

BEARD WITH ME

WINSTON BROTHERS #6

PENNY REID

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PART I

NOVEMBER 2003

Dear Reiders,

This is a book I never expected to write. I believe I had a mental block against writing it. The story is just . . . heartbreaking. Then again, it has a Cletus, so it's also funny in places. ͸_('ʘ)_/͸

As an author, you build your world, you assign motivations to characters and flesh them out, make them real. As I've built this world, I've added details to my characters' backstories which I had no desire to visit or describe on the page. Well, fortunately or unfortunately, for those of you who've asked that Billy and Scarlet/Claire receive an origin story, I had to write those details in this book.

Simply stated: this book is not a romance, it is a *tragic* love story.

As I mentioned, it is the origin story, but not just for Billy and Scarlet/Claire. It is the foundation on which the rest of the Green Valley world is built. It can be read as a standalone, and you do not have to read it to enjoy (or not enjoy) any of the other books in the series.

If you've read the Winston Brothers series, then you know. You know the characters; the unfolding of the events shouldn't be a surprise (the good

and the bad and the sad). If you don't want to read the tragic details, skip this book. You can still read what has come before and what is yet to come.

But if you haven't read the Winston Brothers and this is your first book in the series, then let this serve as a warning. If you have a trigger—any trigger at all—chances are this book is going to trigger you. Just assume it has all the triggers, put it down, and move on to the next book in your TBR.

-Penny Reid

CHAPTER ONE

SCARLET

“Not only had my brother disappeared, but... a part of my very being had gone with him. Stories about us could, from then on, be told from only one perspective. Memories could be spoken but not shared.”

— JOHN COREY WHALEY, WHERE THINGS COME BACK

Caution tape barred the way to the chorus room. Gulping a hard bubble of air, my attention moved from the yellow tape to the hallway beyond it, to a white poster board next to the door. The sign had been set on an easel and it read, WET PAINT – DO NOT ENTER.

“No. No, no, no!” My eyes darted again to the yellow tape.

I gripped the paper sack holding my free school lunch. A sound of despair tumbled from my mouth. Heart galloping, pits sweating, my tongue tasting sour with dread, I had *a moment*.

And by *a moment* I mean I freaked out.

Officially, I wasn’t allowed to eat in the chorus room. No one was. But early on in my freshman year, I’d snuck in and hid myself between two rows of chairs, careful to dash inside before Mrs. McClure arrived for her lesson planning hour. I’d become quite skilled at leaving unnoticed after the bell rang for fourth period, when her students wandered in.

This had worked for the last (almost) year and a half, but it obviously wouldn't work today. Making matters worse, this was the last month of school before winter break. There was no sneaky way to find a place to sit in the lunchroom when I'd spent the majority of the year *not* eating in the lunchroom.

Tugging on the recently repaired strap of my very, very old backpack—some might even consider it an antique—I stuffed the food inside, harsh movements made clumsy by swelling frustration. But then I paused, taking a slow, deep breath, and telling my shaking hands and thundering heart to cool it.

"How does the ocean say hello to the beach?" I asked myself, quietly supplying the answer, "Gives it a little wave."

The stupid joke helped ease the tangle in my stomach and I cracked a smile, laughing lightly.

Don't be stupid. This is no big deal. Whatever.

The first fourteen and a half years of life had taught me many valuable lessons. One of the most important was that the magnitude of disappointment was directly proportional to the magnitude of expectations. I'd known this for a while, but the concept had finally solidified in my mind this year during physics class when we'd learned about Newton's third law: *For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction*. It applied to life and hopes and dreams and expectations too.

Now I had a math equation to estimate my level of disappointment based on my level of expectation. Isn't that nice?

My first mistake was coming to rely upon the chorus room. Second mistake was allowing myself to look forward to this moment. Today was Friday. Eating lunch in a quiet, heated place was a luxury. Free of people, free of bugs, free of people who behaved like bugs. Now I had nowhere to eat my lunch that wasn't free of bug people.

“Come on now, Scarlet. You know better,” I murmured, rolling my eyes and angling my chin. “It could be worse. It could be the *first* month of school.”

My crack of a smile widened, and I sighed as I turned to the tricky zipper of my bag. I needed to be careful. If it was unzipped past a certain point, it wouldn’t re-zip and I’d go the rest of the day with my books and papers falling all over the place.

Plus, I’d have to find a new zipper to sew inside and that would be difficult. Blythe Tanner, who was usually my source for clothes and such items in return for help with can and glass recycling, wasn’t speaking to me ever since my dad threatened to disembowel her dad two months ago. Her father owned the junkyard and my father wanted to store stolen cars in his junkyard. Mr. Tanner—not being a criminal—refused.

A shiver raced down my spine and I promptly submerged it—and thoughts of my father—using a trick I’d picked up at ten years old: rephrase a situation as a scripted comedy TV show. *Good old dad, always threatening disembowelments. What a character!*

Yeah. I talked to myself a lot. I told myself a lot of jokes. I even had inside jokes . . . with myself. I guess folks needed to talk to someone, and it was mostly just me around for conversation. But that was just fine. I was an awesome conversationalist.

Closing my eyes, I knelt on the ground and placed the backpack carefully on the floor so I could gently tuck my food inside on top of my jacket. The back of my hand brushed against my prized possession, a Walkman CD player, and I was careful not to knock it around. With my eyes shut, sounds that were usually background noise sharpened and increased in volume. The rumble of students talking and eating became a roar, trays being set on tables, soda cans opening, laughter.

My stomach sunk, but only for half a second. Squaring my shoulders and lifting my chin, I immediately demanded that my stomach turn itself

around and return to my middle. I did not have time for sinking stomachs, not over something so silly.

Lunch would be over in forty-five minutes. *Forty-five minutes is no big deal. I'll figure it out.* Pretending to fiddle with the front pocket of my bag, just in case a teacher happened by, I debated my options.

The lunchroom was not a possibility. Two choices awaited me within: Try to sit with the other Iron Wraiths kids, or try to sit with anyone else, because there would be no empty tables. Green Valley was bursting at the seams, too many students and too few seats.

I couldn't sit with the Iron Wraiths kids. They'd most likely let me, seeing as how my father was the club president, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Prince King would probably try something horrible to get my attention or make me angry, and then Carla Creavers would do something to get Cletus's attention—who never seemed to sit at the same table twice—maybe flirt with Prince King. Prince King looked like Jared Leto, but he was a complete jerk.

Anyway, Prince King would then get overaggressive with Carla, and then Cletus would intervene—even though it wouldn't be about Carla, it would be about Prince being “ungentlemanly”—and then there would be a fight and we'd all get detention.

But I couldn't sit with anyone else. No one wanted to be my partner for class projects—ever—and I honestly didn't blame them. Who would want their kids hanging out with one of the Wraiths kids? And the president's daughter? No. Plus, I was under no delusions about the state of my clothes and appearance. Clothes and appearance in high school are everything, and my nickname since seventh grade had vacillated between Smelly Scarlet or Sweaty Scarlet.

“But, you know, their loss,” I mumbled, shrugging.

Another option was the hallway just off the cafeteria, but I quickly dismissed this possibility. Principal Sylvester had forbidden students from

the corridor during lunch since last month, after Cletus Winston and Prince King had gotten into a fistfight. Now it was off-limits and heavily patrolled.

A noise snagged my attention, the sound of a toilet flushing, and I turned my head toward it. A few seconds later, two girls exited the bathroom, deep in conversation. I lowered my eyes to my backpack and redoubled my pretend fiddling while they walked past, paying me no mind. As soon as their voices faded, I returned my attention to the girls' bathroom door and EUREKA!

Of course!

With my lunch tucked safely in my backpack—and the tricky zipper closed—I brought the bag to my shoulder and stood; my decision made easy by the obvious choice.

“What did one toilet say to the other?” I muttered to myself, walking toward the bathroom and answering in my head, *You look flushed*.

My lips curved at the joke, and I chuckled. “You look flushed. That’s funny. Or maybe it could be, *you look pooped*. Or how about, *why are you so pissed?*” The last punchline had me laughing and shaking my head at myself again, muttering, “Good one, Scarlet. You should write that—”

I was so lost in my self-congratulations for the superior punchline, I almost collided with the boys’ bathroom door as it unexpectedly opened, missing a door handle to the groin by jumping backward and to the side. But my quick thinking meant that my shoulder and chest collided with the boy who was exiting the bathroom, which meant that I fell backward on my ass.

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. As previously noted, this law applies to life, hopes, dreams, expectations, and masses traveling at varying velocities, especially when one of those masses is a huge boy and the other mass is me.

“Are you—” the boy started, taking a hasty step in my direction that made his sneakers squeak on the linoleum, but then he stopped speaking

and moving just as suddenly.

I froze, a colossal spike of renewed dismay chasing the air from my lungs. I fought to keep the grimace from my face, and not just because my tailbone was going to be sore for several days as a result of my graceless fall. I didn't need to look up to know this boy who'd accidentally knocked me down was none other than high school junior, current star quarterback of the Green Valley football team, every girl's fantasy boyfriend, and my childhood nemesis, Billy Winston.

Nowadays, I avoided him and he ignored me. Actually, in the scheme of things, it was probably more accurate to say I was beneath his notice. So . . .

"Scarlet," he said, like the word was a dirty one, and then released a quiet, drawn-out, annoyed huff. "Are you okay?"

I nodded wordlessly. He didn't move.

When we were kids, I would've thrown some insult at him. I would've felt anger and irritation at being knocked down by Billy, even if it was an accident. I had a kind of fearless confidence when I was a kid, like I really mattered. All that changed in middle school; not because of any one big event or wound; more like thousands of tiny cuts (literally and figuratively). I'd grown tired of fighting the world because the world always won.

ANYWAY.

Presently, my eyes on his feet, I kept my mouth shut, waiting for him to leave.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, like he was about to leave. But he didn't.

"Here." His tone laced with impatience, he reached out a hand. "Let me help you up."

Instinct had me flinching back and tucking my chin to my chest.

"What the hell, Scarlet? It's not like I'm going to hit you," he grumbled, sounding even more exasperated.

I sat frozen, heat climbing up my neck and cheeks. *Just leave*, I wanted to holler. *Just freaking go!* Little kid Scarlet would have.

A moment passed and his hand dropped. Another moment passed and I heard him exhale a sigh, louder this time. Without another word, he walked around me. I listened as his footsteps carried him away, until the sound was swallowed by the maniacally cheerful cafeteria chatter.

Then and only then did I allow myself to breathe. But I would not allow myself to think about what had just happened.

"No. Nothing happened," I said. "Nothing happened. I tripped and I fell. He was never here. Nothing happened."

"Uh, I'm pretty sure something happened."

My head snapped up and I found Ben McClure standing not more than fifteen feet away, his hands stuffed in his jeans pockets, his attention on the other end of the corridor where the cafeteria was, and where Billy Winston had just disappeared.

"Hey, Scarlet," he said, sounding distracted.

"Oh. Hey, Ben," I croaked. My cheeks probably matched the color of my hair by now.

If Billy Winston was Green Valley's picture of the perfect high school boyfriend, Ben McClure was their image of an ideal man, full stop. Ben was about two years older than Billy, but they were both tall and big and square-jawed and deep-voiced. Until last year, when he graduated, Ben had been the starting quarterback of the football team. Billy had taken his place.

But that's about where the resemblances ended.

Where Billy's hair was dark brown, almost black, Ben's was golden blond. Billy had icy blue eyes that felt sharp and piercing, like needles and knives every time he looked at you. Honestly, Billy's looks were off-putting. He was just too handsome, movie-star handsome, looking at him directly hurt just a little. But Ben's blues were warm and pretty, like

bluebells in the summer. His handsomeness was softer, more approachable, boyish.

Both considered good mannered, but Billy's idea of polite was coldly formal, whereas Ben treated everyone like his best friend.

Also, Billy never smiled. Even when he was a kid, he never smiled. Ben's smile was near constant, just varying in size and intention based on the occasion. He had his smile of greeting, his smile of encouragement, his shy smile, his amused smile, his mischievous smile, his—

Ahhhh. Stop it, Scarlet. Stop torturing yourself.

In case you hadn't guessed by my gushing, I had a bit of a crush on Ben McClure. But in my defense, I think everyone in town did too. Men, women, children, dogs. He was so darn friendly and *good*. He was the best at everything.

"Whatcha doing?" I felt his gaze come to rest on me where I still sat grimacing on the ground.

Swallowing around the unidentified oral object—an UOO, if you will—making my throat tight, I forced a chuckle. "Uh, well. That's a valid question. When I figure it out, I'll let you know."

I snuck a peek at him as I found my feet, certain my grin was goofy rather than charming. But that didn't matter. First off, we were friends . . . of a sort. Ben was nice to me and went out of his way to engage me in conversation whenever we happened upon each other. That didn't make me special. Ben was friends or friendly with most everyone in town.

Regardless, it still meant something to me. One of my favorite things about Ben McClure was that he didn't care about who anyone's parents were, or where they were from, or how old their clothes were, or how old *they* were. He might've cared about how I smelled on summer days when showers were hard to come by, but he never said anything about it.

Point was, he was kind to everybody, all the time, no matter how much of a fool you made of yourself, no matter who you were.

Basically, he was perfect.

Sigh.

Ben's eyebrows pulled together as he crossed to me, his eyes traveling over my person, and his examination made me hotter under the collar.

"Are you all right? That was quite a fall." He looked and sounded uncharacteristically irritated as he said this.

"Y—you saw that?" I asked haltingly, wrestling with both my mortification and my heart, which had suddenly gone squishy.

"Yeah, I saw it." He gave me a small smile that seemed to be tempered with concern. "You keep running into doors like that, I'll have to follow you around to catch you. "

"Oh. Ha. Hahahaha." *YES PLEASE.*

He lifted his chin toward the cafeteria. "Was that William Winston? Knocking you down and not helping you up?"

Yikes.

I shook my head quickly. "It wasn't his fault. I wasn't looking where I was going, and he was just minding his own business, and there I was, flying down the hall, not paying attention. And he offered to help me up, I just—"

"Scarlet." Ben lifted his hands, showing me his palms. "You don't need to be defending William to me. I know how he is."

I repressed my urge to set Ben straight about defending William—Billy—Winston. I just didn't want Ben going to Billy's momma and repeating what he witnessed. Then Mrs. Winston would talk to her son and make him apologize or something. The last thing I needed was Billy's ire. And besides, he did offer me a hand. I was the one who refused to take it.

"That looked like quite a fall." Ben stepped forward, his pretty eyes losing any trace of frustration or resentment; the result caused a warming effect on my stomach.

Or maybe I was just hungry.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly, looking concerned.

I made a clumsy little snorting sound, waving away his worry. "Oh me? Nah. I'm fine. It would take a lot more than that to hurt my backside. Have you seen how much padding I got back there? That thing is well protected." Now I snorted conspiratorially, as much as one can snort conspiratorially . .

.

Dear Lord in heaven, why am I such a dork?

Truth be told, concern made me uncomfortable and I wasn't thinking about my words or my snort, I just wanted to change the subject. Growing up, folks never seemed to show me overt concern without an ulterior motive, and I'd known Mrs. McClure's son long enough to know he didn't ever have an ulterior motive. Therefore, Scarlet the Grand Dame of Dorkiness, always emerged when he showed concern. Somehow, I'd have to figure out how to subdue the Grand Dame before she reigned supreme.

Meanwhile, Ben straightened, shoving his hands back in his pockets, his eyes skipping over my shoulder to look down the hall. "I haven't—I would never—" He shook his head, like he was clearing it of something. Then he laughed lightly. "Scarlet, if you're sure you're okay, I'll let it drop."

"I'm fine." I grinned, dorkily, I'm sure showcasing a mouth full of crooked teeth. His teeth were straight as pine trees planted in a row. How I envied his teeth.

"Okay then." Warm smile in place, his gaze once more traveling over my face, he took a small step to the side. "Have you seen my momma? I'm supposed to meet her for lunch."

Ah! Of course. Ben often met his mom for lunch on Fridays since he'd graduated. He went to college in Nashville but drove home most weekends to help his parents. From my hiding place in the chorus room I refused to eavesdrop on their conversations, focusing my attention on books or whatnot. But I did hear their shared laughter—her light, musical chuckle and his deep, rolling belly laugh—from time to time. It always put me in

such a good mood, and I'd catch myself smiling later when I remembered it.

Hearing other people laugh at something friendly, something good-natured, was one of my favorite sounds.

"I honestly don't know where Mrs. McClure is. The chorus room is closed." I pointed toward it. "Something about wet paint."

"That's right. She said to meet her in the courtyard." Ben checked his watch, then glanced at me. "I think I'm late. Where's your lunch? Isn't it lunchtime?"

"It's in my bag. I was going to eat in the—well, in my normal spot, but it's not open right now, so I thought I'd eat in the bathroom." I cringed, not meaning to confess so much, yet not terribly surprised I had. There was just something about Ben that made me always tell the truth. I couldn't imagine lying to such a good, kind face. Or the person behind it.

"Scarlet, what are you talking about? You can't eat in the bathroom. It's not sanitary." He gave me a funny look, like he was trying to scold me and not laugh at the same time. "Why not eat in the cafeteria?"

Every muscle in my body tensed at the suggestion, my eyes lowering to the floor, another UOO in my throat. "I'd prefer not." Not only that, but it wasn't something I wished to discuss, not with beautiful Ben.

"I'll sit with you, if you like."

I shook my head, not even his sweet suggestion could lessen the finality of my decision. Plus, Scarlet St. Claire eating lunch in the cafeteria with Ben McClure wouldn't go unnoticed. I moved my weight to the left, intending to walk around him. "I need to go to the bathroom anyway."

Ben leaned to the side, blocking my way. "Okay, you don't want to eat in the cafeteria. How about this, you come with me and have lunch with my momma in the courtyard. Where's your jacket?"

"In my backpack, but I'm not allowed in the—"

"It'll be fine." He slid his hand down my arm and entwined our fingers, sending racing goose bumps up my arm and in my brain.

ALERT!!!

We were touching. Oh my dear Lord, we were touching. Now I was sweating again. Something about being touched in a nice way, and apparently by anyone I had a crush on, made my glands activate and act a drama. I guess I knew what that something was, but still. The overreaction was frustrating.

"Come on, she'd love it." Ben tugged. "You know you're one of her favorite students."

Self-preservation made me drag my feet. It wasn't that I didn't want to have lunch with Ben and Mrs. McClure. Rather, going through the cafeteria in order to get to the courtyard was the problem. I didn't want to draw that kind of attention to myself.

Picture it: me, walking through the Green Valley High cafeteria, holding hands with *Ben McClure*. Yeah, that wouldn't go unnoticed, even if it didn't mean anything.

"Wait a minute, wait."

"Scarlet, time is running out. If you want to eat, we should go meet my mom. And I'm not letting you eat in the bathroom. So, it's either you and I sit together in the cafeteria, or you come with me to the courtyard."

"Okay, okay. I'll come with." I gently withdrew my fingers from his, needing him not to touch me so my brain would work. "You, uh, you go on first and I'll walk behind."

He inspected me, his eyebrows pulled together into a V, making him look both amused and confused. "You don't need to walk behind me, Scarlet. I'm not ashamed to be seen with you."

"I know that, Ben," I replied softly, my mind and my belly tripping all over themselves at his words.

Mrs. Winston was sweet to me, Mrs. McClure was too. But Ben's sweetness landed different. It felt like a light touch rather than a squeezing hug.

Reaching for my hand again, his mouth pulled to the side. I took a step back, evading him, and gripped the straps of my backpack with closed fists. "Go on. I'll follow."

He studied me again. "Hold up. Are you ashamed to be seen with me?"

I rushed forward unthinkingly, horrified that he'd even ask the question, and grabbed hold of his arm. "Oh no. Never. I'd never be embarrassed of you. You're just the nicest, most . . ." I licked my lips, knowing I shouldn't continue *that* sentence, and added quietly, "I know how lucky I am, that we're friends." I was. So lucky.

His fair treatment of me over the last few years meant that other people hadn't been quite so harsh, and for that I was eternally grateful. Ben McClure was the reigning golden boy of Green Valley, since his birth. Everyone knew the story. His momma and daddy weren't able to have kids for the first twenty-five years of their marriage. Folks prayed and prayed for them. Then one day, miraculously, she got pregnant after they'd given up trying.

The entire town celebrated, or so that's the way the town gossip Karen Smith told it. Mrs. McClure's baby shower had been a sight, with people buying silver baby rattles and engraved cups and spoons. Everything he wore until he was three had been hand-monogrammed by someone's grandmother. Everywhere he went, people were happy to see him. Big Ben, they called him when he was little. The name persisted even now that he really was big, and he bore it all with grace and patience.

He was everyone's favorite. Every teacher, administrator, minister, coach. He was great at everything. He was the best.

And this favorite child of Green Valley was grinning at me. At me. Scarlet St. Claire, spawn of Satan and his illiterate mistress. (No lie, my

momma can't read).

Ben reached for my hand where I held on to my backpack strap, fit our fingers together, and coaxed me toward the cafeteria. Again.

"Well, I'm glad you feel lucky. 'Cause I feel the same way about you." His eyes conducted another sweep of my face, making my stomach warm once more. Or maybe I was just really, *really* hungry.

And yet, my steps were still slow and hesitant, the dread almost eclipsing the good feelings in my torso. If we were seen—and we were definitely going to be seen—by any of the Wraiths kids, it would get back to my father. And that would be like putting a target on Ben's back.

"Ben—"

"Listen. Just trust me, okay? It'll be fine. So what, high school kids will see us together."

"But if we're holding hands, it might look like something it isn't, and then people will talk."

He shrugged, giving me another of his smiles; from where I stood, I couldn't tell if it was a shy or sly one. "Or, it might look like exactly what it is. So let them talk." He squeezed my hand. "I'll keep you safe."

I tried to return his smile but couldn't. It wasn't my safety I was worried about.

CHAPTER TWO

BILLY

“...I walked back to my room and collapsed on the bottom bunk, thinking that if people were rain, I was drizzle and she was a hurricane.”

— JOHN GREEN, LOOKING FOR ALASKA

My eyes were on the road, but my mind was occupied with the disaster sitting next to me.

"Thanks," he said.

Without looking over, I breathed in through my nose, stretching my lungs with as much cold air as would fit.

"Of course," I said, calmly. "Anytime."

"Anytime?"

I shifted in my seat. *Lord, give me patience.*

"You don't even know why I'm thanking you and yet you say, 'Anytime.'"

