I’m going to give you a blow job.”

Now, I admit, I was distracted. A man has only so much focus. When handed two, perfect breasts, all other thoughts must abruptly cease, and all attention is rerouted to the palms.

It took me several seconds to decipher the meaning behind her gibberish, but when I did, it was too late. I was already in her mouth.

“Oh!”

Fuck.

I released a startled breath and my brain shut off. It just . . . flipped off. It hung up the closed-for-business sign and checked out. I’d been wrong about so many things recently. But this, denying Jennifer’s request to do this last week, was the wrongest.

See? Brain gone. Wrongest isn’t a word. But I didn’t know that. All I knew was that I never wanted this to end, but it was going to end. It was going to end mortifyingly soon. And there wasn’t a single fucking thing I could do about it.

Her eyes lifted to mine, full of excitement and trust, and I groaned.

So she stopped, gripping me in her hand and withholding her mouth. “Is it okay? Am I doing okay?”

“You are so perfect I don’t have words to describe how perfect you are,” I said on a rush, but then I held her shoulders as she moved to return her mouth. “Wait. I’m about to come, and you don’t want to—”

“No. No. I’m good. I read about this. I’m good. I’m prepared. I know what I’m doing.”

And with that, she took me inside her again. An involuntary sound escaped my throat, and then another. Later, I would thank Jethro for hiring a

live band, because I wasn't quiet, but no one would have heard me.

I was going to die.

I was going to die from how good this felt.

But I didn't. I came, wanting to wrap my fingers in her hair but instead gripping the comforter on either side of my thighs.

She finished and I fell backward on the bed, reaching for her. She evaded me. Through one eye I watched as she leaned to the side, picked up a previously hidden washcloth and pressed it to her mouth. Then she picked up a hidden bottle of mouthwash and rinsed out her mouth, using another towel. And then, she picked up a hidden bottle of water and took a swallow.

Then and only then did she come to me, laying pressed against my side, a smug smile on her lips. "So, I was perfect?"

I exhaled an incredulous laugh, enjoying the sight of her triumphant moment, enjoying her. "You planned this."

Her grin widened. "I did."

"You're a sneak."

She nodded. "I am."

I shook my head—at her, at myself.

"I love you," I said, and breathed, and felt, and knew, and believed. I was *faithing* Jennifer. I was faithing her so hard.

And she was faithing me as she responded, "I love you more."

This was our life. This woman was my future. She would be the mother of my children.

This was our beginning.

I couldn't wait for the middle.

And I never wanted it to end.

Epilogue—Thanksgiving

*“She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes...”*

— Byron

~Jennifer~

I had brown hair.

“Are you sure we’re not supposed to bring something? Not even a casserole?” my mother fretted, twisting her fingers as we drove along Moth Run Road toward the Winston homestead.

“I’m sure. They were very adamant that we just bring ourselves.”

I felt my mother’s eyes on me and she sighed sadly. “I’m not used to seeing you like this yet.”

I didn’t respond. I was tired of talking to her about my hair.

The Monday after Jethro’s wedding, my momma and I came to an agreement on my terms of employment. She’d also signed over my BMW to me as a show of good faith. Or as a bribe. One or the other, and possibly because at Sienna and Jethro’s wedding I’d been approached by a famous pastry chef based in Los Angeles.

I’d dyed my hair back to what I assumed was my natural color just before the trip to New York, after seeing Cletus off for his boar hunting trip to Texas. The color had caused hysterics from my momma. I did my best to tolerate her waterworks. Instead I concentrated on organizing the bakery in preparation for my three-day absence.

She’d been crying non-stop since kicking my father out. At first I had worried she would take him back, but then she explained that she wasn’t crying because she was missing him. She was crying because she realized how much his nasty and vile behavior and selfishness had cost her family. She’d nearly lost both her children. It was then I realized how much I did

love my momma, and wanted to give her the chance to know the real me. And perhaps, I might get to know the real her, too.

Presently, I was a little nervous about my hair. Cletus hadn't seen me yet and I hadn't told him. I wore blonde wigs for all my social media posts and pictures, and during the meetings with the talent agent.

"Am I dressed okay?" She smoothed her hands down her pants and fiddled with her third finger on her left hand, where her wedding ring no longer belonged.

"You look great."