"Whatever, Cletus."

He snorted, then winced, testing his lip. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the pad of his index and middle finger come away bloody. He smeared the red with this thumb, tucking his hands under his crossed arms. A second later he placed one hand on each knee.

“What if I was thanking you for letting me get another dog?”

“We’re not getting another dog,” I said, again calmly. But also with decisiveness. We were not getting another dog. We could barely afford the vet bills and food for the dog we had.

“But you said, ‘Anytime.’ Therefore, I’m taking you as a man of your word, and—”

“Cletus.”

He snapped his mouth shut and huffed, glancing away from me and out the window. We drove in silence, my old truck jostling us both as we drove over a pothole. This weekend or next, I’d have to check the suspension and shocks. *If I can find the time.*

“I suppose you meant, ‘Anytime,’ for something else then. Maybe you meant I could have cake anytime?”

“Sure, Cletus.”

He grumbled something akin to, “You’re only letting me have cake anytime ’cause you know I don’t like cake all that much,” then winced again, sucking in a breath. I made the mistake of glancing at him and immediately wished I hadn’t. The color of his nose and the trail of blood dripping down his temple made my insides curdle with breath-snatching worry, rage, and urges I’d never act upon. His left eye was already starting to swell shut.

Clamping my jaw closed, I glared out the windshield.

“I suppose you know why I said thanks, so we’ll just leave it at that.” He sniffed, lifting his nose in the air and crossing his arms again. “I’m hungry, what’s for dinner?”

Lord. Patience. Anytime now. Please.

Cletus may have been just eleven months younger than me, but I couldn’t imagine a time when I wouldn’t consider him a kid. Maybe when he stopped fighting all the time? Or when he remembered that Friday night was his evening to cook dinner.

“It’s your night to cook, Cletus. So you tell me.” Calm. Calm. Calm.

“Well shoot.” He made a tsking noise. “Can we stop by the store?”

“Nope.”

He turned to me. “But I didn’t pick anything up.”

“Yeah. I know that.” *Because I just dragged you off Prince King behind the stadium instead of picking you up at the store, which is where you were supposed to be.*

“So what’s the plan here, Billy? You want me to hunt wild boar in the backyard? If we don’t go to the store, then we’ll have no food for dinner.”

“You got the money?”

He stiffened. A second later, he swallowed so loud, I heard it. “Not . . . exactly.”

I pressed my lips together so I wouldn’t laugh. Of course. Of course he didn’t have the money. “Who’d you give it to this time?” Calm. So calm. Like a placid lake.

“Carla.”

“Carla? Carla who?”

“Creavers.”

I found I needed to inhale deeply again to keep the curses from leaving my mouth. As an extra measure, I covered my lips with my hand, keeping the ballooning frustration inside.

As I debated my options—what to do, what to say that would induce Cletus to do what I wanted, which was to stop acting like a fool—I remembered something Dolly Payton had once said to me at a picnic. She was the CEO of Payton Mills, where I worked, the matriarch of the Payton family, friendly with my mother, looked a bit like Phylicia Rashad, and was the smartest person I knew. She’d called me a natural born leader and gave me this advice,

When you manage people, figure out what your employees need from you in order for them to be their most successful selves. Some folks need

praise, some folks need criticism, some folks need structure. Some folks just need small talk, knowing you care, and that's it. It'll be different for each person.

Basically, when you're a leader, it's impossible to treat everyone the same. Each person needed something different from you—as their leader—in order to succeed. Being in charge meant figuring out what that thing was for each individual, and then giving it to them.

Yelling at Cletus, asking him what the hell he'd been thinking, expressing the extreme nature of my anger and disappointment wouldn't do any good.

That approach worked with only one of my younger brothers. A sharp word was all it took with twelve-year-old Beau. He wanted blunt honesty. He wanted me to give it to him straight.

But Duane, the other twin, needed praise. I coldly and pointedly ignored Duane and his mistakes, and then I praised his good decisions.

Whereas eight-year-old Roscoe just wanted someone to talk to. If I took the time to sit and talk with Roscoe, reason with him, he did great. *Problem was, finding the time.*

Point was, the other three could be chastised. They cared about disappointing me. Ashley, who'd just turned fourteen in August, never required any yelling or scolding or praise or talking. She just always did the right thing. *Thank God for Ashley.*

But Cletus? Confronting him made him more ornery and likely to do the wrong thing on purpose later, just to spite me. Trying to reason with him got me nowhere, he seemed to think it was a battle of wits. Praising Cletus only made him suspicious of my intentions. It was almost like he needed to be tricked into behaving.

So I said nothing, and I ignored the pressure behind my eyes . We drove for a stretch longer, me breathing in through my nose to cool my brain, him sitting perfectly still.

He must've been hurting. In addition to his swelling eye, his lip was busted open in one place that I could see. Getting him inside the house wouldn't be a problem. Momma wasn't due home with the kids until six, and if we needed more time to patch him up and make him presentable, Ashley could always be counted on to help.

Then we'd just tell another lie at the dinner table, as usual. Maybe something about falling out of a tree. We hadn't used that excuse in a while.

"Do you want to know what happened?" My brother's solemn voice cut through the quiet, distracting me from my plans.

I sucked in another bracing breath and leaned my elbow on the sill, pinching my bottom lip with my thumb and index finger. "If you want to tell me the story, I'll listen."

I needed to trim my beard. It had come in fully over the summer, just like Jethro's had when he turned sixteen. Now the hair around my lips was getting in the way of food and kissing. I'd tried to shave a few times, but that just ended up a mess, with my face all cut up.

Plus, razors were expensive.

Cletus uncrossed his arms again, returning his hands to his knees. His fingers drummed out a restless rhythm. "Well now, that's not a forthright answer."

"Cletus—"

"You'll listen to what happened if'n I tell it, but you don't wish to know."

Gripping the peeling leather of my steering wheel, now with both hands, I glanced at the visor above the windshield, where I kept a recent photo of my family tucked against the ceiling. We'd all gone rafting down the Nantahala in August, working as a team, laughing and talking the whole way. Just a normal, happy family.

That's what I wanted, that's what we were working toward. I couldn't see the photo at present, but I knew it was there. A reminder.

"Billy, I didn't start the fight."

"Okay." *Lord, give me patience. Please.*

"I swear on the grave of Grandpa Oliver, I didn't throw the first punch."

"With your fist," I murmured, the words out before I caught them.

Give me patience. Give me patience. Give it to me.

It was my momma's most mumbled prayer. Not, *Lord, teach me patience*. No, not that. A few years back she told me, "Never ask the Lord to teach you anything, he'll teach you a lesson you'll never forget. Just ask for what you want. Ask Him to give it to you, no strings attached. It's less dangerous."

Cletus released a loud breath. "Of course, with my fist."

Give me patience. Lord. Dear Lord, give me patience . . . any minute now. I'm waiting.

"How else do you start a fight if it isn't with your fist?"

"With your words, Cletus!"

Dammit.

Dammit!

I balled my left hand tightly and pressed it against my mouth, inwardly chuckling at the irony of the moment. I'd just started a fight. With my words. The Lord wasn't giving me patience, but he sure was demonstrating the impressiveness of his sense of humor.

Cletus tensed, and then I felt him bristle. I felt the energy change in the cab as he gathered his armor of indifference and weapons of wit.

He just wants to fight. Always. All the time. With anyone. It didn't matter who. He just wanted to rage and dominate and destroy. That's what he wanted. All the damn time.

Before he could launch his first attack, I exhaled loudly, unfurling my hand and moving it from my lips to my forehead, rubbing against the headache there. "I'm not your enemy, Cletus. I'm not a foe. I'm not seeking to outsmart you or prove you're wrong."

"That's 'cause you can't outsmart me."

I wouldn't goad him, not that I didn't also have that same instinct, but because someone needed to set the example of restraint. Someone had to be the adult, the voice of reason. Our momma provided the gentle variety. The stern kind had defaulted to me.

"That's because I have enough sense to know it." I chuckled a tired laugh. I was so tired.

"What?" he snapped.

"I don't aim to outsmart you. I have the good sense to know you're smarter than me."

The energy changed again, Cletus's posture losing some of its stiffness, the moment diffused. For now. And that was the problem. Every day with Cletus was like handling a ticking time bomb. He might've been diffused for the moment, but he'd just go and arm himself again whenever the notion struck him.

"I know you're not my enemy." Now he sounded tired. "But what should I have done? Prince King was—"

"Do I care what Prince King was doing? Do I care what any of those trash biker kids do? No. And you shouldn't either."

"They're not all trash."

"Fine. They're not all trash, but they're all surrounded by trash, and anything that spends enough time in a dumpster eventually becomes garbage."

He gasped. "That's harsh, big brother."

"That's fact, Cletus. I know I can't tell you what to do, you'll just do the opposite."

"That's not true." He sounded insulted. "I take your words under advisement."

Under advisement.

Well, thank God my fifteen-year-old brother who has already been held back a year for all his troublemaking, who keeps getting suspended for fighting at school, and who always seems to be beating the shit out of people outside of school is taking my words *under advisement*. Never mind he isn't doing anything to change himself, never mind I keep lying to cover for him and bail him out and stop him from wrecking his life. Never mind all that.

Honestly, at this point, if Cletus didn't end up in jail for assault and battery—or manslaughter—I'd consider it a miracle, and that weighed on me more than anything these days.

More than grades and school, more than the team and football and that scholarship I needed, more than keeping Samantha happy, more than my job at the mill, more than ensuring Momma and Ashley and Beau and Duane and Roscoe were safe and cared for. Cletus was wearing me down. And for the first time in my sixteen years, I didn't know what to do.

I couldn't say, "You need to get control over your temper." Because he wanted to fight, and he didn't see a problem with it as long as the folks he was beating on were nasty to him.

The only thing I could do was point out how what he was doing, what he wanted to do and the choices he made, how all that impacted others. So that's what I did.

"What are you going to tell Momma? Hmm? And Ashley? How about Roscoe? You want him following in your footsteps? You like the idea of him fighting with trash like King?"

Once more, Cletus snapped his mouth shut. This time the movement was so sudden, his teeth made a clicking noise. My brother flinched but was otherwise silent.

I turned on Moth Run Road, slowing the truck because we were almost home. I wanted to give him time with his thoughts before we arrived. I

wanted him to stew in them, maybe find remorse for his recklessness before we walked in the door.

Predictably, he didn't say anything until our driveway loomed. "I, uh, I thought maybe I'd tell Momma I fell out of a tree."

"So, you're going to lie to her."

"Billy—"

"You're smart, Cletus. Tell me, if there's nothing wrong with what you're doing, then what's the harm in telling everybody the truth?"

"Don't try to out-logic me."

"I'm not." I flipped on the blinker even though there was no one behind us, my gaze moving over the fence bracketing the driveway. It needed repair. I looked away, beating down a familiar frustration.

I didn't have the time. I needed to study for my trigonometry test and write a paper for European history. Football practice had gone longer than usual, which had worked out since it meant I'd been at the right place at the right time to break up Cletus's latest scuffle.

And I wouldn't have time over the weekend. I had a shift at the mill all day Saturday and I'd promised to spend Sunday helping Samantha's father rebuild the engine of his hobby car. That left no time for me to fumble my way through fence repairs.

As my attention continued to move over the old house, a gnawing unease settled low in the pit of my stomach. This place needed work, and not the kind of work I was skilled enough to do or had a knack for. Cletus and the twins didn't have the temperament for measuring and double-checking. If I gave them hammers, they'd turn into woodpeckers.

I did have the temperament, but I didn't know what the hell I was doing and rarely had the time to read up on structural house repair. There were only so many hours in the day.

Aside from Roscoe—who was still just a kid, so the jury was still out on him—the simple truth was that the rest of us were good with fixing

machinery, but crap at most handy work.

Well, all of us except my older brother, Jet. Problem was, he was shit at everything else, including being a decent person. And I'd sworn after he left us never to ask him for anything.

I ripped my stare from the sagging gutter and the rotted porch beams. Allowing myself to get frustrated at the state of the house was wasted energy. Instead, I scanned the yard. That did nothing to improve my mood. Duane and Beau were in the process of ripping apart an old tractor and various mechanical parts littered the grass. I'd asked them to pick their mess up maybe a hundred times, but I wasn't asking anymore.

I needed them to listen to me about waking up each morning and going to school, doing their homework, being respectful to their elders, and not causing mischief. Bits of machinery in the yard, making the house look crummy from the road was something I could deal with if they stayed out of trouble.

Well, stayed out of *serious* trouble, that is. Those two couldn't stay out of trouble if trouble were a mountain surrounded by a twelve-foot electric fence and guard dogs. Even then, they'd still find a way to fall on top of it.

"Another lie then? That's what we're doing?" I asked, allowing my voice to communicate the weariness I felt. Never mind the fact that I'd come to the same conclusion. I couldn't handle seeing heartbreak on my momma's face, and I'd do—and have done—just about anything to keep her from hurt.

Cletus had the decency to squirm in his seat. "Lie is such an ugly word. I prefer fiction."

"A lie."

"A story."

"A lie."

"A story. One that'll delight and entertain."

"Oh. I see." I nodded. "So, a lie?"

Cletus huffed. "You know what your problem is, big brother?"

Darrell Winston's prolific sperm.

"You need to lighten up."

Placing my truck in park, I pressed down on the emergency brake and twisted at the waist to face my brother and his absurdity.

"Lighten up," I repeated flatly.

"That's right. I mean, take for example this ride home. Not once did you ask me who won the fight."

"I don't need to ask, Cletus. I was there."

"And another thing, it's about to snow inside the car and you're driving without the heat on. Your heat broken? Or do you just not notice that I'm freezing my balls off? Do you even feel cold?" His voice cracked at the end of his sentence, reminding me that he was just fifteen. Just a kid.

Once more, I gritted my teeth. "I feel the cold Cletus. But turning the heat on wastes gas." Every single one of my paychecks went toward saving for college. Every single one. Momma gave me money for gas, groceries, and such out of her meager paycheck, and I wasn't wasting her money just to make my delinquent-minded kid brother more comfortable on his ride home after picking a fight with Prince Fucking King.

"Then you should get a more fuel-efficient mode of transportation, so you don't freeze me to death. Think how that would look. What would Momma say if you delivered me home safe and sound, with the rigor mortis?"

"Rigor mortis?" I didn't smile, but I wanted to. Despite being a pain in my ass, Cletus cracked me up.

"That's right. Rigor mortis. You know, the dead people."

"Where'd you hear about rigor mortis?"

"I didn't hear, I read. You know how I'm a fan of books? Well, they teach me all this nifty information about the world."

That was true. Everywhere he positioned himself in the house was surrounded by books: his bed, Grandma Oliver's chair, his spot at the dining table, the bathroom. He was like Pig-Pen from Charlie Brown, but rather than dust it was books. Ashley was this way as well, but with fiction instead of history, biographies, encyclopedias, and manuals.

"You need a different car." His tone was sullen and he glanced around the cab with distaste. "This rusted piece of junk doesn't suit you."

Now he was just being rude. "Yeah. Okay. You're right. Let's just go down to the dealership and buy a new car. Can I borrow some money, though?"

Cletus gave me a funny look. "No, you may not."

"Well, in that case, we're outta luck." I made an aw-shucks sound and shrugged. "I don't know if you're aware of this, Cletus, but cars cost money."

Even beneath his bloodied face, I could see his expression turn mean, which was why I wasn't terribly surprised when he said, "Not all cars. You could ask Jethro to—"

"Get out of the truck, Cletus. Just, get out." *That's it.* I'd officially reached the end of my rope with him. He knew better than to bring up our oldest brother, nothing made me madder.

Darrell, our daddy, was a cross to bear, and his motorcycle club, the Iron Wraiths, were a thorn in my side. That's all. I didn't give two shits about either of them.

But Jet? He was the only person in the world I hated. I hated him so much, I couldn't think, I could barely breathe with how it choked me, because Jet was Judas the Betrayer. He'd chosen thirty silver coins over us, over me and Momma and the rest of us, and for what? A leather jacket with a sewn-on patch? A brotherhood of degenerates? The approval of our father?

Jethro cared about exactly three people: himself, our daddy, and last I heard, his best friend growing up and everyone in town's favorite person, the pretentiously perfect Ben McClure. And that's it.

Well, good riddance.

I shoved open the driver's side door and stepped out, my shoes crunching on the icy grass, the frigid air doing good things to cool my temper. It hadn't snowed, but it was threatening. Early November wasn't typically the season for snowfall. However, this year had been especially cold. I'd already had to fix the old furnace in the basement two times since September.

Cletus also exited the truck, grabbing his backpack from the back seat and struggling to fit it over his shoulder. From the look of things, he'd done something to his arm, and it hurt. My brother may only have been fifteen, but he was already big and bulky, but not quite six feet. I sent a prayer of thanks that he'd finally grown to look more like a man. When he was little, his blond curls and pretty eyes hadn't been a good combination with his hair-trigger temper.

Giving up on his backpack, he let it hang at his side and came over to where I was, his expression still mean. I could tell he planned to finish his earlier thought and I readied myself.

"I don't see why you won't consider a loaner from Jet."

I swear. Cletus just never knew when to quit.

Glaring at my little brother, I bit my tongue instead of throttling him. He had all the appearance of being in earnest, asking me to *seriously* consider taking one of Jet's stolen cars and calling it my own.

"You know why," I said, looking away from him, my tone gruffer than I'd intended.

Where had I failed Cletus? And when? How could he not see how wrong that was? How could he justify it enough to ask it?

"You know he doesn't steal from—"

I spun on my little brother, for the first time since I'd separated him from Prince King after practice. I masked nothing of my thoughts, letting him see how bitterly disappointed I was, how angry, how infuriated.

"Now you listen to me. Don't you ever, ever ask me that kind of question again, you got it? You already know stealing from folks ain't right. We are not those people. Jet made his decision, and that's on him. But you, me, Ashley, the twins, Roscoe, we're better than that. There is no gray, there is only black and white. You don't take something that belongs to someone else. There ain't enough justification in the world for thievery. You want something, you work for it. You earn it. You got it?"

Cletus returned my glare, but I could tell his mind was working, looking for loopholes, ways to rationalize doing what he wanted. I had to turn away again before he could see my disgust.

This.

This impulse to take what we wanted, because we wanted it, this was our daddy. Honestly? Seeing it in my siblings made me love them a little less, made my cares feel heavier. Pointless. And not for the first or even the millionth time, I cursed the blood in my veins. Everything Darrell Winston touched, he ruined, made ugly. And part of him made up part of me.

I cringed at the thought. God. I couldn't wait to leave for college. *Just one and a half more years.* I could not wait.

Slamming the truck door, I marched away from Cletus, grumbling, "What is it going to take for you to choose right over wrong?"

"Right and wrong isn't always black and white, Billy," Cletus grumbled in return, but he did sound chastised, an edge of repentance in his tone. "But I see your point, and I accept it as valid. I won't bring up Jet's cars again."

Finally, I wanted to say. Finally, I'd gotten through to him on something. I'd take the victory.

Cletus's dog greeted us on the front step, wagging her tail at the sight of my brother. The animal stood from a collection of blankets under the

broken chains of the wooden swing, stretched, and walked over to me first. Head bowed, she nudged my knee, giving me a look that seemed cautious.

I patted its head. "Why does your dog always look at me like it's afraid?"

"It's 'cause you're the alpha and she wants your approval. Come here, girl. Come here."

With one more wary glance, the dog moved past me and to Cletus, meeting him with exuberance markedly different from the reserved, half-hearted greeting I'd received.

"Alpha," I snorted, shaking my head.

"Pack mentality is key to canine survival. You're the alpha, so she doesn't want to do anything to piss you off. It's a sign of respect."

"Looking at me with fear is a sign of respect?" I asked flatly, pulling my keys from my back pocket while I made a mental list of everyone's whereabouts.

Ashley walked over to pick up Beau and Duane from their middle school every day—sometimes with Cletus, sometimes not—while I either went to football practice or work. Then she'd walk the twins to the library, where our momma was an assistant librarian. By now, they were all likely on their way home.

Roscoe was over at the Paytons', which is where he went every day after school unless it was Momma's day off, then Simone Payton and Roscoe rode their bikes here. I glanced over my shoulder as I fit the key into the lock, searching for my littlest brother's bike. He always forgot to put it in the Quonset hut, so he typically left it on the front lawn until he used it again the next morning.

Spotting no bike, I made a mental note to call the Paytons, and I returned my attention to the door. I twisted the lock, but in the next moment the doorknob was yanked out of my hand by someone opening the door from the inside.

"Hey. There you are. What're y'all having for dinner? I'm starving."

Before I could react to the sight of my prodigal brother—or his question—he turned away and marched back inside, calling back at us, "Where's the beer? I can't find any."

What the . . . ?

I thought I was too tired to be angry.

I wasn't.

Fury pounded between my temples and wrapped around my lungs like a vise, squeezing, suffocating.

"Wait, Billy—wait," Cletus said, sounding faraway.

But I paid him no mind. I was already in the house, mindlessly marching into the kitchen, and grabbing my older brother's arm. Whipping him around, I punched him in the stomach.

He bent over, holding his middle, wheezing, coughing, and laughing. "Well, hello to you too, Billy."

The bastard sounded cheerful.

Grabbing him by the collar of his precious leather jacket, I pulled Jet away from the fridge and to the back door. It was unlocked, and of course it was. That's how he must've gotten in. *Or he picked the lock.*

Opening the door and the screen to the back porch, I shoved him out of the house like the garbage he was. "Get out and stay out."

He was still laughing, still holding his stomach. "Okay, okay. It's gunna be that way, huh?" he asked, straightening, rubbing the spot where my fist had landed earlier. "Should I wait out here for dinner? You gunna bring it to me, then? Are we having a picnic?"

"Leave."

"All right." Jet raised his hands, like he surrendered. "I see you've had a trying day. What happened? Someone molest your balls at practice?"

I started forward while Jet laughed at his own joke. He had the good sense to retreat, descending the porch stairs with swagger and ease like he

had eyes in the back of his head. "Cool down, Billy. I'm just here for a while. I wanted to—"

"Leave."

He gave me a patient smile. "Will you listen?"

Listen? *Listen*? What could he possibly say that was worth listening to?

We were both off the porch now, standing in the frozen stretch of dead wildflowers and grass. The tall trees of the forest at the edge of our field reached to the sky behind him, brown and gray with spots of yellow and purple, the last of the fall leaves clinging to the branches. The sky above was more gray than blue even though the sun hadn't quite set. The air looked cold.

Cletus had asked earlier if I could feel the cold anymore, I'd scoffed at the question then, but he wasn't too far off the mark. I hadn't been cold in the truck and I didn't feel the cold now.

"I don't care to listen to anything you have to say, and I want you gone before Momma gets home with the kids. Go."

Jet's easy expression wavered at the mention of Momma. "I think I'll wait and see what she has to say about me joining y'all for dinner."

"Why are you even here?" This question came from Cletus, standing somewhere behind me. From the sound of it, he was at the back door. "You know Billy moved all your stuff to the garage. You're lucky he didn't burn it. If you want something, get it from there."

Fury's grip around my lungs eased at Cletus's belligerent tone. He might question me in private, pushing my buttons and testing boundaries, but I could always count on him to have my back in public, especially with Jethro or our father.

Jet's attention lifted over my head, settled on Cletus, softened. "Oh, hey there, Cletus. How you doing? How's school? And what happened to your face?"

"Jet, it's nice to see you're still alive and all, but don't pretend you're interested in how school is going or how I'm doing."

"Now, Cletus. That's not—"

"Save us both from the indignity of pretense and get to the point." I could almost picture Cletus's single eyebrow lift over his mix of blue-green eyes. "What do you want? You look like shit."

My vision cleared somewhat at Cletus's words, no longer red about the corners, and I looked at my older brother. I didn't like that I immediately noticed how skinny he was. Jethro coughed then, a wracking cough that shook his entire form. His cheeks were sunk, and the skin around his eyes looked paper thin. He was obviously sick.

Dammit.

I pushed my hand through my hair, warring with automatic worry for my stupid brother. Seeing him like this made my chest hurt. Now I was frustrated with myself for still caring about him at all.

This was why I hated Jet. My brother had this effect on me, made me doubt what I knew to be true. Fact, Jet left us. Fact, he didn't care about us. Fact, he only came back when he wanted something. Fact, I couldn't trust him. I shouldn't care that he looked about ready to keel over.

And yet . . .

It hadn't always been this way. He hadn't always been untrustworthy. We'd been close.

And then he left, like you were nothing.

Finally finished coughing, the side of his mouth curved up. His lips were bluish purple.

"Would you believe me if I said I didn't want anything?"

"Nope," came Cletus's reply followed by the sound of his shoes on the wooden boards of the porch. "You look like death, and death always wants something. Try again."

Our brother grinned weakly. “‘Death always wants something.’ Ain’t that the truth. I have missed you, Cletus.” Jet’s gaze slid back to mine and he stuffed his hands in his pockets, seeming to study my face. Then he sighed. I could hear his chest rattle with the exhale. "Listen, I'm honestly not here to cause trouble—"

"Then leave," I said, even as I fought the urge to bring him inside and out of the cold.

There’d been a time, when I was just seven, that he’d made me chicken soup and read to me when I was sick. The soup had been microwaved out of a can and the book he read had been a manual on motorcycle maintenance, but still. He’d been there.

And that was the problem. He’d always been there. I’d relied on him. I had thousands of stories and memories of times Jet had been my confidant, my co-conspirator, my best friend.

Until he wasn’t.

"I just wanted to see y'all." He shrugged, his shoulders slumping. "I thought maybe you’d like to see me?"

"No. Leave." I had to be strong, because as much as part of me wanted to believe him, I knew he couldn’t be trusted. Every inch of giving with Jet ended up being a hundred miles of taking.

A hint of irritation turned his friendly expression brittle. "Really, Billy? You get to decide when I see my family?"

I took a step forward, but a hand settled on my shoulder, keeping me in place.

"How about this." Cletus stepped in front of me, using a deep voice that sounded forty years older than his age. "You go on, do what you do, and I promise to tell Momma you stopped by. You want to see her? You know she's at the library every day starting at ten. You go see her there. Take her out to lunch. She'd love it."

"And Ash? The twins? What about Roscoe?"

Cletus shook his head. “That’s up to Momma to decide. You don’t get to decide for her by showing up here out of the blue after being gone for months. That’s exactly what Darrell used to do and I’m with Billy on this one. It ain’t right.”

Jet frowned, his glassy gaze turning thoughtful, and he nodded. “All right. Fair enough. But you promise to tell her I was here.” He pointed at Cletus.

“I will. You have my word.”

“Fine.” Jet glanced around the ground, like he was looking for something. “I’ll be going, then. Oh, just one more thing.” Lifting his eyes, a smirk on his face, he addressed his next statement to me. “Saw your game last week, Billy. You weren’t half bad. And that brunette cheerleader I saw you with? She your girlfriend?”

I said nothing, gave him nothing, because I could sense what he wanted was a reaction. I’d pissed him off, not letting him in the house, and now he was lashing out in return.

“A year ahead of you, right? Already eighteen, *legal*. She’s a senior?”

Cletus sucked in a breath between his teeth. “Jet, come on now. Time to go.”

“I might look her up,” he continued, still smirking as he took two steps backward, obviously reading the hostility in my glare. “She’s got pretty eyes. Are they green? Or blue?”

Predictably, my temper was threadbare. Yeah, Samantha was my girlfriend now. And yes, she was older than me, already eighteen. But this act of Jethro’s was bullshit. Jethro knew Sam already because she dated Ben McClure all last year.

It wasn’t Jethro’s trash-talking that had my temper flaring so fast, not really. It wasn’t even about Samantha. Samantha could have been any girl. It was that he would never—never ever, not once in a million years—talk

about a girl this way if she was with Ben. He'd be respectful, because what Ben thought mattered to him.

But me? His own brother? There weren't any insults off-limits. Another reminder that Jet cared for himself, and for Ben, and for some other random folks maybe, just not his family. And that arrow hit its mark. *That* was my sore spot.

My older brother whistled. "She sure is one sweet piece of ass."

"You don't talk to her." My voice was sandpaper, promising violence, and I knew as soon as I spoke that speaking at all was a mistake.

Jethro's mouth hitched on one side, and in the moment, I became obsessed with smashing his face until his mouth became indistinguishable from his bruises.

"Oh yeah? What will you do if I talk to her? It's a free country."

I took a step back as the image of demolishing my brother's face crystalized in my mind. Sometimes the viciousness of my thoughts scared me, and I knew fear was one of the main things stopping me from becoming what he was, what my father was. Fear and disgust.

"Nothing? You won't do nothing?" he taunted, his smile spreading. "What about if I fuck—"

"Jethro!" Cletus stepped fully in front of me, hollering at the top of his lungs. "Would you just leave already."

But it was too late. I'd already moved around my little brother, not caring, not afraid, past disgust, just intent on one thing. And if that made me like my father, then so be it.

CHAPTER THREE

BILLY

“The things we regret and the things we yearn for. That's what makes us who we are.”

— WILL FERGUSON, HAPPINESS

I knew better.

I knew better than to get pissed at Jethro. There was no point with him, he was never going to change. I knew better than to chase him into the woods behind our house, and I cursed my blindness, both the losing of my temper and my lack of direction when surrounded by trees.

Jethro knew this about me. He used to joke I was a city boy born in the country. Now I wasn't only pissed, I was also lost.

These miserable woods.

I hated them. I hated that everything looked the same. I hated every piece of bark, every branch, every leaf. Some people considered this part of the world beautiful, but I didn't. I hated the Smokies, the blue and white mist that clouded everything, covered everything. Suffocated everything.

And now I was stuck in them.

I punched a bush. That did not end well for me. In fact, it ended with me face-first in the bush and wrestling with leaves and thin branches on the

ground as I struggled to stand. But I did stand, telling myself to hit a tree trunk instead.

The last time I'd been stuck in the woods I'd been just a kid, chasing an unsteady baby Roscoe past the tree line while Ashley tried to talk the twins into a bath. Our momma had been indisposed after a visit from our father.

For those of you who don't know, indisposed was just a polite southern word for having bruises that needed tending to.

That particular time, Cletus had been the reason for our father's rage, and he'd been locked in the basement for his own safety under the guise of punishment. Jethro had held me back, stopping me from doing anything by threatening to put me in the basement with Cletus. My older brother intervened—in his own way—before Darrell did too much damage to our mother, distracting and charming our father enough to get him to stop. He then convinced Darrell to go to the club with him, which left Ashley and I to watch everybody as a dark cloud of despair and futility settled over everything.

Just a typical Saturday at the Winston house.

I'd followed Roscoe into the woods, and then he'd led us both out because I'd been useless. All these years later, I could've used a toddler Roscoe to help me out of this godforsaken wilderness.

Catching my breath from the brawl with the bush, I glanced to my left, pretty sure I'd come from that direction. I searched the ground for footprints. All I saw were leaves and sticks and dirt.

This day. This shitshow of a day. I still had homework and chores to do. And Roscoe was probably wondering where I was. I needed to get out of here. I didn't have time for—

I tensed, holding stock still, and listened.

A sound rose above the disorienting noise of the forest. It was a person, singing, loud and clear. A woman, and her voice was beautiful.

"Is that . . ." Guns N' Roses?

It was Guns N' Roses. This angelic female voice was singing "November Rain." I took an automatic step toward the sound.

Laughing a smidge at the unexpected absurdity—that there was some woman out there who'd chosen to unleash her angelic voice on these hellish woods by singing Guns N' Roses like they were choir songs—my feet were already moving toward the sound. A moment later, my brain caught up and told me she, whoever *she* was, should be able to help me find my way out of here.

Also, I found myself sneaking, which made no sense. "Don't scare the woman by sneaking up on her. Make some noise, announce yourself," I whispered. To myself.

I continued to sneak.

The song was much closer now, and if I strained my ears, I could hear the faint sounds of her moving around. I also smelled and heard a fire.

The ground raised upward, and I followed the incline, breaching the crest just as she finished the last lines of her song. I halted, squinting through the branches of the trees and shrubs, and spotted a blue tent as well as what looked like a clothesline strung between two trunks. But I didn't see her . . .

And then she started to sing again, another Guns N' Roses tune. This time "The Garden." A breath pushed out of my lungs at her song choice, and how she made it sound like a sacred ballad.

I was just about to take another step forward when I heard the zipper of a tent. Rocking back on my heels, I reasoned against the impulse to shrink back and just listen to her sing for a bit. And that was crazy. Also crazy, I was still lost in the woods and should've been spitting mad at my brother. But I wasn't.

Holding my breath as the tent rustled, the beautiful voice clearer now, I caught a flash of hair, red as a firecracker. At the sight, the forest floor beneath my feet seemed to sway and then fall away. I reached out and held

onto the tree trunk at my left, because I knew who this woman—girl—was. I'd know that hair anywhere.

Momentarily paralyzed, I watched Scarlet's pale, freckled hands reach out and tug on the stiff clothes hung over the makeshift clothesline. My eyes dropped to her back. She was wrapped in a blanket and it looked familiar, like one my Grandma Oliver used to stitch by the fire in her old chair, the pieces cut from worn-out clothes.

I worked to hear past the rushing of blood between my ears, the jumbled disorder made it difficult to concentrate on just one thought.

I had no idea she could sing like that.

What the hell is she doing? Tent camping? It's winter, for Christ's sake. She's liable to catch pneumonia and die.

That's an unusually high and flat stretch of land she has her campsite on, it certainly would make an ideal plot to build a cabin.

Shaking my head at this last notion, my neck craned as I reflexively tracked her movements. She pulled a rigid pair of jeans from the clothesline, still singing with a voice like a siren, and then seemed to test the dryness of a big Texas A&M sweatshirt. It was the sight of the A&M logo that brought me to my senses.

For the record, I wasn't an A&M fan, but that didn't mean I'd turn down any scholarship from any school that got me where I wanted to go. Point being, I'd go to Texas A&M, I'd prefer Princeton, but I'd go to Texas A&M if need be. *Whatever it takes.*

Back to now, and Scarlet, and her remarkable voice, but mostly it being winter. I should be irritated about finding her squatting on land so close to our house. We didn't need her kind of trouble. Every single one of my decisions and actions since before I could remember was about avoiding the kind of trouble she and her kind brought.

But I wanted to listen longer. It was a silly desire that made no sense. She'd intruded. She wasn't welcome, angelic voice or not.

Remembering myself, I straightened my spine. Marching straight forward and onto her campsite.

"Scarlet, what do you think you're—"

I didn't get a chance to finish my poorly assembled protest because, without even turning, Scarlet dropped the jeans, let the blanket fall from her shoulders, and bolted.

It took me a split second to realize what she'd done and another after that to force my feet to follow.

This day. *This fucking day.*

What else could I do? I chased after her because . . .

Well, because . . .

Because she shouldn't be here! Yeah. That's why.

A streak of red hair between trees was blessedly easy to track, much easier than Jethro's long legs. That bastard has always been quick as lightening. Scarlet was short, her legs not nearly as long as Jet's, but she was surprisingly fast. Not faster than me, but still. It was a good thing I never missed a football practice. The sprints were paying off.

Damn, she'd make a great receiver, though. She's got good moves.

After longer than I'd like to admit, I caught up to her, and brought her to a sudden stop with a hand around her arm. She nearly yanked her shoulder out of its socket trying to pull away, so I grabbed her other arm and tugged her close.

"Hey, would you calm down. I'm not going to—"

Without looking up, she kneed me right in the balls, and out of all the things that I'd witnessed about her over the last several minutes, that was the only thing I should've seen coming.

"Jesus H. Christ." I let her go, wincing, winded, the air leaving my body along with a piece of my soul.

Fucking hell, that hurt.

"Leave me alone! I—I . . . Billy?"

Ah.

Damn.

I just wanted to die.

“What the—Billy Winston. What are you doing out here?” She hesitated where she stood. But then she knelt on the ground next to me, her hands hovering over my body but not touching.

“Just—just put me out of my misery,” I spoke to no one, hoping somehow that bush I’d punched earlier would lend me a thin branch so I could strangle myself.

“Come on now, it can’t be that bad.” She placed her hands on her hips, reprimanding me, but also sounding winded.

I glared at her. Surely, death would be preferable to the intensity of pain I was experiencing. It was . . . indescribable. Unfathomable.

She glared back, her eyebrows lifting a notch as she fitted her lips between her teeth. It became clear a second later she was trying not to laugh as I writhed on the ground. After several minutes, Scarlet reached out her hand.

I moved my glare to it, suddenly reminded of that day last week when I’d accidentally knocked her down coming out of the men’s room. I’d offered her my hand then and she’d acted like it was poison. I suspected it was because she didn’t want anyone to see us together. The Wraith kids didn’t fare well if they were seen interacting with outsiders. I wasn’t exactly an outsider, but still. I understood.

Then, not five minutes later, she came walking out of the back hall and into the cafeteria, being pulled around by Ben McClure. Predictably, that had caused quite a stir. It was all the gossips at school had talked about for the last week, and though I was tired of hearing about it, I was also irritated no one seemed to be talking about the real issue.

What Ben McClure had done—pulling her through the cafeteria for everyone to see—had been monumentally stupid and reckless. That kind of

thing would get back to her father, and he wouldn't like it. I didn't know Razor except for glimpses I'd caught of him at Wraith picnics and such when I was a kid, but I remember being convinced he was the boogeyman. He was the most terrifying bastard I'd ever laid eyes on.

And yet, this was typical Big Ben McClure. Taking what he wanted, whenever he wanted, and not thinking about the ramifications to anyone but himself. He'd always been dense and selfish.

I rolled away, deciding to stand on my own. Besides, Scarlet was significantly smaller than me. Her offering a hand to help me up was like when toddler Roscoe offered to help me paint the library.

I made it to my hands and knees, then my knees, then one foot, contemplating death the entire way to standing.

Scarlet stood too, wrapping her arms around herself and eyeing me with a wary expression that reminded me of Cletus's dog. "I thought you hated the woods." Her voice was soft, and for the first time since knowing her, I heard the musical quality of it. She really had a remarkable voice.

"I do hate the woods." I glanced over my shoulder, again uncertain from which direction we'd come. *Frustrating*.

"Then why are you *in the woods*?"

Sliding my eyes back to her, I took a moment to inspect Scarlet St. Claire. The first thing I noticed—likely because I was a teenage boy—was that this Scarlet didn't look much like herself anymore. But then, when was the last time I'd taken the time or had the inclination to look at her?

Scarlet and I had, on more than one occasion, played together as kids. Though *play* might not be the right word for it. *Bicker* is more accurate.

Presently, all of that seemed like a long time ago, because Scarlet definitely didn't look like the Scarlet I remembered. Yeah, she still had her freckles and red hair, her light blue eyes, and her big old bossy mouth. But she was—what? Fourteen now? And she was one of those girls whose body looked older than her age.

Waiting for me to answer, she held herself tighter and shivered under my inspection. And that's when I realized she was in a tank top and leggings—great for showing off her body, horrible for protecting against an uncommonly cold winter.

Ignoring her question, I asked, “What are *you* doing out here?” Cursing under my breath, I pulled off my coat and shoved it at her. “Take this.”

The redhead twisted away, dismissing my offer of warmth. “It's none of your business what I'm doing, Billy Winston.” She still sounded winded, and with one last glare, she walked past me.

Scowling, I followed, knowing I'd have to ask her help to get out of here. For the time being I would have to follow, and following wasn't something I particularly enjoyed doing.

“Fine.” I trailed after her, not sure what to do with my jacket. I didn't want to put it back on, not when she was obviously freezing. It didn't seem right.

Abruptly, she stopped and spun on me, her eyes crinkled and shooting fire. “You don't own these lands and I'm allowed to camp wherever I please.”

She was wrong. Our property did extend back this far, or I was pretty sure it did. But I was tired of fighting—with Cletus, with Jet—and I needed to get home.

So rather than tell her she was wrong, I said, “Whatever.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You're not angry I've set up camp here?”

I didn't want to lie and say everything was hunky dory, but I needed her help. Her daddy, Razor Dennings, was the president of my father's MC club. Her momma was Razor's old lady, Christine St. Claire. That made Scarlet Razor's only semi-legitimate offspring. Razor had other kids, but none that he'd officially claimed.

The point was, her parents being who they were made her a dangerous person to know or associate with. I knew she and Cletus were friendly, and

I'd warned him against the association more than once, but then he was always picking up strays.

I deflected with a question of my own. "Who'd you think I was? When I came into your camp?"

Scarlet lifted her chin. "I thought you were your daddy."

I felt my eyes narrow, my mouth curve downward. "You thought I was Darrell?"

She gave me a cagey look. "Y'all have many similarities."

"You mean I look just like him." I hated the rising emotion clogging my throat as I thought and said these words. I beat it back.

"That, and how you're both—" Scarlet frowned, stopping midthought. She turned abruptly and began walking again.

I fell in step beside her. "And how we're both what?"

"Uh, nothing." Scarlet lifted her chin, clearly fighting a shiver, and seemed to inspect me out of the corner of her eye.

I set my jacket on her shoulders, unable to stand her shivering any longer. "No. Not nothing. You were saying, *and how you're both* what?"

Usually, I wouldn't take the bait. Usually. But something about her voice, the quickness of her frown just now, and mostly that she'd known me her whole life and yet wouldn't take my hand when offered last week had me pushing to know her thoughts.

Scarlet stopped, huffing, pushing my jacket off. I reached forward before she could and tugged the edges firmly together, buttoning the top button, then the one lower down. "Just take the damn jacket. Watching you shiver and turn blue is making me cold."

That was true. I wasn't cold in the car with Cletus, or standing outside with Jet, but something about her shivering made my bones ache.

Watching me warily, like I couldn't be trusted and my honest concern was some sort of trick, she slowly fit her hands through the arms of my coat. "Well now. I wouldn't want you to be uncomfortable," she said firmly.

I lowered my eyelids by half at her statement, like she was the one doing me a favor by taking my jacket. *Whatever.*

“Just finish your sentence. What else do Darrell and I have in common?”

Taking a deep breath, she seemed to lean away, shift her weight backward as we stared at each other. “Just forget it.”

“No. Tell me.” My voice came out gentle, a hint of pleading there. But that was no matter. Perverse or not, I truly wanted to know how I was like my father. *So I can fix it, change it, be better.*

Scarlet’s lashes flickered and the hard, stubborn set of her jaw relaxed, just a little. “I was going to say, that you look like him, yeah. But also, you’re both real good at making folks feel their, uh, position.”

“Feel their position?” I searched her eyes and then her face, like I might find the meaning to her words written there.

“You know, their standing. Their pecking order. Whatever you want to call it.” She tucked the bottom half of her face inside my jacket, warming her nose while she watched me watch her.

Feel their position.

Their standing.

Their pecking order.

Mystified, I squinted at her. “Are you calling me a snob?”

Her red eyebrows lifted, and she shrugged. Turning on her heel, she walked away. I stared at the spot where she’d been standing, and then I turned my head and stared at her back, wearing *my* jacket. Shaking myself, I jogged after her until we were mostly side by side again.

“That’s nonsense.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her shrug again, like she didn’t care whether or not I believed her. I grit my teeth.

“Darrell is a snob? Really?”

She nodded. “Yep. A big snob, actually. You’ve seen him at the club when we were kids, correcting folks’ English, speaking over their heads, making jokes at their expense and they have no idea. Your daddy is smart—real smart—better at most everything than anyone else in the club, and he doesn’t let anyone forget it. You know how often he brings up that he married your momma? That he’s better than everyone, more cultured? All the time. Everyone else is dirt and he’s a king.”

My tongue tasted bitter, because her words rang true. Darrell was like that with us before Momma separated from him. *Superior* is what Duane called it. And one of the main reasons Darrell disliked Cletus so much was because Cletus knew more than him and would correct *him*.

Nothing aggravated Darrell more than a person who was stronger, smarter, better-looking, more charismatic, more respected. *More feared*.

But I wasn’t like that.

Shoving my hands in my jeans pockets, I conceded, “Yeah, that’s Darrell. But that’s not me.”

I glanced at Scarlet just in time to see a small smile claim her face before she hid it. She said nothing, but the smile was enough to communicate her thoughts loud and clear.

“I’m not like that.”

“Whatever, Billy.”

Frowning, because *whatever* was what I said to Cletus when he ranted, or Duane when he was moody, or Beau when he had a crazy idea. No one said *whatever* to me.

“I’m not, Scarlet.” Breathing out my frustration, I stopped her again with a light hand at her elbow. “Maybe you just don’t know me.”

“Sure. Maybe.” Another quick smile as she peered up at me, there and hidden. Her gaze grew less wary and more candid. “But why would I know you? You’re Billy Winston. You’re a straight-A student, star quarterback of the football team, grandson of the illustrious John Oliver, destined for

greatness, the envy of all who know you. You're a king. And everyone else . . .?" She shrugged again, and this time when she smiled, she let me see it. "Sound familiar?"