She did look great. I'd insisted we go shopping while in New York and had pushed her into trying on a pair of pants. They looked fantastic. I then talked her into buying them. I also splurged and grabbed a few items, one of which I was wearing now, a dark orange sweater dress. I'd liked how Cletus looked at me in the blue knit dress and I thought this one complimented the color of my hair.

"You also look very nice," my momma said, patting my leg.

I struggled for a moment. I didn't want to make a big deal out of it, so I decided to say, "Thank you, Momma."

But it felt like a big deal. It was the first time she'd complimented me about anything for months, since I'd painted my nails burgundy, in fact.

I was anxious to see Cletus. We'd been texting as much as possible, but where he'd been—out in the middle of nowhere Texas—didn't get good reception. Also, when I'd returned from my trip, I'd been working non-stop at the bakery fulfilling seven hundred Thanksgiving orders for banana cake.

Then he'd returned from Texas late last night.

I missed him.

But today was the day. The cakes were baked. The orders were delivered. I'd talked my momma into taking the day off and going to the Winstons' with me for Thanksgiving.

"This will be fun," she said, as though trying to convince herself, still twisting the vacant spot on her finger.

I parked my car and then reached for her hand, squeezing it until she met my eyes. "It will be fun. The Winstons are really nice. Just try to relax and

enjoy yourself.”

She nodded tightly, but I could see she was panicked. Maybe she didn’t know how to relax. Or maybe she didn’t know how to enjoy herself.

Sighing, I left the car, waiting for her to also exit before climbing the steps to the porch. We walked to the front door together and I rang the doorbell, a little flutter of excitement in my stomach growing and reaching a crescendo as the door was pulled open.

I grinned. “Cletus.”

He grinned, his eyes devouring me. “My Jenn.”

He was so handsome, but I didn’t get much of a chance to count the ways because he pulled me forward, wrapped me in his arms, and gave me the most magical of all kisses, cupping my jaw with one hand, tilting my head to one side then the other, tasting me from every angle and making my toes curl in my shoes.

I clung to him, my heart racing, my blood singing in my veins—more, more, *more*.

And then my mother cleared her throat.

And so did someone else, followed by a voice chiding, “We’re going to move that mistletoe, Cletus. That’s the twelfth person you’ve kissed tonight.”

Cletus lifted his head and turned an angry expression on Beau. “That is a falsehood. I’ve kissed no person for ten days.”

Beau elbowed him out of the way and reached for my mother’s hand, placing a gentle kiss on the back of it and saying, “Please excuse my brother. He usually has better manners. Won’t you come in?”

My momma gave Beau a tight smile. “Yes, thank you for having us.”

“Our pleasure,” the redhead responded graciously, offering his arm.

Despite my kiss haze, I could see Beau’s gentle politeness had worked as my mother walked by. She was by no means relaxed, but perhaps I needed to give her some time.

Fortunately or unfortunately, I didn’t get a chance to say a word on the matter because Cletus pulled me to the porch, shutting the door behind us, pressing me against the side of the house, and kissed me again.

“I missed you,” he said between kisses, “so much.”

“I missed you,” I said when he gave me three seconds to gasp for air, but I didn’t mind. Not at all. I just wished we’d had a moment before now to catch up.

Eventually the kisses turned less frantic and frenzied. His lips softened. His fingers relaxed and smoothed down the length of my torso instead of gripping my hips with punishing fingers. We rested our foreheads together and attempted to catch our breath, neither of us willing to cease touching.

“I was very rude to your mother. I will have to apologize and compliment her pants.”

I nodded, laughing lightly. “You noticed my mamma’s pants?”

“Yes. Of course. My whole life I’ve never seen that woman in pants.”

“Did you notice anything else?” I lifted my head and peered up at him, lifting my eyebrows in expectation.

He studied me, a confused frown on his forehead. “She’s not wearing her wedding ring.”

“No. Not about her. About me.”

His frown deepened and his eyes widened, like a deer caught in headlights. “You . . . changed your . . . toothpaste?”

I glowered at him. And then I smacked his arm.

“No, wait. You changed the address on your voter’s registration card?”

“Cletus.” I smacked him again.

“Sorry, of course, I’ve got it. You changed your mind about me sucking your toes.”

Despite myself I laughed, but I also smacked his arm a third time. “You are extremely irritating.”

Grinning, he captured my cheeks and pulled me forward, placing a soft kiss on my lips, then pulling away. His clever eyes moved over my head and he pushed his fingers into my hair.