"I don't brag." I frowned severely, her words making me defensive, uncomfortable. *She doesn't even know me.*

. . . *But why would she?*

"You don't need to brag." Her smile widened and she looked at me like I was funny. Again, she turned, leading the way back to the camp and not waiting for me to follow. "That's the difference between you and Darrell. He brags 'cause he ain't so certain. His superiority is questionable, even to him."

I walked behind her as she chattered on, each of her words reaching me just fine.

"But you? You're certain. You don't even think about it. It's just who you are. So, no. You don't brag. Because, why would you?"

I didn't know which part of her claims to dispute first, it was all such nonsense. I was certain? Certain of what? Certain I was making a mess of everything? Certain I never had enough time to get everything that needed being done finished? Certain I lacked the knowledge and skill required to keep our house from falling apart?

I wasn't certain. I was . . . drowning. And I almost said so. In fact, it was on the tip of my tongue as I followed her wordlessly through the woods.

I'm drowning. Everything is falling apart. Help me.

Instead, I pressed my lips together and rubbed my forehead, because asking Scarlet for help would truly be nonsense. We didn't know each other, not anymore. And how exactly could she help? She was homeless for all intents and purposes.

And why was that? Why was she out here instead of at home? And how did she get Grandma's blanket? And why was I talking to her or giving her

opinion any weight? And why, until moments ago, was she someone I never wanted to know?

This last question was easy, and it had nothing to do with me being superior like Darrell and everything to do with keeping my family safe.

And yet, she couldn't help who her parents were any more than I could.

. . . Do you want to know her now?

Glowering at the ground, I shook my head. Nothing had changed. I didn't want to know her and that didn't make me a snob. I wasn't a snob. I was confused, that's all. Tired and confused. I'd say I needed to go on a run, clear my head, except I'd already run three miles today during practice.

No. I didn't want to know her. But I still needed to get out of these woods, which meant I would have to ask her for help. And once I was out, I'd talk to Momma about Scarlet's camp, see if she could . . . I don't know. Relocate her? Maybe get her in a shelter or something? There had to be something we could do to help. It was too cold for anyone to be sleeping in a tent.

"Here we are."

I looked up, expecting to see Scarlet's campsite, but was instead greeted by the end of the tree line, dead wildflowers, grass, and my family's home in the distance.

"We're at our field," I said and thought.

"That's right. I figured you didn't want to camp with me, so I walked you home."

I turned to her, searching her upturned face for . . . something. But there wasn't anything. No problems for me to solve, no expectations for me to live up to (or down to). Nothing. Just Scarlet and her light blue eyes, freckles, and big old bossy mouth.

She met my stare directly, her features impassive. After a long moment, she stuck out her hand, giving me a small smile. It was genuine enough, but it wasn't exactly friendly.

Inhaling, coming to myself, I looked from her hand to her face, taking the offered fingers. As my palm slid against hers, I stiffened at the little shock of electricity that passed from her to me, or from me to her, impossible to tell the direction. It was cold and dry. Little static shocks weren't common, but they weren't unusual either.

"Goodbye, Billy," she said, holding my stare as our hands were held suspended between us, not moving. "Have a nice life."

My eyes narrowed at the finality of her words and I felt the side of my mouth kick up a smidge. "I'll see you at school, Scarlet."

Her smile widened, like I amused her, but it still lacked any trace of friendliness. "No you won't." She withdrew her hand.

With that, she turned and walked back into the woods.

For some reason, I watched her go. I tracked her red hair until she was indistinguishable from the trees and bushes and grays and browns. Only then, when she'd disappeared, did I turn from the forest and make my way across the barren field for home. Tired, spent, her words still irritated me. But at the same time, I also felt strangely peaceful. Calm instead of just faking it.

She really does have an amazing singing voice. I wonder if she's had lessons.

I doubted it. My sister had a pretty voice, but Scarlet's was something else. Something more. It was angelic for sure, but in a wild sort of way. *Robust* was the word that came to mind. *Someone should give her lessons.*

I knew how to play the guitar. I'd taught myself in eighth grade so our momma wouldn't make me dance. I played the guitar and sang while she forced Cletus and Beau and Duane to stand up with both her and Ashley. Roscoe got out of it only because he was still short. But when he grew up, I reckoned our momma would make him dance with her as well.

Oddly, I had the sudden urge to pick up my guitar tonight. I still had homework to do, chores, needed to check on Roscoe, make sure Cletus's

face was cleaned up, see if Ashley survived her time with the twins. But I'd find the time. *Maybe I'll ask Ash to sing with me.*

Yeah. I'd ask Ash. We'd sing, I'd play, and Momma and Duane would dance. He acted like he hated it, but I suspected he loved dancing. Out of all of us, he was the best.

Things settled, I gathered one more bracing breath of the winter twilight and jogged the last few feet to the house. It wasn't until I was climbing the back porch steps that I realized Scarlet still had my jacket.

CHAPTER FOUR

SCARLET

“Certainly no one has ever died of an unrequited passion—it’s usually the ones that are requited that get people in trouble.”

— MERCEDES LACKEY, FOUR & TWENTY BLACKBIRDS

“**P**ssst.” I paused shuffling the books within my locker and glanced over my shoulder. *Cletus*.

“Pssst,” he repeated.

Scrunching my nose, I faced him fully—not more than two feet away—and his *pssst*. “What is it?” I used my normal voice.

“Scarlet,” he whispered loudly, like he wasn’t standing right there at my shoulder, and I wasn’t standing right here in front of him.

“I can hear you just fine, Cletus Winston. So stop being a loony and just spit it out.” *And hurry up*. The next bell was about to ring and I needed to get these books out of my bag before the weekend started. No way was I carrying these suckers a mile and a half to the library, and then another five and a half miles in the opposite direction to my tent.

“You want to go to the library after school?” He leaned against the locker next to mine, shoving a mess of unruly hair out of his eyes. “I’ll walk you.” He grinned.

Cletus hardly ever grinned. He wasn't really the grinning sort, which meant Cletus was in an unusually good mood. Further proof, his eyes were bright and glittery, reminding me of Fourth of July sparklers. I could guess why, probably for the same reason I was in such a good mood: Prince King and two of the other Wraith kids had been expelled on Wednesday.

The week hadn't started off so good. It had been fine, but not good. Last weekend, I'd been faced with a quandary, as Cletus liked to say. I had Billy Winston's jacket, but I didn't wish to interact with him if I could help it. Luckily, since it was a letterman jacket, it had his last name written in big letters on the back.

Monday morning, I'd placed it on the counter in the school office and left before anyone saw me, reassuring myself that the school secretary would spot it and make a point of returning the jacket to him. Everyone knew that she and Bethany Winston—Billy's momma—were good friends. It would be a shame when she retired next year.

This cleverness saved me from figuring out how to return the jacket to Billy without just shoving or throwing it at him as we passed each other in the hall. Although, randomly throwing Billy Winston's letterman jacket at him would've been pretty darn funny. Just thinking about it made me laugh. He'd probably look at me like I was crazy. Picturing his typically stoic face all discombobulated—like he was last Friday afternoon—had me laughing harder.

Anyway. Problem solved.

The rest of Monday had been mostly uneventful. I'd walked to my first class and kept my head down as usual. But there was only so much blending in a person could do when they had hair the color of a baboon's ass. Speedwalking around a group of girls, I heard their chatter stop followed by a frenzy of whispers in my wake.

I didn't think it was my imagination. Actually, I was sure it wasn't my imagination. Ever since Ben McClure had pulled me through the cafeteria

by my hand two weeks ago, folks had been whispering whenever they spotted me. I'd hoped it was temporary. I'd hoped they'd forget already. And I hated that my hair made me so recognizable. It was a shame we weren't allowed to wear hats at school.

The chorus room had reopened by Monday, so I ate my lunch in there, squeezing between chairs and out of Mrs. McClure's view. She'd been so nice to me when Ben had brought me to their lunch, I'd been feeling shy around her since. Truly, I would've found another place to eat, but there wasn't anywhere else to go. No matter. I made myself as invisible as possible and perfected eating without making a sound.

Thankfully (but also disturbingly), on Wednesday of this week, Prince King and some of the other Wraith kids caused a stir during gym class and were expelled for good. Something about taking one of the CPR dummies, hanging it by the climbing rope about the neck, and pinning Cletus Winston's name on the shirt. Someone had witnessed the whole thing and ratted them out.

I didn't know who would've dared to turn them over, but I was impressed by the bravery required and whispered a prayer for his or her safety. It goes without saying, whoever it was, they definitely needed to watch their back.

Prince King's mischief and punishment meant that everybody had something new to gossip about, and now I was breathing easier.

Presently, taking a moment to study my . . . well, I guess my *friend* Cletus, I felt my lips twist to the side. "How'd you know I have to go to the library after school?" I had two papers that needed writing and no computer at home. Obviously.

"Oh? You have to go to the library after school? Good. I'll walk you."

"Cletus."

"Or you can walk me, if you prefer."

He always did this, so I said what I always said, “Fine. How about we walk together?”

“That works.” He backed away, pointing at me with both his index fingers, fake whispering again, “I’ll meet you at the west door after school and I’ll bring snacks.”

“Not beef jerky.” I made a face of distaste. He was always bringing beef jerky as a snack and I couldn’t stand it.

“Meat sticks are a fine snack, Scarlet.” Cletus seemed affronted.

“But you keep it in your pocket and it gets warm.” If it wasn’t warm, I would’ve eaten it.

“What do you have against warm meat?”

I glared at him. Now he was being gross. “You are gross.” Boys are gross. *Except Ben.*

He frowned thoughtfully. “Sure, some sticks of meat are more like a meal, and I can understand your reluctance to consume such a large quantity all at once. But you just have to get used to the flavor, and you’ll want it all the time.”

Impulsively, I threw the notebook I was holding at him. “You are gross, and I have no interest in your warm meat stick.”

Turning, he strolled down the hall, calling over his shoulder, “Well if you change your mind, I’ll have it in my pocket for you.”

“Ugh!” I scrunched my face, laughing despite myself and shaking my head.

I hardly saw Cletus, we rarely spoke, probably because I was so good at hiding and he had no desire to. But he always seemed to know when I needed to go to the library to write a paper or do research, and that’s when I saw him. He probably considered himself my bodyguard or something.

Finished with my locker, I shut the door and walked to the notebook I’d tossed at Cletus, picking it up, dusting it off, and making a tally of all the things I needed to do before leaving school for the weekend—including

picking up a bag of food from Ms. Dee in the cafeteria—so I didn't see Carla Creavers until she was right in front of me.

"Carla." I took a half step back, surprised to see the brunette. She never talked to me at school. Like most of the Wraith kids and everyone else, she gave me a wide berth.

"Scarlet. You meeting Cletus after school?" Her voice was shaky, her usually golden brown skin was pale-ish, and her brown eyes darted all over the place, like she expected Freddy Krueger to jump out of a locker.

I shook my head, confused by her anxious demeanor, but also, *How could she possibly know I'm meeting Cletus after school?* "Uh—"

"I just heard y'all. You mind if I walk with you?"

It's not that I minded, but Cletus might've.

First, she was the daughter of one of my daddy's top lieutenants. Cletus helped her out sometimes with lunch money or things like that, but I didn't think he liked her company much. Because second, she had a huge crush on him. For Carla, that meant she was always trying to make him jealous, and usually by getting herself in a bad way with Prince King.

Anyway. Let's just say, I was certain any warm feelings were one-sided.

"Uh—"

"Cletus won't mind. But it'd be good if we didn't walk on the road. I don't want folks to see."

"S—sure. Yeah. Fine." I never took the road, so this was okay by me.

"West door, right? Just outside." She glanced over her shoulder again, her eyes darting around the empty hall. Not waiting for me to respond, she turned abruptly and called back, "I'll be there."

* * *

The walk to my campsite from school was four miles as the crow flies, and that's how I went most days, like a bird.

I could've walked on the side of the road, but that wouldn't have made any sense. Taking roads to my campsite was much, much longer, twelve miles to be exact. Also, the trail was one of my making, not something others knew about. Walking in the woods gave me cover, kept me from being easily spotted or picked up by one of my father's men. As far as I knew, he wasn't looking for me, but better to be safe than sorry.

My trail's entrance was located on the far side of the student parking lot. But once I was on the trail, I was home free. You couldn't take a car on the path, or a motorcycle, or a regular mountain bike either. Half the walk was uphill, blocked by large roots, fallen trees, and a few streams—wider than a creek, not as big as a river. If someone followed me in, I'd lose them. No one was as fast as me in the woods, or as good on rocky terrain.

Well, no one but Billy Winston, apparently. But that was beside the point. I hadn't seen him all week, and he wasn't likely to chase me around the woods again anytime soon.

My point is, the only way through the trail was on foot. Since I had feet, and I was fast, and I knew every tree and shrub and ditch and stream, it was one place I felt safe and content.

However, sometimes, like today when I couldn't go home straightaway because I needed to stop by the library first and wait in line to use a computer, I longed for a bike. The library was in the opposite direction of the campsite and twelve or so miles on a bike was much better than walking, even if I did have to use the road.

Yep. Afterward, the walk home was sure to be brutal. But looking on the bright side, I'd be so tired when I got home, I'd sleep great tonight no matter the temperature. Plus, the Green Valley Library was warm. Bonus, if Mrs. MacIntyre was out or on vacation, Mrs. Winston and Ms. Winters would make us kids hot chocolate while we did our homework. I liked that.

But first, I had to get through this awkward mile walk with Carla and Cletus.

“You seem like you want to say something, Carla,” Cletus said from my left. He’d placed me between them.

“I do.” She looked over her shoulder for the millionth time. “Just, let’s get further away from the school.”

Cletus and I glanced at each other, his eyebrows disappearing into the mess of hair on his forehead. “Any new jokes you care to share, Scarlet?”

“A few.” I kicked a rock off the trail and noticed I had a hole in my shoe, right under the big toe. Damn. I knew the rubber was getting thin, but . . . *Damn*.

“Well. Tell me.” He nudged me with his elbow, drawing my eyes to his.

“Tell you what?”

“A joke.” He glanced between me and my feet. “What’s wrong?”

I shoved away the frown that wanted to take over my face and arranged for a smile instead. “Nothing, just thinking.” I couldn’t tell Cletus about the hole, because then he’d want to buy me shoes. He did this with everybody, and I doubted his momma’s paycheck was enough to feed and clothe all the needy kids in Green Valley.

I was already camping in their old tent, using their old blankets thanks to his oldest brother, Jethro. Even if none of them but Jethro—and now Billy—knew my situation, I wouldn’t take more advantage of the Winstons.

“So, a joke.” I mentally thumbed through the latest ones I’d made up. “Okay. What did the peanut butter say to the grape jelly when she asked him to the dance?”

“Grape jelly asked peanut butter to a dance? How would that work? They’re both viscous liquids.”

“It’s a joke, dummy. Just say, ‘What?’”

“Fine. What?”

“No thanks. You’re not my jam.”

Cletus wrinkled his nose, but he cracked a reluctant smile. “It needs work.”

“It’s still in progress. I feel like I need to add music somehow, so *jam* means jelly, music, and preference all at the same time.”

“Maybe you could talk to Beau. He makes up jokes too. And he’s—”

“Okay, y’all. Shut up a sec.” Carla put her hand on my arm, bringing me to a stop and looking around the woods. After a long moment, she heaved a watery sigh and looked between us. “I need your help.” She looked like she was about to cry.

“What is it?” Cletus stood straighter, because she’d said Cletus’s version of the magic words. *I need your help*.

“You know how someone turned in Prince and the other kids on Wednesday? Someone who was there?” she whispered, stepping closer to Cletus. “Well, it was me. I ratted them out.”

Both Cletus and I flinched away and now suddenly I was glancing around at the woods, the hairs on the back of my neck standing tall. *Shit*.

“Do they know?” I asked, fighting not to become frantic.

She shook her head, looking an alarming shade of green. “No. They think it was someone else, not one of the Wraith kids. But if they find out it was me . . .” Her big blue eyes drifted to Cletus. “Help me. I don’t know what to do.”

“I will,” he said immediately, putting his arm around her shoulder. “I’ll keep you safe. I promise.”

She turned toward his chest, her chin wobbling. Meanwhile, I gave Cletus a stern look, because he was making silly promises he couldn’t keep. I didn’t want to scare her, but—

“And how’re you gunna do that, Cletus? Once her daddy finds out, and he will, there’s no place a hundred miles around here she’ll be safe. Ratting on The Family? This is a beating, if she’s lucky.”

Carla made a sound of distress, now fully crying, and she should. She still lived at the compound. She’d been beaten before, so she knew what

was coming. Cletus held her tight and leveled me with a thoughtful frown, his intelligent eyes determined.

I wanted to laugh. No amount of determination was going to change the facts: Carla was in serious shit, and now so were we because we knew.

“We’ll just make sure they don’t find out,” Cletus reasoned, whispering non-comically for once.

I paced away, dropping my backpack and shoving my fingers into my hair. *Damn*. “Dammit!”

I wanted to ask her what she was thinking, but I thought maybe I already knew. She wanted to impress Cletus. She wanted to help him. She expected him to be impressed, and then what? He’d like her?

What a fool.

“That’s not how things work for people like us,” I muttered under my breath, the air in my lungs bitter with despair. My mind didn’t even try to look on the bright side of this. There was no bright side. This was a dumpster fire of assholes and arsenic.

Sure, people might pity kids like Carla and me, but they didn’t ever actually *care* about us. Pity was not compassion. I understood that, I got it. Clearly, she did not. We were unfortunate charity projects, worthy of what other folks were willing to give, which was usually just a sympathetic glance and a *Whatcha gunna do?*

And that’s it.

So, yes, I took charity when it was offered. I took it to survive, so I might pull myself above this ditch of unworthiness. I might get passed a rope every so often, but it was always going to be me using my own two hands to claw myself out.

What I didn’t do was build myself a shovel to make the hole deeper!

“Calm down, Scarlet,” Cletus whispered kindly. “We’ll figure it out.”

I spun on him. “Easy for you to say, Cletus. Your momma loves you. You got brothers and a sister that care about *you!*” I wasn’t going to cry, but

my throat was closing up. I had to clear it to continue. “But Carla? She’s got a daddy who likes beating on women and a momma who’s too strung out to know she’s got a daughter. She’s got no one.”

He seemed to be trying to form a cocoon around her, which was exactly the wrong thing to do. What he needed to do was shove her off and teach her to be strong, teach her to fight. Not coddle her, not give her a false sense of security. Now she might think he would keep her safe and take care of her.

Don’t get me wrong, Cletus cared. Just like he might care about anyone else in the same situation. He cared deeply, and then he went home to his comfortable house, and comfortable bed, and food on the table, and a momma who loved him something fierce.

While Carla and me? Well, let’s just say, this is why you don’t pet strays. You don’t teach them to expect gentleness. Getting their hopes up just ends up being an unkindness instead, in the end.

My breath spilled out of me, my nose stinging, my bones feeling like they were on fire, my heart feeling like it might crack in half, and I wanted to scream.

But I wouldn’t.

“This ain’t my problem,” I said on a rush, crossing back to my backpack and slinging it over my shoulder. “I don’t know anything. This ain’t my problem.”

“Hey.” Cletus stepped away from Carla quick as lightening and caught my arm. “Where are you going?”

I shook him off. “I’m going to the library. I have two papers to write.”

His eyes searched mine. “You’re no coward.”

I laughed. “You’re wrong, Cletus. You’re so wrong. I am the biggest coward you’ll ever meet. But you know what? I’ll survive.”

A flash of what looked like disappointment and hurt passed behind Cletus’s gaze, his eyebrows pinching and lifting on his forehead. “You’re no

coward,” he repeated firmly, as though just saying so could make it true.

I shook my head. If he was disappointed in me, so be it. I’d rather be a disappointment than a canvas for my father’s cruelty.

Carla’s croaky voice interrupted. “Wait, there’s something else.” She came to stand next to Cletus, wrapping both her arms around his bicep, but her wide eyes were on me. “Your daddy, he heard about Ben McClure and you.”

My stomach fell to my feet and the world tilted. “What?” I breathed the question, more air than sound.

Cletus’s hand gripped my elbow, presumably to keep me from falling over.

“Prince told his daddy about it, and Raymond King told Romeo and Razor.” Cletus grew still and Carla lifted her eyes to him, her gaze apologetic. “I’m sorry, I mean, Darrell Winston and Razor.”

His eyelids lowered by half. Cletus glanced away, and I could see he was working on keeping his temper. Romeo was his daddy’s club name and it always had been—even when Mr. and Mrs. Winston weren’t separated. For obvious reasons, none of the Winstons liked hearing it.

“He don’t like it, Scarlet,” Carla continued, her eyes red from crying. “Your daddy wants you brought in.”

* * *

I couldn’t concentrate on divine right monarchs of Europe because I was scared.

Strategies that worked for other stuff—like sadness or hunger, or anger or being so cold my teeth wouldn’t quit knocking together—never worked when I was scared. Nothing worked.

Maybe I should just go up there and try to smooth things over. If I went up there on my own, calling it a visit, and told my father the truth, that

nothing was going on with Ben and me, then maybe he'd let the whole thing drop and that would be that.

My daddy and his men had mostly left me alone since September. I'd moved out of the biker compound in the middle of August and left him a note, saying I was going to try living on my own for a bit. I'd left the note so he wouldn't think I was being willful.

He didn't like that and cornered me outside the library on a Friday afternoon. He didn't ask where I was staying, but once he figured out I was truly living on my own and not accepting charity, or staying with some random family, he let me be. For a while.

Going up there, reinforcing the facts—that I was all on my own—it might work. Then again, it might not.

And then you'd be trapped. Who knows for how long this time.

I shuddered, suddenly breathing hard. I was going to be sick; I was sure of it. My stomach was rolling, I was sweating, and that old library smell I usually loved tasted like furniture polish and mold on my tongue.

What am I gunna do?

Drumming my fingers on the computer desk, I stared at the blinking curser on the blank page. I stared and stared. I stared so long the blinking line became two lines, then four, then ten.

"Scarlet."

I jumped, sucking in a breath, my hand flying to my chest.

"Whoa," a kind voice said just before a soft, warm hand came to rest on my shoulder. "Hey now, you okay?"

I turned, looking up at Mrs. Winston's kind hazel eyes, and I nodded. "Just fine, ma'am. Is my time up?"