“You are lovely, Jenn. No matter what color you paint your hair, I love it and I love you.” His gaze returned to mine and he added on a rumble whisper, “But it’s your goodness, kindness, and heart that makes you beautiful.”

My mother didn't stay long after dinner. I could see she was trying, but I also understood that being faced with a boisterous, happy family like the Winstons must have been painful on some level. She'd had two children, invested a lot of herself into us, and nothing had turned out like she'd hoped.

I walked her to my car and gave her a hug. She'd returned the embrace, kissing me on the cheek, and drove back to the lodge. She'd been staying there since splitting from my father. My father wasn't at our family house either. My mother had changed all the locks and froze all the accounts. The gossip mill was having a field day with Kip Sylvester's sudden disappearance. I endeavored to ignore the lingering looks and whispered questions.

I didn't know where he was. He hadn't made any attempt to contact me.

I tried not to think about it, about him. My life was full of too many wonderful things. I decided I didn't have time or energy to waste on pointless endeavors.

Dessert was served outside, around a large bonfire as we all bundled up in blankets. Cletus passed out shot glasses of moonshine while Drew and Ashley passed out pie.

"I wonder what Duane and Jess are up to." Roscoe picked at his pie, eventually discarding his fork in favor of the shot of moonshine.

"They're probably asleep." Cletus refilled his youngest brother's glass, then capped the jar and moved to me. "It's the middle of the night in Italy."

"They should have stayed for Thanksgiving," Ashley lamented, frowning at the fire.

She was sitting on Drew's lap and he rubbed her back. "But then they'd never leave. After Thanksgiving it's Christmas, then New Year's, then birthdays, and such. It was time for them to go, they'd put off their fernweh long enough."

Cletus motioned for me to stand from my seat, so I did. Then he claimed it and opened his arms. "Come cuddle with me," he said low enough for only me to hear. "I still miss you. I need you close."

I grinned at that and settled myself in his lap, covering us both with the blanket.

“Speaking of adventures, how was boar hunting, Cletus? Did you bring home much meat?” Jethro was lounging with Sienna on a blanket. He sat upright with his legs stretched out before him and she rested her head on his lap, sucking on a lemon candy I’d made her. She said they helped with the nausea, but still wanted the custard cakes. I was happy to oblige.

“Don’t you worry about my meat, Jethro.” Cletus lifted his eyebrows at his oldest brother, holding me close. “I brought home plenty and more is on its way. Jenn and I are going to make some sausage pie.”

“Sausage pie?” This question came from Billy, and he swapped a knowing look with Beau.

“That’s right. Sausage pie.” Cletus pushed my hair over my shoulder and encouraged me to snuggle closer.

“I see.” Beau nodded slowly, thoughtfully. “So Jennifer is going to let you put your sausage in her pie.”

Cletus stiffened. “Don’t say it like that.”

“Like what?” Roscoe pressed his lips together, staring at the fire and clearly trying not to smile. “Beau is just asking after your sausage, and we know how much you like talking about it.”

“You know what.” I could hear the warning in Cletus’s tone.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Cletus.” Beau held his hands up as though he surrendered, but he lost the fight against his grin. “I’m just remarking on the fact that you’re going to slip your famous sausage into Jennifer’s hot, moist—”

“Do not use that word.” Ashley raised her voice over Beau’s and made a face. “Everybody hates that word.”

“Fine. Hot, wet—”

“Pie crust is not wet. It’s flaky,” Jethro put in.

Sienna added, “I think using the word moist for cake is okay.”

“Using moist for cake is the only time it’s okay,” Ashley confirmed. “Otherwise it’s a no go.”

“Wait a minute, that’s a good point.” Beau pointed at Ashley, then at me. “Let’s talk about Jennifer’s moist cake for a minute.”

“Beau. Stop it.” Cletus did not sound amused. “Quit.”

I straightened and sat forward, meeting Beau’s twinkling and teasing gaze. “I think it’s pretty obvious why my cake is so moist.”

Everyone—and I do mean everyone—frowned, blinked, and turned their startled gazes to me.

Despite all the eyes leveled on my person, I managed to sound completely reasonable and calm as I said, “It’s the banana. The banana in my cake makes it wet.”

A stunned silence followed, during which the men—Cletus included—gaped and the women grinned.