She stared at me for a moment, then set a mug down on the desk in front of me. "Hot chocolate, four jumbo marshmallows, just how you like."

My gaze strayed to the cup and I had to blink at the sudden rush of dampness and sting of tears behind my eyes.

No. No, you will not get worked up over a cup of hot chocolate. It's just a little thing. It means nothing.

I forced a smile, submerging the reckless, desperate longing under plain gratitude.

I sat straight and said quietly, "Thank you so much. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome." Mrs. Winston's voice was so nice. Like an angel. All sweet and earnest and patient. I could see why Darrell Winston was so proud of her and liked rubbing it in everyone's faces that he'd got the best one. She'd given him six sons and one gorgeous baby girl, and he claimed Bethany Winston always knew her place.

Never mind the fact she'd kicked him out over four years ago and they were now separated. He pretended like that didn't figure.

The computer adjacent to mine was out of service. Unexpectedly, she took the empty seat, leaning her elbow on the desk. She pushed the cup of hot chocolate closer to my fingers.

"Go on. Just looking at you makes me cold."

I smiled at that. She sounded like how Billy did last week.

Obediently, I wrapped my (cold) fingers around the mug and brought it to my lips, taking a sip. It tasted like heat and sweet, and usually I'd scarf it down in three gulps. But not today.

What am I gunna do?

"What's on your mind, Scarlet?"

I shook my head, forcing another smile. "Oh, nothing. Just tired I guess."

Mrs. Winston shifted in her seat. "You get prettier and prettier every time I see you." The ways she said the words, they didn't sound like a compliment so much as a forlorn discovery, or a statement of sympathy.

"Thank you. That's kind of you."

“We both know it’s not,” she muttered, sounding sad. After a minute, in my peripheral vision I saw her look from the computer screen to me.

“I have notes,” I rushed to explain. “I was planning to come back tomorrow too. I just need to type them up.”

“It’s fine.” She waved off my statement. “Stay as long as you need. What’s the paper on?”

“Divine right monarchs.”

“European history? As a freshman?”

“I’m a sophomore this year, Mrs. Winston.”

“Scarlet, you call me Bethany. Or Beth, if you prefer. And, I’m sorry. I keep forgetting you’re a sophomore.” She said this thoughtfully, pinching her bottom lip between her thumb and forefinger, her eyes on me.

She kept forgetting because I shouldn’t have been a sophomore, I should’ve been a freshman. See now, I wasn’t one of those kids who was so smart that they skip a grade. I was one of those kids whose parents lied about their age to get them into school earlier. My momma told the elementary school I was five when I was four. She was tired of having me around the club, getting into trouble.

But hey. I did all right. I wasn’t a straight-A student, but I’d gotten myself into honors courses, which was why I was taking physics as a sophomore. I’d struggled with bigger concept stuff until just this last year—especially in science—but things were finally clicking into place for me. I loved school.

“You and Ash are so close in age, three months I think, it muddles me.”

“When’s her birthday?” I took another sip of the hot chocolate and then pushed a big marshmallow under the surface with my index finger, fighting a flare of jealousy.

Bethany’s daughter Ashley was a freshman at Green Valley High and was gorgeous and that’s all I knew about her. We hadn’t played together growing up because her daddy treated her like a princess. He didn’t like her

around us other MC kids—said we were too rough—so she was hardly ever at any picnics and such, always staying home with her maternal grandmother.

Darrell's sons? Whatever. He wanted them to grow up tough. But his daughter? His *baby girl* as he called her, she was too good for everybody as far as he was concerned.

"Ash was an August baby. She just made the cutoff for school by fifteen days. I wanted to keep her home and wait, but she begged me to let her go to kindergarten, so I did. No matter—" Bethany chuckled lightly "—I liked having her home, and it would've been a treat to have her for another year, but she's always had wings that ached to fly."

I batted away jealousy, but I gave Mrs. Winston a tight smile. I was so irritated with myself for the gloomy, pointless direction of my thoughts.

"You know, she still believed in fairies until she was near eleven. That makes me feel like I did something right."

Nodding, but having nothing to say, I sipped my drink. I exhaled silently. I pushed the marshmallow down again. It came back up wrinkled and coated in a thin layer of brown. Once they melted enough—but not too much—I'd eat the marshmallows whole. Something to look forward to.

"Speaking of fairies, my son Billy told me the oddest story last Friday."

I stilled. *Shit.*

My mind working, I managed to croak out, "Oh. He did?"

"He sure did. Do you want to know what it was?"

"Ah, that's okay." I picked up my notebook and reached for my bag, dread and stomach acid rising up my esophagus to the back of my mouth.

Stupid Billy! All he had to do was not say anything. *I knew he hated me! I just knew it!* I wasn't even on their dumb land. Now I'd have to find another place along with everything else, and I couldn't move all that stuff by mys—

"He told me there was a fairy living in our backyard, past the tree line."

My eyes swung to hers. "He what?"

"That's right." She smiled, her gaze traveling over my face. "A beautiful fairy, with a campsite, and a blue tent, and one of my momma's blankets."

A beautiful fairy?

"I—I—he what? Mrs. Winston, I—"

"Call me Bethany. And you know what I asked him?"

"What?" I barely got the word out.

I could hardly believe my ears. Billy Winston wanted to help me? He told his momma about me because he wanted to help? I was shocked. So shocked. So epically, enormously shocked.

"I asked him what he thought the fairy's favorite food is."

"Why would you ask that?" I stared at her, bewildered, trying to catch up. *You misjudged him. He's not heartless. He might be gruff and formal, but underneath he's kind. So kind.*

"Because a fairy's got to eat, right? Roscoe and his friend Simone Payton think fairies like to eat cotton candy, but I think that's nonsense. I think fairies like mashed potatoes with gravy, and meatloaf. Or maybe roasted chicken and dumplings? What do you think?"

My mouth caught up with what she was saying before my mind and began watering at the word *gravy*. I'd been surviving on protein bars and school lunches since September. The lunch lady, Ms. Dee, always gave me two extra rolls and bagged food on Friday. "Mrs. Winston, you and Billy—"

"Bethany."

"Ms. Bethany, I am so sorry I camped back there without asking. I app—I can't tell you how much—" I rubbed my forehead, not knowing what to say first. "Jethro gave me the blanket and the tent. He showed me where to camp in the back. I thought if he—"

"Don't be sorry. Don't you believe in fairies?"

We stared at each other. Her eyes were so kind, I didn't want to disappoint her. But I didn't have it in me to lie or pretend today. So I shook

my head.

"No, ma'am. I do not."

"Well then, I'll have to show you. In fact, Simone said the same thing, said she was too old for fairies, and I'll show her too. I'll *prove* they exist." She hit her hand lightly on the desk. "See here, we'll leave a plate of food for our fairy, right next to the forest by the woodshed. You know where that is? We'll leave it under a crate so the critters don't get it, along with more blankets, and maybe some clothes, soap, a tooth brush, a regular brush, and the like."

Do not get worked up over this. Do not expect it. Do not want it. Say thank you and move on. If it happens, fine. If not, no biggie.

"You don't have to do that." The words just above a scrape of a whisper. I pressed my lips together. I also averted my eyes because—dammit—I was going to cry. I was overwhelmed.

Billy Winston . . . I still couldn't believe it. Seriously, I couldn't. Sometimes selflessness came from the strangest, most unexpected places.

"But I do have to do it." Her tone grew impossibly gentle and I sensed her lean forward. She smelled so good, like honeysuckle and tea. "Because I want Simone and Roscoe and Ashley and the twins to believe in magic for as long as possible. And you too, Scarlet." She reached for my hands, covered them with her own, and whispered conspiratorially, "I want you to believe in magic too."

I sniffled, blinking furiously. *Dammit.*

Why'd she have to be so special and nice? Why'd Billy have to turn out to be such an amazingly good person?

"So here's how it's gunna work." She cupped my face, forcing my head back and gave me a warm smile. "If fairies don't exist, then our pile of offerings won't move, right? They'll just stay there and waste. But if fairies do exist, and I hope they do, then every morning, when we send Roscoe out to the edge of the forest, he'll come back with an empty plate, and that's it."

"That's so generous of y'all," I mouthed because I'd lost the ability to speak without bursting into tears.

"I don't think so, sweetheart." Her eyes moved between mine, all gentle and concerned. *Compassionate*. "I think it's an even trade. We feed a fairy, and she keeps all of us believing in the magic of possibility."

CHAPTER FIVE

BILLY

“And then everything was in the hands of gravity, which has never had much love for the terminally stupid.”

— MIRA GRANT, *FEED: THE NEWSFLESH TRILOGY*

“**W**hy’re you in a *mood*? You won, didn’t you?” Samantha pressed me against the door of my truck, lifted on her tiptoes, and covered my face with kisses. I let her, placing my hands on her waist and waiting for her to be done.

. . . And waited.

“Samantha,” I sighed after a time, pushing her away a little. “I’m all sweaty.”

Someone shouted behind her, snagging my attention. Most of the team and cheerleaders were taking the bus to campus and there was a festive ruckus coming from the adjacent parking lot as they piled in. I had special approval from the coach to drive on my own to and from away games. Sometimes I was coming from work and couldn’t make the bus on time.

“I don’t mind you sweaty. I love it.” Samantha wagged her dark eyebrows, flashing me a big grin, looking cute and sinister at the same time. Leaning in close again, she whispered against my ear, “Why don’t I skip the

bus. You drive me back and we'll stop by Cooper's Field on the way? I'll be your reward for winning."

I grimaced. Luckily, she didn't see it.

Yeah. We'd won, but it wasn't a good game. The other team's fate had basically been sealed by the beginning of the second quarter. After our second touchdown, their offense had a fumble and we recovered it for another touchdown. The score was 21 to 0, our kicker had made each of the field goals.

Once that happened, it was like they'd lost their spirit. Coach pulled me and most of the starters out halfway through the third quarter so our second string could get some practice playing an away game. Our second string scored two more touchdowns. I watched the remainder with knots in my stomach.

It's not that I didn't like to win. I did, especially since I knew there were college scouts in the bleachers. But I didn't like to see anyone lose by so much, and on their home turf. Didn't seem right.

"Sam . . ." I pushed her away again, gently, my gaze flicking beyond her to the bus. "Another time. I need to get home."

She caught my eye, her forehead wrinkled. "Hey. What's going on?"

"It's been a long week and—" I started, closed my eyes for a second, and then tried again. This time with no excuses, just the truth. "I'm not into it, okay? You're great. It's not you."

Sam leaned back, her hands still on my shoulders, her blue gaze growing concerned. "What is it then? If it's not me?"

I struggled, trying to pinpoint the reason why I didn't want to have sex with my hot girlfriend. She'd been my first, but I hadn't been hers. That didn't bother me any, and I really liked how enthusiastic and up for anything she always seemed to be. For the first few months, we'd do it all the time, several times a day if we could, and she never got tired.

In fact, it seemed like the more we had sex, the more she expected me to disrupt my study time, ditch school, work, practice, and family to have sex. Maybe that would've been fine for most guys my age, maybe they would've loved it.

Maybe I would've loved it too, if things were different.

"It's the game," I finally said with more certainty than I felt.

"You won." She sounded and looked perplexed. "You're upset 'cause you won?"

"No. It was hard to watch, don't you think? Seeing folks lose like that."

"Oh. I see." She gave me a smile, the worry easing from her eyes, becoming something warm and sweet instead. "You and your big heart, feeling bad for winning." Her hand trailed down my front.

I caught her fingers. "I don't feel bad for winning."

"You do feel bad." She shook me off and twisted her arms around my neck, pressed her body to mine. "But we haven't done anything in two weeks, and I *need* you. You can feel bad all you want, Billy, just so long as you make me feel good."

I didn't grimace this time, catching the expression in the nick of time. I didn't want to hurt her feelings.

"Another time. I promise." I gave her a quick kiss and, as gently as I could, tucked her under my arm to escort her to the bus. She huffed, but fell into step next to me, though it felt like she was dragging her feet.

If she didn't get on the bus, then I would have to drive her home. And if I drove her home, I'd be fighting off her hands the entire way. And then I'd have to walk her up to her door and listen to her dad. I liked her dad fine, but that man loved to talk at folks about his high school football days, and I'd already given him four hours of my time last Sunday when I helped him with his hobby car.

It would've been one thing if instead of sex in my truck she'd offered to go out for pie at Daisy's Nut House. Then we could talk. Samantha was

clever, funny, sweet, made me laugh. She was interesting and cool. But she never wanted to do that with me. *And besides, I want to get home, check on Roscoe, Momma and Ash, the twins.*

Samantha wouldn't quite meet my eyes as I loaded her on the bus, and she didn't return my goodbye kiss either. She was upset and wanted to make sure I knew it. I drove away from her with a heaviness in my stomach but was able to set it aside without much work.

Family came first. Always.

* * *

"All I'm saying is that the Road Runner is the best muscle car ever made. That's all I'm saying." Duane's proclamation reached my ears as soon as I walked in the door. I knew it was his voice because it was surly.

"How is it the best?" Beau's cheerful question followed. From the sound of it, the twins were in the family room.

I kicked off my shoes by the door, letting my bag fall next to them, and reminding myself to wash everything tomorrow. Otherwise, it'd stink.

"I don't need to explain myself," Duane argued. "It just is."

I walked into the room just as Beau asked good naturedly, "Well, is it the fastest?" He then turned around and shot me a big grin with a lot of teeth too big for his head. "Oh, hey there, Billy. Did you win?"

I nodded.

"All right!" Beau stood and lifted his hand for a high five.

I gave it to him. "Did you finish your homework?"

"It's Friday, Billy." He shot me a look like I was crazy, scratching the red hair above his temple. "Why would I be doing homework on a Friday?"

Duane gave me an eye squint in greeting, and that's it. "The Road Runner could be the fastest, with the right driver."

"Hm." Beau rubbed his chin. "What do you think, Cletus?"

I glanced around, finding Cletus in the far corner of the room. I hadn't noticed him when I walked in. He was skulking, looking troubled, his hands shoved deep in his overall pockets. And he was standing, not sitting. Just standing there.

He glanced up at Beau's question and I saw his eyes were cloudy. "Everyone knows it's the Pontiac GTO," he mumbled, distracted like.

Uh-oh.

I left Duane and Beau to argue over cars and approached Cletus. He'd dropped his eyes again. I tried to snag them.

"Hey. What's going on?" Just as I asked this, the front door slammed.

Cletus shook his head. "I don't wish to discuss it."

"What do I look like? A genie?" I glanced between Cletus and the entryway. "I didn't ask what you wish. Tell me what's going on."

"There's a fairy in our backyard!" This excited claim came from Roscoe, who'd just run in carrying two bags of groceries, heading straight for the kitchen.

"Don't slam the door and no running in the house," I called after him.

Cletus leaned away from the wall to move past and I stepped in his way. "What's going on, Cletus? You know I'll help, no matter what it is."

He shook his head, agitated, and then shoved past me. I watched him walk up the stairs. The heaviness in my stomach returned, different, fiercer. I wouldn't be able to shake it off so easily. Over the weekend, I'd have to get him alone, make him talk somehow. An agitated Cletus was liable to cause trouble.

"Billy! Help me and Ash with these bags. And you should wash your football stuff before it starts to stink," Momma's voice called from the entryway. "Duane and Beau, come get the rest out of the car!"

Frowning after Cletus, I returned to the front door and dutifully took several shopping bags from my sister, pausing in front of my momma to give her cheek a kiss after I took her load too. "What's all this?"

Before she could answer, Duane and Beau ran past, out the door, and into the night.

“Don’t y’all think you can stay outside and play and pretend it’s not time for bed just ’cause Momma asked you to get the bags!” Ashley hollered after them. “I mean it. It’s almost ten. Time for brushing teeth!”

Leaving Ashley to deal with the twins, I walked with my mother to the kitchen, depositing my load on the island and peeking in the bags. “Hey, don’t forget, I need my birth certificate for those school applications. Hey, what’s this stuff? Clothes for Ash? Shoes? A jacket? I thought she had a jacket.”

“Something like that.” My mother turned, reached inside the fridge and withdrew a plate of food. Roast chicken, gravy, mashed potatoes, corn, greens. *Good*. I was hungry.

I reached for it, but she held it away. “Ah uh-uh. This isn’t for you. Hands off. You want something, there’s chili and cornbread in the fridge. Help yourself.”

Rearing back, I glanced between her and the plate. “Who’s it for? An army?”

“It’s for the fairy,” Roscoe announced as he ran back into the kitchen, tossed his arms around me for a quick hug, and then ran back out while calling over his shoulder, “Dibs on taking the plate out. I’m getting the crate.”

Fairy?

Frowning at my momma, because her eyes were downcast and she looked guilty, I straightened my back and glared at the huge plate of food. “Fairy?”

“Let me get some cornbread too.” She turned again for the fridge. “Want any?”

I followed her. “Fairy? Since when do we have a *fairy* that eats roast chicken?”

She pulled a basket out of the fridge, set the napkin on top to the side, and placed two corn muffins on the plate, studiously keeping her gaze downcast. “Now, Billy—”

“You told Roscoe that Scarlet St. Claire is a fairy?” I leaned close, lowering my voice. “And now you’re feeding her?”

“Yep.”

“Momma.”

“William.” She huffed, setting her hand on her hip and finally looking at me.

I ignored the bored expression she wore and whispered, “I told you about her last week because I wanted you to do something about it.”

She gestured to the food and the bags of clothes on the counter. “And look, I’m doing something about it.”

“Not feed her!”

“Why not? She needs to eat, doesn’t she?”

“You know why not. If Razor or Darrell—” she flinched at my father’s name, and I hated that I’d brought him up, but it needed doing “—or Jethro finds out she’s back there, they’ll come for her. And they’ll assume you or Cletus had something to do with hiding her.”

She reached in the bag of clothes and took out a pair of jeans, ripping off the tag. “Don’t worry about Jet. He won’t say anything. We can trust him.”

Now I flinched, my temper rising, grinding my teeth. “We *cannot* trust Jethro. He’s—”

“It’ll be fine.”

“It won’t be fine! She’s a threat.”

My momma peered up at me through slits for eyes. “Now you stop it. Scarlet St. Claire—tall as me, sweet as pie, face like an angel with a personality to match—is not a threat.”

“No. But *who she is* means being anywhere near her makes us all a target. You want Roscoe to be a target?”

My mother sighed tiredly. “Billy, now you know I would never do anything to intentionally put any of my babies in danger. That said, I cannot stand by while that sweet girl suffers. And I will not toss her off our land *just in case* Razor or Dar—” she huffed “—or someone else finds out she’s here.”

Taking a step back, I glared at her.

“I see you’re angry with me, but she needs our help,” she added, beseeching. “When people are overwhelmed, they can’t see past their own campfire. I’m asking you to look past your campfire, Billy.”

I shook my head, frustrated. So frustrated. My momma and her soft heart, she made me so crazy.

Closing the distance between us, she placed her hands on my cheeks and held my face. “My sweet boy, you need to have faith. The Lord would not have put her in our path if He didn’t want us to help. I believe that. We are being called. And when you’re called, you answer, even if it’s inconvenient, even when it’s scary. Actually, especially then.”

We stared at each other, neither giving an inch. But what could I do? There was no reasoning with her.

“How’re we going to pay for all this stuff? The twins need new shoes,” I reminded flatly.

“I picked up their shoes just now, so don’t worry about that.”

“But—”

“I said not to worry,” she said, using her *don’t you argue with your momma* voice.

She’d made up her mind, clearly.

But that didn’t mean I had to be happy about it.

“I need to go wash my football stuff.” I moved to leave.

She wouldn't let me go and her gaze turned searching. "You should trust more."

"You trust too much." I glanced over her head and huffed a bitter laugh. Her trust of people meant more messes for me to clean up.

My mother pulled my head down and placed a big kiss on my forehead, murmuring, "That's 'cause I've got to trust for both of us."

* * *

I took Roscoe to the edge of our field, set up the crate, put the plate inside along with the clothes and things my momma had bought—including a giant, thermal, *expensive* sleeping bag—and then I waited. I brought a flashlight and my trigonometry book so I could study, waiting for an hour. And then I waited for another half hour.

When I started to feel the cold and my eyes couldn't fight the weight of the day any longer, I went back inside. I had work in the morning; it was dangerous to be sleepy at the mill.

Saturday, before my alarm went off at 6:00 AM, I was informed by my littlest brother jumping on my bed that the fairy had come. He showed me the empty plate as proof.

Great. Hoo-fucking-ray.

Saturday night, after work, after dinner, after finishing boy scout stuff with Roscoe and trying—and failing—to get Cletus to talk, I dragged my tired ass outside. Again, with my flashlight and trigonometry book and my notebook and a pen—but this time also with a camping chair and a blanket—I waited. Seven beget eight, eight beget nine, nine beget ten, ten beget eleven, eleven beget me falling asleep in my chair.

I woke with a start in the middle of the damn night and immediately checked my watch. It was past three in the morning. Rubbing my eyes, I hunted for my flashlight in the dark. We Winstons can see pretty well in the

dark. I didn't need the flashlight to get back to the house, but I did need it to read and study.

The flashlight was easily located, sitting in the cupholder of the chair. But curled around it was a note. I clicked on the light and scanned the tidy lettering.

“A Fairy Haiku just for you:
Thank you for the food.
No need to guard it, Billy
Don't snobs sleep indoors?
- Forest Fairy”

I read it three times. Once my sleep-weary mind comprehended the message, I barked a surprised laugh and closed my eyes, leaning back in the chair and shaking my head. *What a—*

She was such a—

I swear, she was . . .

I yawned, unable to come up with a word for what Scarlet St. Claire was. *She's something else, that's what.*

Nodding at that, I stood, stretched, and searched around for my trig textbook and notebook, which had been on my lap. Apparently, the “Forest Fairy” had stacked them in a neat pile next to the chair. She'd even stuck the pen in the spiral binding of the notebook, I suspected to keep it from getting lost or rolling away.

Curious, I spared a glance at the crate. The empty plate laid inside, clean, as though she'd washed it. Except, she'd placed a little yellow flower in the center of the dish. Frowning, I left the plate for Roscoe to find in the morning and picked up the flower, studying it, and then absentmindedly placed it between the pages of my notebook.

I then trekked through the dead field while wondering where she'd found a blooming flower in the middle of November. By the time I got back to the house, I'd arrived at the conclusion that Scarlet St. Claire had been avoiding me. For years.

Mrs. Hill, our school secretary, gave me back my letterman jacket on Monday. She said she'd found it on the counter in the office, just sitting there. I didn't see Scarlet once—not once—this last week, and I'd been looking.

As loathe as I was to admit it, her singing voice had stayed with me.

I'd catch myself thinking about it and remembering the sound at the oddest times. Driving to school in the morning, eating lunch with my teammates, working the saw at the mill after school. *In bed at night, before I go to sleep.*

I would've said it plagued me except I liked the memory. Afterward, if I was able and it was nearby, I'd pick up my guitar and play for as long as I could spare, always a bit calmer, able to breathe a bit easier after.

Green Valley wasn't that big of a school. It was crowded for its size, but less than eight hundred kids in the whole school meant everybody knew everybody, more or less. I should've seen her at least once this week, but I didn't.

Fact was, Scarlet wasn't coming out of the tree line if she saw me there (awake). Seeking her out at school wasn't an option. She was just too good at avoiding.

I needed a plan. Someone needed to explain things to her, get her to move on, go somewhere else. Since that person was not my momma, it would have to be me.

At Sunday service the next morning, as I worked to hide my yawns, our pastor talked about the story of David and Goliath. I began to tune him out, but then he said something that got my attention.

“ . . . story of David defeating Goliath isn’t about a man defeating a giant. Did y’all know that?”

I frowned, certain I’d misheard, because I was pretty darn sure that’s what the story was about.

He continued, “The real meaning of the story is about who is fit to rule, who is fit to lead. Saul is nearly as tall as Goliath. His armor is equal, he has all the right weapons and tools and yet he refused to fight the giant.”

My frown persisted because, *Who the heck was Saul? I thought we were talking about David?*

“Saul has no faith in his own success, in his people, in God. And then David comes, a boy who resolves to fight the giant, though he has no armor and no spear. By comparison, he has none of the right tools, taking only a staff, sling, and five stones from a brook. But he also takes *faith*. All the right tools in the world can’t measure up to the power of faith.”

The pastor paused here, dramatically, his eyes sweeping over the congregation before asking, “Who, then, is better fit to lead? Saul or David? A man with no faith? Or a boy who trusts?”

I felt the weight of someone’s eyes on me and turned to the right, finding my momma giving me a small, self-satisfied smile across the heads of my brothers and sister. I didn’t roll my eyes. Instead, I faced the pulpit again.

The old pastor needed to wrap it up. I had things to do. I had a plan.

CHAPTER SIX

SCARLET

“If you don't receive love from the ones who are meant to love you, you will never stop looking for it.”

— ROBERT GOOLRICK, *THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT: SCENES FROM A LIFE*

I had a plan.

It wasn't a foolproof plan, or even a solid plan. But, with my father, there wasn't any such thing as a solid plan.

This Thursday was Thanksgiving. I'd almost forgotten. I didn't usually keep track of such things, but I did need to keep track of when school was off. We had a half day on Wednesday, and the school would be closed both Thursday and Friday. This weekend was supposed to be record setting cold. Even with the thermal sleeping bag Mrs. Winston—Bethany—and Billy had left for their forest fairy, I knew I'd been feeling the chill.

Anyway, the plan was as follows: Instead of going to school on Tuesday, I'd go to the Dragon (the biker compound where my father and his men lived and socialized). The earlier the better. Less people would be up early, but my daddy would be. I'd act like I was hungry, see if I could stay for a meal, and I'd dress in my dirtiest, most torn up clothes.

And I'd ask him for money.

. . . I think I'm going to throw up.

I shook my head, clearing it, chanting in a whisper, "You can do this. You can do this. It's no big deal. You've done it before. You can do this."

He'd ask me about Ben, most likely. I'd tell the truth, because why not? I'd say I knew of Ben McClure, but did my daddy really think someone like Big Ben McClure, golden child of Green Valley and surrounding areas, only son of the local fire chief and sainted chorus teacher at GV High would be interested in me? I was only fourteen for hootenanny's sake! And Razor Dennings's daughter!

Hahaha.

. . . No. Not interested.

If I came on my own, then he'd see I had nothing to be afraid of. I had no secrets, nothing to hide. I'd remind him that I knew better than to ask anyone for anything other than him. He'd see that I was alive, but not doing so great, and definitely not too fearful or desperate to visit. He'd get what he wanted—what he *always* wanted—and I'd be flying under the radar again. Plus, I'd have five whole days to heal and recover.

There. Done. Easy. In and out. *Think of it like a tune-up. You've got to visit and submit every once in a while to keep things from falling apart.*

Yep. That was my plan.

I had to be sure to look bored rather than scared. If I was scared, he'd keep me. If I was indifferent and greedy and desperate, he'd let me go.

Worst-case scenario, he'll keep me for a few days to show me who's in charge, and at least I'll sleep out of the cold in a warm bed. There. That wouldn't be so bad.

I shivered, my mouth suddenly dry, and reached for my CD Walkman with shaking fingers. I'd just taken the closest thing to a bath as could be had in the woods and my body was still cold. I probably should've waited until school on Monday, when I'd have access to the gym showers, but I

couldn't resist getting clean before wearing the new clothes the Winstons had brought me.

Placing the headphones over my ears, I turned on the CD I'd borrowed from the library and lay back on my new, fluffy sleeping bag. Throwing an arm over my eyes, I let the music fill my head, replacing my pointless apprehension and fear with Evanescence's "Bring Me To Life."

Gosh, Amy Lee sure did have some impressive pipes. I opened my mouth and sang along after the word *numb*, wishing not for the first time that I knew how to play the piano. I'd been listening to the CD nonstop since Friday night, needing something in my head other than the dread and frustration.

At the first *wake me up inside*, I sat up dramatically, my hair—which was loose around my shoulders, because I'd just washed it and it needed to dry—fell forward in my face. I shoved my fist in the air and just really belted it out. With feeling.

After the first chorus, I jumped up and on my feet to sing the next stanza, running out of the tent, using full on jazz hands, rocking my hips, pointing at invisible people in my imagination, and demanding that they save me from the nothing I'd become. I was frozen without his touch—whatever he was—and I really, super-duper needed my darling's love.

And then, holding that last note—*the dead*—for an eternity before the fella did his thing, I balled my hands into fists, tucked them to my chest, dropped my chin to my collarbone, and waited.

One.

Two.

Three.

Almost.

My turn!

I flipped my head back theatrically, about to tell everyone that I'd been sleeping for a thousand years, but then I spotted Billy Winston standing on

the edge of my campsite, his hands shoved loosely in his pockets, his eyes uncharacteristically warm, watching me with a big old smile.

I screamed.

He took a step back, flinching like I'd startled *him*, lifting his hands, his eyes wide. He was saying something, but I couldn't hear him because I still wore my headphones.

Meanwhile, I stumbled on a pile of firewood behind me, and landed on my ass. He winced, and then set something on the ground before rushing forward and kneeling next to me, still talking.

"What?" I snapped, taking off my headphones and glaring at his intrusion. "What the hell, Billy? You scared the shit outta me!"

He pressed his lips together in a line that wouldn't hold still, his suddenly bright eyes moving between mine. And then, like he just could not help himself, he leaned back and busted out laughing.

He was laughing so hard, he held his stomach.

Held. His. Stomach.

I huffed, blowing hair out of my face and doing my best to hold on to my anger. But I couldn't, not after thinking about him all weekend and what he'd done for me with his momma. Plus, I was too busy being mesmerized by stone cold Billy Winston laughing his darn head off. Goodness, my heart was racing and my cheeks were red. I could *feel* them. I was so embarrassed, I felt like I was about to come out of my skin.

So why was I grinning?

He has . . . an amazing laugh.

Authentic and abandoned, deep, rumbly, contagious. This was friendly laughter, not the mean kind, and friendly laughter was my weakness. I swallowed thickly, strangely anxious knowing I'd be thinking about his laugh later and it would probably make me smile.

Billy glanced at me, drawing his legs up to sit next to me. He rested his forearms on his knees, giant smile in place, his face happy and open and

blindingly handsome.

Ah! He's too good-looking like this! Make it stop!!

Billy Winston's handsomeness wasn't a discovery, not really. I'd watched him grow. He was good-looking when we were kids, he was good-looking now, and he'd be good-looking as he got older. His daddy had a black soul but was one of the best-looking men I'd ever seen. That man was made ugly by his words and actions and deeds.

But Billy? I was a bit startled to realize I'd never thought of Billy as ugly or even plain. Despite what I thought was his apparent dislike of me, I'd never thought of him as anything but handsome. And being this close to a smiling, seemingly happy Billy Winston—especially now that he'd shown me such kindness with the food and clothes and sleeping bag and such—felt a bit like being sucker punched in the stomach.

I couldn't catch my breath.

"I am so sorry, Scarlet. I did not mean to scare you," he said, his voice quiet and close and just as warm as his grin. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, that last bit? Where I tripped on the log?" I wrinkled my nose, my smile likely gooftastic because the Grand Dame of Dorkiness had decided to show her face. "That was part of the choreography. I planned that."

Billy's shoulders started to shake again, and he dropped his chin between the circle made by his arms, mostly hiding his face.

"Next, I crawl around on the ground and act like a cat," I added, peering at him and waiting. I wanted to see his smile again.

But he covered his mouth with a hand, his shoulders continuing to shake. *Shoot.*

"And then—and this is the best part—I tuck my ankles behind my head and walk around on my hands."

Now Billy buried his face in both his hands, laughing again in earnest.

"And for the encore—"

“Stop. Oh my God. Please stop.” He wiped at his eyes, sniffing, and blinking a few times. “No more. I surrender. I did not mean to scare you, I swear. My jaw hurts from laughing.”

I mentally devoured this picture of him, feeling greedy for it. It was like looking at a painting or a sculpture, an intensely gorgeous piece of art. Have you ever known someone like that? Who takes your breath away when they smile? *Gawd.*

“Please accept my apology,” he said, turning his face back to mine.

Now that I know your heart, I’ll forgive you anything.

“Of course.” We stared at each other and his smile waned over time, became a small one, and it was me who tore my eyes away, shaking my head of silly thoughts.

“What are you doing out here?” Ugh. My voice sounded weird and I was still having trouble with the breathing thing. Knowing myself, I knew all of this—liking his laugh so much and suddenly thinking he was breathtaking—had more to do with the kindness he’d shown me than his face.

I’d wanted to thank him, tell him how grateful I was for what he’d done, but I didn’t want to make things weird or uncomfortable by drawing attention to it.

When he didn’t answer straightaway, I glanced at him. Billy’s smile had fallen, and the happy light in his gaze had dwindled. He looked more like himself—serious, formal—but his eyes were still fastened to my face.

“I—uh—wanted to talk to you.”

“Okay.” I nodded, still grinning, my heart bursting. “But before you say anything, I wanted to thank you.”

“Thank me?” He sat taller, his eyebrows pulling together.

“That’s right. And, I guess, apologize.” Something about being so close to him was making me even more nervous, so I pushed myself up to my feet.

“You want to apologize? To me?”

Untangling my headphones from around my neck, I gave him a quick smile, and placed my CD Walkman inside my tent. “Yeah, I should. ’Cause I misjudged you and I owe you an apology for that.”

“How did you misjudge me?”

I wiped my hands on my new jeans and tucked my hair behind my ears, standing in front of him and having trouble meeting his eyes. “So, I thought, when your momma first talked to me, telling me that she knew I was camping out here because you told her, I thought you told her ’cause you wanted me gone. You wanted to get rid of me.”

I’d been thinking about him all weekend, reframing my mental image of Billy Winston, replaying the sparse moments between us in my head from the last few years. He cared so much about his family, I saw that now. He loved them something fierce, and I’d been seeing only the ferocity, not the love.

Billy’s head turned to the side slightly, like he was giving me his chin. His cool eyes moved down and up my person. “You thought I wanted you gone?”

“I did.” Now I laughed, crossing my arms and looking anywhere but at him, his handsome face felt like too much.

I officially had another harmless crush. *Lord help me.*

But how could I not notice how beautiful he was on the outside knowing he had a heart to match? After his surprising compassion, how could I not have warm feelings for him?

“I’m so sorry I thought that about you,” I went on. “And I wanted to thank you for talking to your momma on my behalf.”

“She told you I spoke to her on your behalf?” He sounded disbelieving.

“Oh, don’t feel weird about her telling me. I know it doesn’t mean anything, other than you being a good, kind person. And I don’t expect anything from y’all, or that we’ll be friends or anything.” At this I lowered

my chin, giving him my very best expectationless smile, feeling like I was fudging this up with my weirdness and over-honesty. “I have no expectations of that. I just—well, I wanted to say thank you. It’s important to show gratitude when folks treat you—me—with compassion instead of pity. There’s a difference between the two, and I’m appreciative is all. So . . . thank you.”

All through this last bit, Billy watched me patiently from where he sat, his gaze seeming to focus inward, and then outward, and then inward again, like he was searching my words for hidden meanings and intentions.

I thought maybe he was worried I didn’t mean what I’d said about having no expectations. Maybe he needed more assurances that I’d keep my distance at school.

So I blurted, “Really, Billy. I promise, I won’t tell a soul. I’ll keep outta sight, like I always have. I don’t talk to anybody anyway, not really, so you don’t have to worry. I’ll keep my distance. You won’t see me, you won’t hear me, it’ll be like this never happened.”

His eyebrows pulled together as I tripped over the words and his lips pulled at the corners with a frown. He stared at me, good and hard, like he was trying to figure out if I was telling the truth.

For good measure, I trailed my thumb and forefinger along my lips and turned my wrist, like my mouth was sealed with a lock and I was throwing away the key.

Billy sighed, like it pained him or something. And then he closed his eyes, his chest expanding with a giant inhale as he stood and dusted off his hands on the back of his jeans.

“Scarlet . . .” He sighed again, looking torn. He shook his head, and then leveled me with a direct stare. “I am not a good, kind person.”

I wrinkled my nose at him, another of my goofy grins—I’m sure—in place. “What? Of course you are.”

“No. I’m not.” He continued to frown at me, his gaze—somehow both warm and cool—moving over my face, and his lips were parted like he hadn’t decided whether or not to say the thing he was thinking.

Now I was worried. “Have you . . .” My heart was bouncing around my chest, not knowing whether to climb or plummet. “Have you changed your mind?”

At that, he smiled, all soft like, and huffed a laugh, looking lost and not at all like himself. “I guess I have.”

My face fell and I stumbled back, twisting my fingers and dropping my gaze. “I said I promise I won’t bother you at school. What else can I—”

“No. No, no, no.” He rushed forward, but then stopped short of touching me. “No. You should stay. Stay here. You’re right. My momma is right. No one will find out. It’ll be fine.”

I lifted my eyes, searching his. “But you just—”

“You were right. I wanted you gone,” he said, blunt as a spoon. “That’s why I told my mom you were here last week.”

My mouth fell open.

But just for a second. I closed it quick enough and grit my teeth, absorbing this blow and feeling like a complete and utter fool. *And he let me go on and on, apologizing, thanking him, promising to stay out of his way.*

What. An. ASSHOLE.

“But she was right to let you stay,” he added evenly, taking a step back as he surveyed me, shoving his hands in his pockets. “You should stay.”

You should stay, he said.

But what I heard was, *I feel sorry for you, so I guess you can stay.*

A breath tumbled out of me, all those warm feelings falling to the dirt, replaced with swirling arctic winds of resentment. I turned away from him, staring at the campfire, and wanting—again—to scream.

Because, what could I do? My options were: accept Billy—*asshole*—Winston's pity, or leave. My mind warred with itself, random thoughts flying around my head.

Always trust your instincts about people. You thought he was a jerk. Guess what? SURPRISE! He's a jerk.

"Scarlet?"

I could move camp closer to the school. That's Principal Sylvester's property, and if he found me, I'm pretty sure he'd have me arrested.

"Hey. Did you hear what I said? You don't have to go."

But anything is better than staying here . . .

"Scarlet—"

"Well." The word came out rough, garbled. I cleared my throat. I faced him. He flinched back at my expression, his eyes darting over my face. "While I appreciate your very generous offer of *pity*, I'm afraid I'll have to decline."

He lifted an eyebrow while also frowning in an impressive show of broody superiority. "You'll have to *decline*?"

"Yes. Thank you, but no thank you." For some reason, I gave him a curtsy. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I have some packing to do."

Billy's mouth fell right open at the same time his eyebrows shot high on his forehead. "You're—you—"

"Don't worry, I'll leave all your *stuff*. Maybe it's not too late to return it. Except, you know, the underwear I've got on. But I have some money saved up. I'll pay you back. I wouldn't want to put y'all out." I ignored the hard, sharp ache around my heart, knowing I was cutting off my nose to spite my face.

But I couldn't.

I can't.

I could not accept Billy Winston's pity. No way. NO DAMN WAY.

“Now hold on—” He reached for my arm as I turned and I shrugged him off roughly, glaring at him with every ounce of disgust and pride I had left.

Which, apparently, was more than I thought. *Go me.*

He looked frustrated. “I said you should stay.”

“And I said no thank you.”

He exhaled, the sound sorta like a rumble. “Scarlet St. Claire, you are being stubborn and stupid.”

I laughed, glancing around the campsite, taking mental stock of everything that was mine. *Walkman and batteries and headphones, blanket from that last visit to Goodwill, pillow, food from school, protein bars, bottle of water, rope from the junkyard, backpack, my old clothes . . .*

Huh. Well. On the bright side, shouldn’t be too hard to carry.

I lowered to my knees in front of my backpack and forced my hands to move slowly as I folded my clothes, carefully placing them inside. I also had a canvas bag around here somewhere, maybe under the Winstons’ blanket?

Billy, meanwhile, watched me. I wished he would leave, but I couldn’t force him, so I ignored his odious presence (I’d just learned the word *odious* this last week and now I loved it). I folded the beautiful new clothes Mrs. Winston had given me, gently returning them to their bags. I rolled up the sleeping bag and secured it with the ties. I took down my clothesline, looping it around my arm and hand.

But when I pulled the first stake from the tent, Billy made a loud growling sound, like an angry bear. Or a mountain lion. Or a really pissed off sixteen-year-old boy who wasn’t getting his way.

“I swear to God, Scarlet. You are the most stubborn, infuriating, *irritating* person I have ever met.” He placed himself between me and the tent, as though protecting it from my destruction. “What is it going to take to get you to stay? What do I have to do?”

I didn't believe he was sincere, so I asked for something ridiculous. "Apologize."

"Fine. Sorry. I'm very, very sorry. I've never been so sorry in my entire life. Happy?"

I looked at him, surprised. Well. That was easy. Too easy. Folding my arms, glowering, I worked to determine what percentage of his apology was sarcasm and how much was genuine remorse. *Or, I could just ask for something else ridiculous.*

"And I want you to stop acting like you're so much better than me."

He blinked, frowning, like I'd surprised him or struck a nerve.

His eyes seemed to gentle by the barest degree and the muscle at his jaw ticked giving me the sense my words frustrated him but didn't irritate him. "If I do that, then I apologize. I do not believe I am better than you." His tone was plain and firm and direct.

I examined him and this latest apology. *So formal.*

And yet, if it hadn't been formal, it wouldn't have been sincere. I wouldn't have believed him. Taking a deep breath, I continued to swap stares with him, not sure what to do next.

He waited for a time, and then he gave me a grim smile, more like a baring of teeth. "Am I forgiven?"

"I'll think about it."

Billy's eyelids drooped, his stare not quite a scowl. "Fine," he said through a clenched jaw. "Will you stay?"

Hmmm.

"I'll think about that too."

Now he did scowl, taking a silent, quick deep breath. "What else do you want?" he asked very slowly, his voice dark, deep, and communicating infinite levels of frustration.

For reasons unknown, that made me want to laugh. I turned away, deciding it was best he didn't see me fighting a delighted smile at his

obvious annoyance, and debated what to do next. My attention snagged on the thing he'd placed on the ground earlier, when he'd surprise-scared me and I took a tumble backward over a log.

It looked like . . .

"What is that? Is that a guitar?" I pointed to the black case sitting on the ground, turning a questioning frown on Billy.

"Yes. That is a guitar."

I looked between him and it. "Why'd you bring it?"

His eyes flashed, full of frigid ire. "I'd planned to teach you how to play it."

"Teach me?" I'm sure my eyes were big as quarters.

"Yes," he ground out.

"To play the guitar?"

Despite myself, and who he was, and the emotional roller coaster I'd just been on, this idea excited me. Therefore, my voice had pitched higher, betraying my excitement. Before, when he asked me what I wanted from him, I couldn't think of a single thing, not really.

Not until now.

Billy nodded, the side of his mouth tugging upward the barest fraction of a millimeter before he firmed his lips. I couldn't tell if that trace of a smile was amusement or sinister or what. I didn't know Billy Winston's smiles.

"But why?" I was still excited by the thought of learning how to play—as I'd always desperately wanted to learn a musical instrument—but offering to teach someone when you just wanted them gone didn't make any sense. "Why would you offer to teach me the guitar?"

"Because I . . ." he hesitated, looking torn for just a split second. But then, all doubt—and feeling—cleared out of his expression. He began again, using that voice of his: plain and direct, calm. "The truth is, I thought

maybe if we did something fun it wouldn't hurt your feelings as much when I asked you to leave."

I shivered, just a little one. Gosh, he was so cold. *This is Darrell.*

I swallowed at the thought. This, right here, how emotionless and unfeeling he came across, that was what Darrell Winston was like when he thought no one important was watching. But when he was around people he wanted to impress or con, Darrell was a master charmer, which was how he got his club name, Romeo. The man's charisma felt like a tractor beam.

Jethro had that charisma in spades. I'd never seen Jethro aloof though, only friendly. And his friendliness never seemed like an act to me.

But Billy, obviously he'd inherited the glacial gene.

"You don't want to teach me anymore?" I asked, just as direct.

"No reason to."

I squinted at him, crossing my arms. *Asshole.* "What if I'll only stay if you teach me how to play that guitar?"

His eyes also narrowed, just marginally, but he gave nothing of his thoughts away. He'd be a fierce poker opponent. I bet on the football field he was scary as hell.

"If . . ." he started, letting the word hang out there like steak sauce with no steak (pointless) for a good while. Drawing himself up to his full height, which was very high, he lifted his chin. "I'll teach you, if you *promise* to stay."

Biting the inside of my bottom lip to keep myself from agreeing too fast—because I wanted to yell *YES!* and be done with it—I forced myself to think his offer over.

"No other stipulations? You teach me, I stay?"

He nodded once.

"And you have to teach me more than once. You have to follow up."