Sienna’s burst of laughter broke the silence. “I love her! I swear, Cletus, if you don’t marry her then I will talk to Jethro about making her my sister-wife.”

I turned a bright smile to Cletus and he gave me the side-eye. “You’re pretty sneaky.”

My smile grew because it was uncontainable. It was uncontainable because I was surrounded by warmth and love and Cletus. I knew, without a doubt, that this was where I belonged. I’d found my tribe. I’d found my people.

I’d found my person.

And I’d found myself.

I fell asleep on Cletus’s lap in front of the fire. The ebb and flow of the conversation, the laughter. The good and warm feelings lulled me, relaxing me, until I could fight my exhaustion no more.

I woke up in Cletus’s arms and it took me several seconds to comprehend we were in my house. Apparently, he’d driven me home and carried me inside.

“You’re not still worried about my feet, are you?” I asked, my voice raspy from sleep, my words slightly slurred.

He chuckled, kissing my forehead, and whispered in the dark. “I’m still thinking of your feet. They need to be protected.”

I laughed, coming more awake, twisting my arms around his and kissing his neck. “What time is it?”

“Late,” he said, setting me down on my bed and kneeling in front of me.

Cletus reached for my right boot and pulled it off. Then he worked on my left. His eyes followed his movements, his face impassive as his hands pulled off my socks and tucked them away. Then he sat next to me on the bed and pushed my hair over one shoulder. His fingers searched for the zipper at the back of my dress.

“The other one didn’t have a zipper,” he mumbled, finally finding the pull.

My room was dim, just the light from the hallway spilling in through the doorway, so I couldn’t see very well. But I felt him, felt his thigh against my thigh, his fingers on my neck and back, his breath against my cheek.

Suddenly, I was awake. And I was restless. And I’d missed him terribly. I shifted, swallowed, tensed as the zipper lowered down my lower back.

He leaned away and I felt his eyes on my profile. “Are you okay? Do you need my help to undress?”

His question, so calm and kindly meant—almost detached—made my heart twist and ache. He thought I was tired, he thought I was still sleepy. He wanted to make sure I was okay.

How Cletus cared for me was both exhilarating and exasperating.

Didn’t he know I wanted him? Didn’t he know how I longed for his touch, for both the sweet and the rough? Every night we’d been separated I thought of him, of his hands and mouth and tongue and fingers and . . .

“Jenn?”

His tone was patient, composed, infuriating.

I stood, stepping in front of him, and pulled down the sleeves of my dress. He lifted his chin and his eyebrows arched as well. Our eyes met and tangled. I wondered, could he read my thoughts? Did he know what I wanted?

Or will I have to show him?

As his eyebrows lowered, settling into a thoughtful position, his lips parted—his glorious, kissable lips—as though a question were on the tip of his tongue.

My sweater dress fell to the floor, leaving me in nothing but my undies and bra. I quickly removed the bra. And then my underwear. And then I was naked.

He blinked at me, confusion and desire gathering behind his gaze. His hands fisted, grabbing the comforter, as though he were trying to control himself, hold on to something tangible.

“Do you want me to touch you?” he asked roughly, his voice suddenly gravel, his throat working, his expression a mixture of torment, hunger, and determination.

He didn’t understand, not yet.

So I shook my head, pushing his jacket off his shoulders. I reached for his shirt, tugged it up and over his head. He obliged by lifting his arms, tossing both to the floor at the foot of the bed. I paused, devouring the sight of his bare chest, of his stomach and arms, his shoulders. He had really beautiful shoulders.

And then I knelt in front of him and reached for his belt buckle.

He grabbed my hands. “Jennifer, what are you doing?” He sounded breathless.

I ignored the question, instead straightening and lifting my chin, capturing his mouth with a kiss as my pebbled nipples grazed his chest, making him shudder and sigh and groan. He released me and cupped my breasts, groaning again, massaging and caressing, as though helpless to fight against the reality of boobs.

Good to know.

Taking advantage of the distraction, I redoubled my efforts with his belt, then made quick work of unbuttoning and unzipping his fly. I shifted away and he followed, his hands seeking my skin. I stood and he stood, kissing my neck, biting my shoulder, then bending to lick the flat of his tongue against the center of my breast.

My breath hitched, because the hot, wet friction felt essential and startling. But then I remembered myself and what I wanted. I pushed his pants down

first, then his boxers, then I pushed him.