He didn't nod. "How many times?"

I meandered a step closer. "Ten."

“Two.”

“Eight.”

“Two.”

I grunted. “That’s not how negotiations work, Billy. Eight.”

“Four, and that’s my final offer.”

“Deal.” I stuck my hand out.

He looked at it, seemed to debate touching me.

I grunted again. “I thought you weren’t going to treat me like garbage anymore?”

He leveled me with a coolly candid stare. “How am I treating you like garbage?”

I wiggled my fingers. “Worried I’ll give you cooties?”

Again that fraction of a smile. This time he didn’t hide it so fast, but I was still uncertain what it meant. “I am not worried about you giving me cooties, Scarlet.”

“Then shake on it.”

Gathering a deep inhale, he reached out and gripped my hand. A snap of electricity passed between us, like when clothes come out of the dryer all staticky, buzzing up my arm. I ignored it. His eyes jumped to mine, held, strangely bright but completely unreadable. I withdrew my hand, folding my arms again.

“Fine. It’s settled.” I angled my chin, trying to look down my nose at him, which was silly since he was so dang tall. “Four times.”

“Four times,” he repeated, also crossing his arms. “And you stay.”

He said this like a command, making me want to shave his eyebrows while he slept. I wouldn’t, but I wanted to.

Instead, I shrugged, pretending his tone didn’t get under my skin. “I’ll stay. You teach.”

And you better be a damn good teacher.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SCARLET

“It's delicious to have people adore you, but it's exhausting, too. Particularly when your own feelings don't match theirs.”

— TASHA ALEXANDER, *A FATAL WALTZ*

Getting to the Dragon Biker Bar wasn't a big deal. It would've been a long walk, mostly uphill, if I'd had to walk. But there was no need for that. Whenever anyone needed to get to the compound, all they had to do was walk to the closest pay phone and call in.

The Corner Shoppe, despite its use of the double “p” and an “e,” wasn't a cute little market. It was an eyesore. A bright neon yellow building with a tar roof, red rust stains on the peeling stucco, and a sign painted in black that read BEER, and another sign on the other side that read SMOKES.

Out front was a small parking lot with random cigarette butts and empty containers littering the pavement, a plastic bottle or two, and an empty Big Gulp cup that was spotted with red sticky soda on the inside. It was no secret, the Larsons, who owned the *Shoppe*, stole cups from the 7-11 in Merryville instead of buying their own.

But there was also a pay phone.

The phone rang three times before it was answered with a gruff, “Yeah?” a voice I recognized as belonging to one of the newer—and more

reliable—recruits.

“It’s Scarlet. I’m at the Corner Shoppe on Moth Run Road. Send someone to get me.”

“Got it.” *Click.*

I hung up, taking a couple deep breaths as I exited the booth, and walked a short distance to the tree line. The Corner Shoppe might’ve looked a mess, but it was surrounded on all sides by majestic oak, pine, and ash trees, the forest rising up behind the building as though to threaten this unsightly blight in the otherwise natural landscape.

Leaning against a tree set some feet away back from the road—just in case I didn’t like who they sent as my driver—I zoned out, psyching myself up for what was to come. Or, maybe more accurately, numbing my mind and shutting down.

Build a wall. One brick at a time. Don’t let anything in. Don’t let him in.

But I did completely bite off four of my fingernails before I heard the telltale sound of a motorcycle engine. My mouth suddenly dry, I straightened from the tree and hid myself behind it, peeking around the thick trunk just as the bike materialized.

Repo.

He wasn’t a bad guy, relative to the other bad guys I knew. I mean, he was a criminal, yes. He kept the books, managed the money flow—in and out—approved all purchases, authorized every single expense. But Repo never did pay me no mind growing up, and I always figured I wasn’t on his radar.

But from watching, I knew he had the respect of most of the men and had a reputation for being fair minded and even tempered. He didn’t threaten, didn’t seem prone to unnecessary violence, and entertained his lady friends away from the community rooms.

Also, the man never wore a helmet.

Releasing a long, deep breath, I pushed away from the safety of the tree as he haphazardly pulled into a spot. Not cutting the engine, not even turning his head, he waited. Boots flat on the ground, bored expression on his face.

This is it.

Walking toward my father's money man, I didn't even feel the cold. I took that as a good sign. He turned his head as I marched beyond the tree line and removed his sunglasses, his patient stare moving down and then up.

"Scarlet," he said as soon as I was within earshot, rubbing his tidy salt and pepper beard. His white skin was slightly pink at the cheeks and nose, probably due to the cold. If he were in a suit instead of black leather, he'd look like a banker on a bike.

"Repo," I said, stopping about three feet away.

His eyes moved over me again, taking in my dirty long-sleeved shirt and jeans. Probably my unwashed hair as well.

He grimaced. "You got a jacket?"

"Nope."

His grimace intensified. "I don't have an extra."

I said nothing, my mind finally quiet, checked out. Stepping closer, I moved to mount the bike. He stopped me with a hand on my arm.

"Hold on. Take my jacket."

I shrugged him off, staring straight into his dark eyes. "I'm not wearing your piece of shit jacket. And if you try to make me, I'll take it off mid-ride and throw it in the woods."

The side of his mouth quirked up, but his eyes held no humor. "Fine. Get on."

I'd done this a thousand times, maybe more. How regular folks sat in a chair, that's how I got on a motorcycle. Mounting the bike behind him, I

settled my hands around his waist but kept my back straight. I needed to touch him to feel how he moved, but that was it. Minimal contact sufficed.

“Ah, wait now. I got a helmet for you.” He twisted at the waist, reaching beyond me for the compartment at my back. “In the trap. Get it and put it on, unless you think that’s a *piece of shit* too.”

I didn’t move. “You’re not wearing one.”

The older biker’s gaze, hard as it was, seemed to warm a little. “Yeah. And I ain’t Razor Dennings’s fourteen-year-old daughter, am I? Put it on. Please.”

Giving my eyes a half roll, because feeling disdain at the irony of the situation was better than feeling mournful and wretched, I did as instructed. Vaguely, I noted the inside of the helmet smelled like it was coated in cheap perfume and hairspray. If I’d been myself, fully conscious and reacting as normal, I would’ve gagged.

Repo watched me put it on, strap it into place, and waited for my hands to find his waist again. Then and only then did he pull away from the Corner Shoppe. And we were off.

Later, when I recalled the events of the day, I didn’t remember much of the ride, just that it was windy. It was like we pulled away, and then suddenly we were there. Repo carefully slowed and walked his cycle next to an impossibly long line of bikes. I slid off, my movements unhurried, and placed the helmet back in the trap. I was calm, so calm. *Good.*

Not waiting for him, I stuck my hands in my back pockets and strolled to the front door.

“Hey. Wait. Wait up,” he called, a note of urgency in his voice. “Jesus, Scarlet. Hold on.”

I turned. “Why?”

He finished up with his bike and quickly walked to where I stood, taking off his glasses again. With a mild frown on his face, Repo seemed to be studying me with a strange kind of intensity.

“Why’d you want back in?”

“I’m hungry. I just want breakfast.”

His eyebrows pulled together. “You came back here for breakfast?” he repeated, like he was sure he’d misheard me.

I nodded.

The older man sighed. “Shit, Scarlet. I’ll buy you breakfast. Let’s go to Daisy’s. You don’t have to . . .” He sighed again. “You don’t have to go inside.”

“I also want some money.”

The muscle at Repo’s temple ticked. He reached in his back pocket and, to my surprise, pulled out a wad of money. “How much you need?”

Taking a step back, I glanced between him and the cash, the surprise and unexpectedness of the offer cracking my armor of detachment.

But then I remembered where I was and who I was talking to. Repo was a Wraith, first and foremost and always. Maybe he was trying to trick me, test me as part of some sick mind game of my father’s. Or maybe he was looking for some “female companionship.” It was very possible that Repo had never mistreated me prior to now because I’d never been on Repo’s radar prior to now because I’d never been old enough to register *prior to now*.

Whatever. I couldn’t trust Repo. I couldn’t trust anyone. *Build a wall. One brick at a time. Don’t let anything in. Don’t let him in.*

I tilted my head to the side and sneered at his wad of cash. “And what do you expect me to do for this money?”

The big man sighed for the third time, his eyes cutting to the right as he answered through gritted teeth. “Nothing, Scarlet. Not a damn thing.”

I shook my head, taking another step back as his attention returned to me. “Yeah. No thanks. I’ve never met a dollar bill without strings attached to it.”

A flicker of something flashed behind his eyes, and it seemed like he was about to say something, but then stopped himself. Cursing under his breath, he pulled five one-hundred-dollar bills off the top, grabbed my hand, placed the bills in my palm, and curled my fingers around them before I could react.

“There. No strings. Now, where you wanna go? Back to the Corner? Or maybe the bus station?”

Curling my lip, I threw the money in his face. “Fuck off, Repo. And leave me the fuck alone.” Not sparing him another glance, I turned and marched to the club, opening the door without looking back.

I thought I heard him say, “Stubborn,” or something like it, but I didn’t pay him any mind. I was here for a reason, and I needed to get it over with before reality seeped in and I lost my nerve.

Taking no notice of the large bar area—which was the first room as you entered—I headed straight for the labyrinth of hallways behind the kitchen. The first few doors were community spaces, some had pool tables, some had beds, some had conference tables and the like. Further back were the junior recruits’ rooms. When I’d been planning this, I figured they’d mostly be asleep. Luckily, I was right.

Down a set of stairs, another hallway, a hidden door, another hallway, up two flights, another hall. I’d made it to my father’s rooms and I honestly could not tell you if there’d been anyone I’d passed on the way.

My hand found the handle and . . .

I glanced down at my fingers. They were shaking. I closed my eyes, clenching my jaw, taking a few quick, deep breaths. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. Just do it. Just do it.”

Damn Repo. I was ready to do this until he’d offered me money. For the barest fraction of a second I’d almost believed him, that he’d give me five hundred dollars with no strings. But I was no fool. With these guys, there’s always strings. *Always.*

Besides, money wasn't the real reason I was here.

Taking one last deep breath, I exhaled slowly. The numbness descended once more, falling like a soothing blanket of detachment over my head, my shoulders, my back and stomach and thighs.

You are fine. It's fine. You've done this before. It'll all be over soon. Build a wall. One brick at a time. Don't let anything in. Don't let him in.

Staring at the door until I felt absolutely nothing, I turned the knob and walked in.

I knew where my father would be. He liked to sit on a stool in front of the black lacquer bar at the far end of the main room, one foot on the floor, one foot on the bottom rung of the stool. I forced my eyes higher and his face came into focus.

He wore all black, a stark contrast to his pale white skin, and his eyes were blue, but not like mine. *Thank God*. If I'd had his eyes, and I had to look at them every time I saw my reflection in a mirror, I would never look in a mirror.

His hair was black and long and gleamed under the lights. His chin came to a subtle point—like mine—and his cheekbones were high and sharp, with shadowy indents beneath. My father would've been a good-looking man if he weren't so terrifying.

He looked at me like he wasn't surprised to see me. But then, I imagined Repo had informed him I was on my way.

Razor licked his bottom lip, nibbled on it, his dead-eyed stare settling on me like a cold hand. I struggled—and I mean *struggled*—not to feel it.

"Scarlet."

"Daddy." It was like a script.

"What are you doing here, girl?"

"I need money," I said, monotone. *Build a wall. One brick at a time. Don't let anything in. Don't let him in.*

“You want money?” He perked up, a flicker of life behind his calculating gaze. “You asking your daddy for something, Scarlet?”

“Yes, sir.”

He stood, sauntered to me, stopped about two feet away. “You know what happens when you ask for something.” His stare grew bright, seemed to glow with excitement.

“Yes, sir,” I said evenly.

He examined me for a long time. Or maybe he was just savoring the anticipation before he got to cut into something. Drawing his bottom lip between his teeth again, he chewed on it.

“That’s why you’re back?”

I nodded, meeting his gaze squarely. It was too late now—too late to change my mind, too late to leave—and for some reason, that made everything feel so much easier. *No choice.*

A fleeting smile arrested his features and he laughed—like a giggle—turning and moving toward the tall knife cabinet along the far wall. “You staying around? How long you here for?”

Rid of his gaze, I let mine fall to the floor, focusing on nothing. “For a little. I wanted to get something to eat from the kitchen.” In many ways, the worst was already over.

“You’ll eat when I say you can eat,” he said absentmindedly, opening the cabinet.

I pushed away fear upon seeing the glint of the knives and worked to subdue it. “Okay. Can I eat here?”

“I don’t fucking care if you fucking eat.” Razor pulled a pack of Marlboros out of a front pocket and patted his other pockets, presumably for a lighter. His attention moved over the blades.

In the brief silence, I heard a rustling noise from one of the back rooms. “Is that Scarlet?” a woman asked, her voice scratchy. It could’ve been my mother, hard to tell.

Razor turned over his shoulder. "Shut the fuck up and get back in bed!" The rustling stopped, the sound retreated. My father looked at me, scowled. "What?"

"Nothing." I shook my head, arranging my features to appear as bored as possible.

He examined me, his eyes narrowing. "I have a question for you."

Shit.

"Yes?"

"You know Raymond's oldest son? Prince King?" He pulled out a cigarette, lifted it to his lips.

Show nothing. Feel nothing. "Yeah, I know him."

"He was expelled."

"Oh?" I asked, sounding completely unperturbed. Maybe it was good I knew what was coming, maybe it was good I had to prepare for it. I was a rock: blank, without motivation, without fear, without worry, without purpose.

My father lit the cigarette, took a drag, never taking his eyes off me. "It happened last week. You didn't hear about that?"

"You know I'm not a big talker."

He smirked at that. "Yeah. I guess I do know that. You haven't heard anything?"

"I'm not a big listener either."

Again, he nibbled on his bottom lip, and then took another pull from his smoke, speaking as he exhaled, "Well I heard something about you."

"Oh?"

"I was just about to send my boys out to pick you up, matter of fact. You got a boyfriend? That McClure kid? I don't like that."

I pressed my lips together, pretending like I was fighting a smile. "Ben McClure? Big Ben? The Sainted Son of Green Valley? That's real funny."

"It ain't true?" His eyes were assessing.

“Uh, no. I mean, I know him. He’s nice to me. Always trying to give me charity. But I—”

“Don’t you take a thing from him, you hear me? Tell him to fuck off. Like I said, I don’t like it.”

“I don’t take anything from him. If I need something, I come to you.”
Build a wall. One brick at a time. Don’t let anything in. Don’t let him in.

He twisted his lips to the side subtly, like my statement pleased him, his gaze flickering down and then up. “You look like shit. Too skinny. You should stay a while, take a shower. You stay for a bit.”

“Okay.” I shrugged, like this didn’t matter to me one way or the other.

But make no mistake, I would *not* be staying.

He turned back to the cabinet, taking another puff, blowing out. “You know what? Forget I said that. You talk to him the next time you see that boy.”

What?

I let my confusion show on my face and in my voice. “What would I talk to Ben McClure about?”

He pulled out a knife and I tried not to look at it.

“Talk to lots of kids. Talk to everyone. Find out who got Raymond’s son expelled,” he said. “You find out, I’ll give you some real money.”

I made sure to look like this interested me. “How much?”

“Fucking greedy. You’ve always been so fucking greedy, just like your momma.” He shook his head, grinning and putting the knife back. “I’ll give you two thousand dollars. Five if the rat turns out to be a traitor here.”

I didn’t have to pretend to be greedy now. My mouth went dry and all pretense immediately fell away. *Five thousand dollars?*

I could disappear. I could go somewhere else, live a different life. I could pretend I was older, get a job, just . . . disappear. *Five thousand dollars.*

“Yeah, I see you like that. Good. Find that rat, Scarlet. Folks in town trust you, they think you’re sweet. If anyone can do it, you can.” He was suddenly walking toward me.

I’d been so preoccupied by the dollar amount, I hadn’t realized he’d already picked out the knife he’d be using. Shaking myself, I blinked, the task at hand coming sharply into focus. Razor took one last drag from the cigarette, the spark of life behind his eyes telling me I’d made him happy, and then flicked it to the ground.

“Uh, where? Where do you want to cut?” I asked, swallowing the last word. *Oh God. Here it comes. Here it comes.*

“Your back.” His eyes dropped. “I’m not finished there yet.”

I nodded and turned, lifting the shirt high to my shoulders so that my entire back was exposed, the air in my lungs a dead weight. I felt myself sway a little, dizzy, but quickly gathered a deep breath and grit my teeth. I couldn’t faint. I couldn’t. If I did, it’d be ten times worse.

Pull yourself together. Build a wall. One brick at a time. Don’t let anything in. Don’t let him in. Get through this. Just get through it.

“Thank you,” I heard him say, his tone reverent, almost kind. “You’re a good girl, Scarlet. You’re daddy’s good girl.”

I closed my eyes. I built a wall, one brick at a time, and nothing got in. Not a thing.

I felt nothing.

* * *

I didn’t stay after.

I found Repo in the office closest to the back stairs on the main level and—as my father instructed—told him to give me the money I’d earned. He did, from that same wad of cash he’d taken out earlier.

I don't know what his thoughts or feelings were handing over the money, since I didn't look at him and he didn't speak, but I got the sense he wanted to say something. I didn't care to listen, so once the bills were in my fist, I walked out, forgetting about my plan to eat breakfast. I wasn't hungry anyway.

Five thousand dollars.

My father always cleaned me off and put a big bandage over the spot after, taking as much care with the wound as he did with inflicting it. So I didn't have to worry about bleeding through my shirt anytime soon. But I'd have to change the dressing tonight, before I went to bed. I didn't have any oversized Band-Aids, disinfectant, and such at the camp, so I decided to stop by the store on the way.

The walk was long, but it was downhill. My back hurt, every step irritating the spot. The cold helped. Also, to my everlasting shame, I couldn't stop imagining myself boarding a bus with five thousand dollars in my pocket.

I know who did it. I could leave all this behind. I could just disappear. But that would mean turning in Carla . . .

I had no idea how long I walked—an angel on one shoulder, a devil on the other—but I was just about to take my exit off the Parkway when I heard the first car of the morning coming up behind me. Careful to step off the asphalt and into the gravel, I kept walking. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, folks just drove on past. Every once in a blue moon, someone would pull to the side, ask me if I needed help. I wasn't in a mood for talking, so I hoped this car would be the former.

But no. I heard the car decelerate.

Head down. Ignore. If the driver didn't take the hint, I'd be more than happy to run into the forest until they left. Yeah, I'd probably bleed all over my shirt, and that would hurt like hell, but the shirt was black so I didn't have to worry about a stain showing through. *No big deal.*

The front of the truck came into view and the car slowed to keep pace with me. Once the driver's side window began rolling down, I took a deep breath and prepared to run.

But then a familiar voice said, "Scarlet?"

I glanced over and my surprise stopped me in my tracks. "Ben?"

He gave me a big smile. "I thought that was you. How are you? What're you doing out here?"

"Oh, I, uh . . ." I rubbed my forehead, shaking my head, forcing a laugh. I looked a mess—dirty hair, clothes, and such. I didn't care. However, if this had been almost any other day, I would've been embarrassed for Ben to see me like this. I was still numb. That was good, otherwise I was going to cry.

Inhaling deeply, I managed a small smile. "I'm good. Just, you know, walking."

"On the Parkway?"

"Yeah."

Ben looked at me like I was funny. "Well, do you want a ride?"

"Okay." I nodded. "I was on my way to the store. Would you mind giving me a ride?"

"Sure." He seemed puzzled—likely because I was nowhere near the store—but he didn't hesitate to hop out of his truck and circle around the front, opening the passenger side door. "I'll drive you."

"Thank you," I said robotically and climbed up to the seat. Once he shut the door, I settled on the edge of the bench, sitting as far forward as I could.

He walked around the truck bed this time to the driver's side. Once he was back in, he glanced at me, did a double take, and frowned.

If he says something about my dirty hair, I will punch him in the face.

"Scarlet, you should wear a seatbelt."

"Oh. Yes." And that's when I realized what I'd been doing, perched on the edge so my back wouldn't touch the cushion behind me.

Gritting my teeth against the pain, I scootched backward and reached for the seatbelt, holding my breath while I twisted to buckle it.

“There.” He grinned at me, obviously not even noticing I looked so out of sorts. *Good.* He put the car in drive. “I’m glad I happened by.”

“Me too,” I said, but I knew it lacked feeling. *Nothing much to do about that.*

I felt his eyes on me again, intermittently as he drove. “Is something wrong?”

Keeping my eyes forward, I said, “Oh, I hurt my back a little. That’s all.”

He was quiet for a moment. Then he asked, “Are you upset with me about something?”

I shook my head. “No. Just tired.”

“Yeah. I feel that. I drove back from Nashville on Friday and I still haven’t recovered.” He chuckled.

When I didn’t echo his laugh, I heard him clear his throat. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No.” I forced myself to meet his gaze and smile widely. “Of course not. I’m tired. That’s it. I promise.”

He didn’t look convinced, but he nodded, concentrating on the road again.

“Really, Ben. It’s not you.”

He nodded again, not looking at me, but when he spoke again his voice sounded strained, “Hey, so, aren’t you supposed to be in school?”

I glanced out the window on my side, bracing my elbow on the sill so my back wouldn’t jostle against the seat as much while he drove. “I’m out sick today.”

We drove in silence for a bit, him with his thoughts, me with mine. Honestly, I didn’t have many thoughts other than the list of things I was getting from the store.

Then, as soon as the grocery sign was in sight, he asked, “Are you sure you’re not upset with me about something?”

“It’s honestly just my—uh—I’m tired. It’ll be better tomorrow, but I’ll probably stay home anyway. There’s the Piggly Wiggly. You don’t have to take me to the front.”

Ben was quiet as he pulled into the lot, placing his car in park. I turned to unfasten my seatbelt, again holding my breath, and he covered my hands, stopping me.

I looked at him.

He was smiling. *Why is he smiling?* It looked . . . shy.

“Well, if you’re not going to school tomorrow, can I take you out for breakfast? Or how about lunch?”

I required several seconds to understand his words, and when I did, I could only repeat them, “Out for breakfast?”

“Yeah. How about Daisy’s? I always get a milkshake for breakfast if I go there. Have you ever done that?”

In a daze, I shook my head. “I haven’t done that.”

“Then it’s settled. Where should I pick you up?”

“The Corner Shoppe.” The words were out of my mouth without me even thinking them.

His smile spread, looking pleased. “All right then. I’ll pick you up at ten, Corner Shoppe. And we’ll have milkshakes.”