He fell backward on the bed.

“Take off your shoes,” I heard myself say, my eyes greedily savoring the sight of a naked Cletus.

Well, almost naked. His pants were around his ankles, blocked by his boots.

He glared at me and it felt furious. It felt desperate. Again he balled his hands into fists. He shook his head.

“What are you doing?” His tone now gruffer, angrier, raw. He was breathing hard and appeared to be barely retraining some dark urge.

Give in to it.

I swept my long hair to the side and bent to remove his boots, pulling the laces, then tugging them off along with his pants and socks.

Now he was naked. We both were. And his jaw was clenched.

My beautiful man.

I placed a knee on the bed and he flinched, shaking his head, his eyes dark and dangerous. “I don’t have a condom.”

“And I’m not on birth control,” I whispered, laying my hand on his shoulder.

He flinched again at the contact, grabbing my wrist and pulling it away. His eyes flashed and I saw what I hoped to see: Desire. Reverence. Longing. Devotion. Lust. Love.

His control was slipping.

“What the hell are you doing, Jenn?”

I don’t know.

Placing my other knee on the bed, one on either side of his hips, I lowered myself, my open center sliding against his erection.

We both trembled. His eyes snapped to mine.

Watching him—a starving, wild thing—I rocked my hips, pressing myself more completely against him, and I whispered, “Make love to me.”

He growled, a savage, strangled sound. His hands finally, finally came to my body and he flipped us. My back hit the bed and he was on me, kissing

me, his fingers between my legs, skillfully stroking my center.

I shivered, grabbing his hand and trying to pull it away. "I want you to make love to me with your body. I want you inside me."

"I know." He growled, claiming my mouth quickly, not relinquishing his place, still stroking. "But you're not ready yet."

"I am ready."

He shook his head, then lowered his mouth to my neck, then lower to the valley between my breasts. Then lower to my stomach.

My protest died as his tongue settled against my entrance. He parted me with his thumbs and licked me, hot and wet and at once overwhelming but not enough. My hips bucked and he pressed me down, holding me in place with his strong fingers as he lapped and sucked and savored.

"Cletus, I want you . . . I want you inside me. I don't want to . . . not like this."

He groaned, but he didn't stop. I lifted myself weakly on my elbows and saw that he'd grabbed himself, held his magnificent penis in his fist. At the sight, and against my will, I came.

My back arched and bowed and my entire body tensed. I pulled in a desperate breath, the excruciating pleasure of his mouth on me pulling me apart and putting me back together.

I came cursing him, tears of frustration gathering in my eyes as wave after wave of tortuous ecstasy pulsed through my veins.

I was so angry.

I wanted him, and he'd held himself back. He'd held himself away.

Gasping for air, I prepared myself for a fight, but my body was too pliant, too relaxed and satiated.

And then he was there. He was over me, his erection still in his fist, his eyes on mine. Cletus settled himself between my legs, his hard, thick length sliding against my still sensitive flesh. I shuddered.

"Cletus."

"Now you're ready," he growled, his fingers threading through my hair, pushing it out of my face.

Using his powerful thighs, he spread me wider, sliding into my body.

My breath hitched and my hands searched for him, for purchase, because as exquisite as my orgasm had been, now I felt mostly pressure.

His eyes searched mine, but he didn't ask. Holding my wide gaze, he thrust his hips forward and I gasped. A sharp, pinching pain making me stiffen and moan.

"I was going to be patient." His voice hushed, gruff. "I was going to be so good."

He withdrew and the pressure eased, but then he thrust again. I tensed, wincing, prepared for more pain, but it didn't come. His hips moved slowly then, rocking, pushing, then withdrawing. His eyes held mine captive, cherishing and predatory.

"Temptation," he nipped at my lips, grazing his lips against my jaw, "you feel so good, so fucking good, so fucking good." His breathless and chanting confession sounded mindless, as though he didn't realize he was speaking.

I felt myself relax, the earlier tension dissipate, and I reveled in the feel of him above me, his body sliding against mine where we mated.

"You feel good, too," I whispered.

"Do you like this?" Cletus's wild, needful eyes moved between mine, his grip on me tightening.

I nodded, panting. "I love you."

He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, an unsteady exhale escaping his lungs. He was fighting his release and I thought I knew why. He wanted me to come again. He wanted my first time to be amazing.

It was.

He was.

Because of his care for me. Because I loved him. Because he loved me

I tilted my chin, capturing his mouth, teasing his tongue until he gave it to me. His hands found mine and our fingers entwined. The way he moved above me, with rhythm and grace, like I was an instrument, and he was a musician, and together we made something more, something beautiful.

I felt my body straining, reaching for something just out of its grasp. It felt exciting and I moaned, sighed, and moaned again.

He growled in response and his powerful body increased the tempo. The feel of him became more pleasure than pressure and I arched, tilting my hips to meet each of his thrusts.

His eyes flew open and collided with mine. "Jenn—"

"What does that feel like?"

"Heaven. Paradise."

I rolled my hips and he sucked in a breath. "Don't."

"Let me be your paradise." I kissed his neck, my nails trailing down his chest, between our bodies. "Let me be your heaven. Because you are mine."

Cletus groaned at my words, coming apart before my eyes, a heady range of emotions flashing over his features, just before he crushed my mouth with a fierce, covetous kiss. And when he was spent, he stilled, his breathing labored.

Eventually, he rolled to his side, gathering me to him. His heart thundering as he placed passionate kisses over my face and neck and breasts.

I threaded my fingers into his hair and enjoyed the friction of his beard against my skin, his hot mouth on my body.

He continued kissing me, devouring me, for a long time. Meanwhile, I felt stretched and twisted and worked and used, supple with lovemaking and the adoration of his eyes and hands and mouth.

Folding me in his arms and crushing me, as though he were afraid I'd leave him, he shook his head. I sensed he was about to speak, and I also guessed that what he had to say wasn't what I most wanted to hear at this moment.

"I don't regret what just happened," I announced, "I loved it, and I love you, and I can't wait to do it again. Don't you dare say a single word to the contrary."

Huffing a laugh and squeezing me tighter, he searched for my mouth. Finding it, he took my lips with a soul-searing kiss, shifting just an inch away to say, "Even if I wanted to, even if you wanted me to, I would never regret making love to you." He kissed my nose and waited until my eyes met his. "But I'm afraid you'll have to wait to do it again."

A protest ripe on my tongue, he cut me off.

“Just two days, three at the most. And then we can do it whenever you like,” he kissed me again, “as often as you like,” he kissed me once more, “and wherever you like.”

I grinned and his hand slid from my hip to my breast, his thumb tracing a circle around the peak. God, I love his hands. I loved how he touched me.

“You promise?”

He nodded. “I promise.”

“Then prepare yourself, because we’re going to do it all the time. Until I’m an expert.”

“Then what happens?”

“Then we’ll do it even more.”

He chuckled, shaking his head, kissing me and sucking on my bottom lip like he couldn’t help himself. But then his smile waned as he drew away. It softened and his eyes sharpened.

“Jenn, if we’ve made a baby, then I won’t stop badgering you until you have me as your husband.” Achingly vulnerable, his tone was also solemn with promise.

I smoothed my hand over his chaotic curls. “I know. And I wouldn’t stop badgering you until you have me as your wife.”

“Do you want to be my wife?” His smile returned, but this time it was subdued, hopeful.

“More than anything.”

Cletus’s mercurial eyes moved between mine, his hand petting and stroking from my shoulder to my hip.

“Then marry me,” he whispered the command, his tone thick with passion and sincerity.

I stared at him, at this man, who had been so proud. Who was clever and powerful and good. All those months ago, when I’d pressured him into helping me, I never thought things would end this way.

I missed him. Even here with me now, I missed him. I wondered if I would ever stop.

“Yes,” I said simply, nodding, feeling the rightness of him and me and us to the marrow of my bones.

He didn't speak. He just looked at me, like I'd hung the moon and designed the stars to match.

Tucking me against his body, his powerful legs tangling with mine, Cletus lay perfectly still, and so did I, living in the moment. After a time, the weight of my happiness exhausted me, and I grew drowsy. My eyes drifted shut.

But I thought I heard Cletus whisper against my ear, just before I succumbed to sleep, "This is just the beginning."

~The End~

About the Author

Penny Reid lives in Seattle, Washington with her husband, three kids, and an inordinate amount of yarn. She used to spend her days writing federal grant proposals as a biomedical researcher, but now she writes books.

Published in 2016, 'Beard Science' is Penny's 12th novel.

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