Not waiting for me to respond, Ben opened his door, jumped out, and walked around the front toward mine. He handed me down, still smiling, and then gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, like he couldn’t help himself.

“You’re not allowed to change your mind and you’re not allowed to be late,” he said, walking away with a spring in his step.

I watched him leave the parking lot and make a right onto the main street. I watched his car until it disappeared. And then I stood there for a while longer, still numb.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BILLY

“She tries to wear her pain on the inside. She always has. It’s the trademark of the oldest sibling, I think.”

— LAURA MILLER, MY BUTTERFLY

“I hoped you’d be here, and here you are!” Samantha clapped her hands together, a giant grin on her face.

“Hey, Sam.” I rocked backward on my heels, unable to hide my confusion. “What’re you doing here?”

She pushed past me. “Well, I know y’all don’t have football practice this week, so I thought maybe you’d be at the mill, working. But then I thought you might be here, so I drove over and—presto abracadabra voila!—here you are.”

I turned as she spoke, shutting the door behind me and following her into the family room, wishing she’d called first.

“Here I am. Just trying to get some studying done.”

“Studying?” She scrunched her face, spinning in a circle and looking around as she took off her jacket. She was wearing a tank top, revealing her tanned arms, neck and chest. Sam’s maternal grandparents were originally from Iraq and she’d inherited her mother’s dark brown hair and olive-toned

skin as well as her father's green-blue eyes. It was a striking combination. "Who else is here? Is your momma here?"

"No." I meandered further into the room. "Just me."

I didn't get three steps inside before she wrapped her arms around my neck and fastened her mouth to mine. She kissed me, her hands moving down my shirt, lifting the edge of it.

I caught her fingers before they made contact with my stomach. "Whoa, now." Tearing my mouth away, I set her back. "Sam, wait a minute."

"I don't want to wait anymore." She came at me again.

I held my hands up, sidestepping. "Now isn't a good time. I have a test tomorrow."

She made a pouty face, placing her hands on her hips. "In trig? Ugh! Carrie told me that too. Who gives a big test on a half day? Right before Thanksgiving."

I shrugged tiredly, turning for the dining room where I had my stuff all spread out. "If you want to sit for a while or have something to drink before you go, help yourself. I think Roscoe made lemonade."

Samantha came up behind me and wrapped her arms around my torso, forcing me to walk with her plastered to my back. "I miss you, Billy. Promise me we'll have some time this weekend for fun stuff. I don't know how much longer I can wait."

I peeled her off and pulled out a chair for her at the table. "Sit here. You want something to drink?"

She plopped into it, giving me a dark look. "No, I don't want something to drink." Then she straightened, smiling. "I could give you a blow job while you study."

I paused halfway to my seat, my mouth falling open and along with it a laugh tumbled out. "Uh, that's awfully nice of you but—"

"Then you could return the favor."

As I sat, I frowned at her. She was wagging her eyebrows, leaning forward.

“Sam. I really do have to study. This test is important.”

“Okay.” She leaned back. Pouting, sighing dramatically, she rolled her eyes. “I guess learning stuff is ‘important.’”

She put the word *important* in air quotes and it made me smile. She could be funny when she wanted to be. “So, what are your plans for Thanksgiving?”

Samantha’s attention had dropped to the tabletop. She was using her thumb to scrape at something. “If I asked you for your letterman jacket, would you give it to me?”

Lifting an eyebrow at the unexpected question, I sat back in my chair, resting my elbows on the armrests. “You want my jacket?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Is that something people still do?”

“We could make it popular again. I’ll give you my jacket!”

I chuckled, my eyes moving over her tiny body. “And I’d what? Use it as a scarf?”

She smiled, laughing too. But then her smile fell. She looked sad.

“Billy.”

“Sam.”

Lifting her gaze over my head, she asked, “If we aren’t going to have sex, then why’re we together?”

My mouth curved just slightly. “We like each other?”

“Like? Blah!” She made a wincing face and shook her head. “Sorry, no. I don’t like anyone enough to date them but not have sex with them ever again. I put up with that from Ben McClure for a *year* and those are months of my life I can’t ever get back. Besides, sexless fun is what friends are for.”

That made me laugh, and I shook my head, turning my attention back to my trig book.

“Billy.”

“Hmm?”

“Do you want my body?”

“Always.” I scanned the practice test questions, happy to find they all looked easy enough.

“That didn’t sound convincing.”

“What?”

“Billy.” A hint of pleading entered her voice. “We don’t have much time. Your momma will be home by six, right?”

Setting my teeth, I glanced up again. “Sorry. I got a lot on my mind. And I need to—”

“—study for the test. I know.” Her gaze softened. “I guess I know you do. I mean, I know you do. You have lots going on . . .”

We looked at each other for a stretch, and her cagey expression gave me the sense she was wanting to tell me something but wasn’t so sure how I’d react.

So I prompted, “You got something to tell me?”

“I feel like you don’t have time for me.”

When I didn’t respond, because I didn’t know what to say and because she was kinda right, she stood suddenly, her hands coming to her face. “Just forget I said anything.”

“Sam—”

“No. It’s fine.” She darted out of the dining room.

I stood, followed her, caught her hand and tugged until she turned to face me. “Wait. It’s not fine.”

“No. It is fine.” Her arms came around my neck and she kissed me real fast, once on the lips. “I’m fine. We’re fine. Everything is fine. I can wait until you’re not so busy. I just miss you. I even miss your scruffy beard. . .” She tilted her head to the side and pressed herself against me, her

movements both agitated and desperate. “And also your body, okay? I miss your body. A lot.”

I gave her a small smile, waiting for some flicker of similar desperation in me, but all I felt was warm affection and exhaustion. “I miss yours too.”

She made a face, her eyes searching mine. “Billy. I want you to promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“As soon as you’re tired of me—”

“Sam—”

“No. Listen, okay. As soon as you’re not thinking about me every day; as soon as I’m not your first thought in the morning; I want you to break up with me.”

I reared back and I blinked at her, stunned.

“‘Cause that’s how I feel about you,” she continued, looking nervous. “I think about you all the time. I can’t concentrate on anything, because I just want to be with you . . . all the time.” She bit her lip, her eyes growing big, and then she blurted, “I love you.”

We stared at each other. She’d never said those words before.

Damn.

I didn’t like to think myself a coward, but right then, in that moment, faced with a good, kind woman offering me her heart, I didn’t know if I had the strength to admit the truth to her.

Turns out, I didn’t have to.

Her arms fell from my neck, and she stepped back, her eyes sad. So sad. “You don’t feel the same.”

“Sam.” I couldn’t catch my breath, but I did try to catch her hand again. She moved out of my reach.

A laugh escaped her, and she clamped her hand over her mouth, water pooling in her eyes.

I breathed out remorse for not feeling enough. “I really—”

“Like me. You really *like* me.”

“I do.”

“As a friend,” she said, a tear trailing down her cheek.

I grimaced, that wasn’t true. I was attracted to her, and I liked the stuff we’d done, and being with her was fun. But I went days without thinking about her. And when I did think about her, it was more like a task I needed to cross off a list.

I had so much on my mind, she didn’t fill my thoughts and heart. Maybe I didn’t have the space to spare. Maybe my family would always have the lion’s share of my attention and focus. Whatever. It didn’t matter. My reasons didn’t matter. I didn’t want Sam like she wanted me, not like she deserved. And now I knew it, and she did too.

In the next moment, she’d straightened her spine and lifted her chin, sniffing and swiping away tears, her eyes darting everywhere but at me. “Well. Okay then. I guess we’re breaking up.”

Damn. “What can I do?”

She shook her head, laughing again. “Nothing.” Her laughter continued for a few more seconds, and then it tapered to silence.

Looking at me, a determined glint in her eye, she walked right up to me, grabbed my face, and kissed me. I let her, and I kissed her back, but I didn’t touch her anywhere else. I didn’t hold her.

When she was finished, she pulled away with a smile that needled my chest. “Billy Winston, you’re one of the good ones. You take my breath away. You’ve stolen my heart.” Her voice cracked, her smile wobbled. “I hope one day you find someone who steals yours.”

Another tear spilled down her cheek and she released me, walking past to the door. I heard it open. I heard it close. I closed my eyes.

Damn.

I’d hurt her.

Damn.

That had not been my intention.

Damn.

Dragging my feet, I returned to the dining room. I sat down. I stared at the textbook. *What a shitty day.*

I tried to set my mind on studying again. Neither my eyes nor my brain would focus. My limbs were restless and lethargic. There'd been no practice after school today and my body was used to running, working, fatigue.

I stood, I stretched, I paced the floor, I checked the clock. Still over two hours until the rest of my family got home. Debating my options, I considered going on a run or making dinner. It wasn't my night, it was Ashley's night, but that didn't mean I couldn't—

My attention caught on the guitar. I'd placed it on the stand adjacent to the fireplace last night after I'd played for about an hour. I'd also played on Sunday night. Doing so had helped calm me down after my . . . *interaction* with Scarlet.

Scarlet hadn't wanted her first lesson on Sunday when we struck our bargain, said she wouldn't be able to concentrate on learning until she could, and I quote, "Look at your face without wanting to shave your eyebrows off."

Well then.

I'd left. Two days had passed. Maybe she'd cooled down enough now that I'd get to keep my eyebrows. The sun was still up, mostly. My family was gone. I didn't have enough time to start and finish a house project.

The more I deliberated, the more I decided tonight was as good a night as any to get Scarlet started on her lessons.

* * *

Standing at the edge of the forest, the guitar case strung over my shoulder, a plate of food and a thermos of hot chocolate—as peace offerings—in my hand and under my arm, I waited.

Last time, it only took a few minutes before I heard her, before her voice rose above the sound of wind through the leaves and birdsong. It had been faint, maybe the wind had a part in carrying her voice to me, but I'd heard it.

I didn't hear her now.

I laughed lightly at myself. *She can't sing all the time, Billy.*

I batted that thought away. If anyone should sing all the time, it was Scarlet St. Claire.

How about, shouldn't you be studying?

That question was just as easy to justify and dismiss. Having glanced at the practice questions, I felt pretty confident for tomorrow's test. Plus, I'd have time after dinner.

You'd prefer to spend time with Scarlet than Samantha?

I scowled, unable to think of an answer that made any sense, so I ignored the thought and turned, scrutinizing the horizon beyond the house. The sun was low, throwing spears of orange and pink across the sky. It hadn't yet sunk below the roof, but it was well on its way. I wouldn't need a flashlight to see where I was going, but I didn't know where I was going. Once I was in the woods, I was blind regardless.

I closed my eyes and waited and listened.

Birds. Not many, just a few, singing in a short, trilling burst. Crickets. Frogs, maybe? The rustle of leaves falling from trees, the whistle of wind through barren branches.

A voice. I opened my eyes, an automatic smile tugging at my mouth. *Her voice.*

I stepped into the forest and I followed the sound, my heart speeding ahead of me, seeming to push me forward, or lead me forward, or

something like that. It was cold and I felt it acutely, a shiver running along my spine making me grateful I thought to bring the hot chocolate.

As I got closer, and just like the last two times I'd approached her campsite, I began to sneak. Why this was my instinct, I couldn't figure. But I did it anyway. Stepping lightly, checking for twigs before I placed my foot. I strained my ears and tried to decipher the words of her song.

And then I stopped, a different kind of shiver running down my spine. She was singing a Nine Inch Nails song entitled, "Hurt" that had been covered last year by Johnny Cash. She must've been singing that version because the tempo was slow, like a ballad. But it wasn't just the song choice.

Something is wrong.

Like before, her voice was beautiful, robust, heavenly. Unlike before, she sounded . . . *Sad*? No. The song was sad. It was one of those true emo songs, and I might've teased her about it, except she didn't sound just sad.

Tortured. Agonized. Lost. Broken.

Forgetting to sneak, I plowed ahead, my eyes wide and watchful. I found her flat rise of earth easier this time, my feet carrying me straight there. As soon as I crested the incline, I saw her. She was lying on her side, her back to me. Curled into a ball from the looks of it, she faced the campfire. Scarlet wore no blanket, no jacket. Just jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. But her headphones were on.

I didn't want to scare her, like I'd done the last two times, but I couldn't think of a way to approach without freaking her out again. I waited, listening to her song, waiting for it to finish and growing more restless with each stanza.

Just when I thought she was done, she reached forward, pressed a button on her Walkman, and started singing again. From the beginning.

Well, this could go on forever.

I let the guitar fall from my shoulder, guiding the case carefully to the ground and placing the food and hot chocolate next to it. Wiping my hands on my jeans, I crossed to her and, hesitating just a second, I knelt next to her on the blanket, tapping her shoulder and bracing myself for something unexpected, like perhaps a fist to the face.

She stiffened. She stopped singing. But she didn't move. She didn't make a sound.

Licking my lips, I pulled the headphone facing up away from her ear. "Hey. It's me. Billy."

Scarlet leaned further forward, giving me more of her back. "Leave me alone."

I frowned at the faint curve of her cheek visible and studied her more closely. Her hair was a tangle, looked unwashed, greasy. Her faded black shirt had smudges of dirt and a stain on the lower left. Or maybe it wasn't a stain, maybe it was a wet spot. Her jeans were too big and yet threadbare. And she had a hole in her shoe.

"Scarlet, why aren't you in the new clothes my momma bought?"

"Go away!" she screamed, startling me, her hand on the blanket in front of her balling into a fist.

I rocked back on my heels, shocked. Yelling was one thing when we were arguing like on Sunday. But screaming? I stood, shoving fingers into my hair and getting a better view of her face. She'd been crying. A lot. Her face was red and puffy, her eyes near swollen.

I had a sister. So I knew teenage girls were prone to odd fits of emotion, crying and the like. Just like me and my brothers were prone to spells of aggression. But this didn't seem like one of Ash's monthly *no one understands me* fits. This seemed—felt—serious.

Walking around her head, I came to stand in front of her, hoping she'd look at me at least. Instead, she turned into the blanket, her dirty hair covering her face.

“Scarlet . . .” I crouched low and reached my hand out but didn’t put it on her. My heart and mind were racing. “You can keep singing, if you want. You won’t even know I’m here.”

She made a small sound, a wretched whimper, and my stomach dropped.

“Go away. Please. Please.” She was crying again, her hand now limp in front of her. “Just go away.”

I couldn’t. And I wouldn’t. It wasn’t in me.

Instead, I did touch her. I placed my hand on her shoulder. I crept closer when she didn’t flinch away and—again, hesitating for just a moment—I slipped my other hand under her arm against the blanket. Close now, I lifted her up, using my grip on her shoulders to bring her body to mine.

Surprisingly, she didn’t fight me. She came to me, alarmingly docile at first, letting me bring her to my chest and cradle her. But then she reached for me. Her arms wrapped around my neck like I was a life preserver, and she buried her face in my neck, crying. Crying and crying.

Her body shook with her cries. I had to blink against a stinging behind my own eyes. Holding her tightly, an achy, cold sensation swirled in my stomach.

Something is wrong.

And something about this, the weight of her crushing sadness, seemed vaguely familiar.

“Shhh. It’s okay. It’s all right. I got you,” I said, because that’s what my momma had said to me when I’d been so angry and completely inconsolable after—

I stiffened, a shock of memory hitting me in the back of the brain. My eyes widened with suspicion and my arms reflexively tightened around her. She winced, pulling back and crying out in pain. I immediately opened my arms.

“What? What is it?”

She retreated, bowing her head like she was too tired to hold it up.

I pushed her hair from her face, tried to tuck it behind her ears. “Scarlet, this isn’t you. Where are you? What happened? Tell me what happened.”

She shook her head, looking everywhere but at me, and then closed her eyes. “Please don’t make me talk about it.”

The last time I’d been this frantic, I’d done something reckless but not stupid. I’d been twelve, and I’d swung a baseball bat at my father.

“Okay. You don’t need to talk about it.” I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and gently brought her back to my chest, tucking her forehead under my chin. “Just don’t ask me to leave. I’m not going to leave.”

I felt her face crumple again, but no tears.

I suspected she was out of tears.

CHAPTER NINE

BILLY

“She tries to wear her pain on the inside. She always has. It’s the trademark of the oldest sibling, I think.”

— LAURA MILLER, MY BUTTERFLY

She led me out of the woods. I still couldn’t find my way without her. And then I led her across the giant field to the house. We snuck in the back and I felt her reluctance with every step.

“Your momma has been so good to me. I shouldn’t—”

I snatched her hand, held it tightly. “Please. Don’t talk. You’ll wake Cletus, he’s a light sleeper.”

That shut her up.

I pulled her up the stairs, down the hall, and into my room. I used to share it with Jethro. Now it was just me, but his bed was still there, all made up and ready. Roscoe sometimes used it when he had a nightmare. So did Cletus. So did Duane. And so did Beau.

But never Ashley. When her nightmares came, she slept with our mother.

Flipping on the light next to my desk, I turned to my dresser and riffled through the bottom drawer, looking for my warmest pajamas. Finding a pair

of flannel ones—which would be huge on her, but they’d keep her warm—I faced Scarlet and stopped short.

She was holding herself about the middle, her eyes puffy and unfocused, like she was remembering—or reliving—something. Shoving back a sense of helplessness, I moved to her and tucked her hair behind her ear to get her attention. She blinked, lifting her head and coming partway out of the fog to look at me.

“Hey.” I gave her a small smile. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

She nodded, accepting the folded pajamas as though on autopilot. Stepping around her, I opened the door and peeked out. When I was sure the coast was clear, I grabbed her hand again and pulled her down the hall to the bathroom.

Stepping inside, she looked around, as though this were the first time she’d seen a bathroom. Something about it suffocated me, made the blood pump quicker and angrier in my veins.

“The towels are in there,” I rasped out, pointing to the closet on the other side of the toilet. “When I hear the shower stop, I’ll wait another few minutes so you can get dressed, then I’ll knock. Like this.”

I tapped two times on the doorjamb, paused, and then tapped again.

Scarlet again nodded. She’d been doing a lot of nodding instead of talking, even at the campsite where there was no Cletus to wake up. That, too, felt suffocating.

Searching her dazed, downcast eyes one more time, and feeling restless to do something that would make a difference, I asked inanely, “How do you like your hot chocolate?”

Her stare lifted to mine, cleared, held. “Four big marshmallows. If you have them.”

“Okay. You got it. See you soon.”

She gave me a weak smile, turning away as she closed the door. I waited outside. Listening. Listening.

When I didn't hear what I expected, I leaned into the door and whispered, "Lock the door, Scarlet."

"Oh! Sorry," she whispered back, followed by a soft click of the lock being engaged.

Standing there, suddenly out of breath, my mind was a mess. Someone hurt her. Someone worked real hard to break her spirit. I'd recognized her agony because it had once been mine.

Pushing away from the bathroom, I didn't get two steps from the door before it opened again, just a crack.

I hurried back. "What? What is it? What's wrong?"

Scarlet stared at me, looking distressed. She held up a white towel, her eyes glassy. "I can't use any of these towels."

"Why not?"

"They're all white."

Studying her, and then the towel, I failed to see the issue. "It's okay. We use bleach to keep them white. Nothing you—"

"What about blood?" she blurted on a harsh whisper, her hand holding the towel began to shake. She lowered it, her gaze dropping too. "I shouldn't be here. I can't accept this. I shouldn't—"

Alarm and dread and protectiveness had me stepping into the bathroom. I closed the door, taking a second to lock it before turning to her and tucking her hair behind her ears to get her attention again.

"Hey. Hey, it's okay. It's okay." I took the towel from her, set it on the counter, and pulled her forward by the shoulders into my arms. Keeping my hands above her mid back—because every time they'd accidentally traveled any lower it seemed to cause her pain—I rubbed a slow circle between her shoulder blades.

"It's not okay." Her voice was monotone, and it sent a shiver up the back of my neck, making me afraid she was about to run out of here. But her hands fisted in my sweater. "I should leave."

“Scarlet, don’t leave. Please.” I leaned away, tilting her chin up, and using my palm to brush her hair back from her cheeks. “Don’t worry about the towel. We got lots of towels. And, like I said, bleach’ll remove just about anything. Use the towel.”

Our eyes locked. I got the impression she was searching for something within me, like she was on a hunt for my intentions, and I confused her.

“Why are you doing this?” She gave her head a subtle shake, releasing my sweater and stepping away. She glanced around the bathroom again, like she didn’t remember how she got here, then her eyes cut back to mine. “What do you want?”

I wanted to reach for her again, comfort her, but I saw that would be ill-advised. I crossed my arms. “I want you to get clean, take a shower, change into those pajamas, and go to sleep in a warm bed inside this house. That’s what I want.”

“You know what I mean, Billy.” She sounded more like herself—challenging, firm—I took the show of strength as a good sign, even if it meant she was arguing.

As I debated how best to respond—what words would entice her to do what I wanted—I remembered Dolly Payton’s words of wisdom about managing people. I’d applied Dolly’s logic to handling my brothers and my teammates. In my desperation to help Scarlet, I figured there was no reason I shouldn’t use the same method now.

What does Scarlet need from me, right now, in order to accept my help? What can I say that will get her in that shower, in those pajamas, and sleeping the night in a warm bed?

Inhaling deeply—mostly to stall because I had no idea what Scarlet St. Claire needed from me in order to make good, logical choices—I finally settled on, “I came to the campsite this afternoon to teach you guitar because I always keep my word. I can’t teach you guitar and fulfill my part of the bargain if you’re sick and upset. Can I?”

Her eyebrows flickered together, her gaze turning introspective.

“Whatever happened to you,” I added, since she was listening, “you don’t have to tell me. I’m not going to push you on that. Just . . . let me help.”

Scarlet’s attention swept down and then up my person, assessing. “You won’t ask any questions?”

Seeing I was winning her over, but not wanting to lie, I shrugged and gave her a nonanswer. “Why would I? Is it my business?”

“Okay. That makes sense.” Something behind her expression cleared and her shoulders visibly relaxed. She seemed to breathe easier. “Then, uh, if you want to get started with the guitar lessons, I’m going to need your help with something after I take my shower.”

“What’s that?” I worked to keep my tone neutral even though every instinct told me to take her by the shoulders, hold her, and demand she tell me what happened. I wanted to know who’d hurt her, who’d taken her fiery spirit and dampened it, tried to snuff it out. Who’d made her sing that way? Because I never wanted to hear her sing that way ever again.

And then I’d ask how she wanted me to make them pay. Vengeance was on my mind.

However, neutral seemed to be what she needed. *So be it.*

Again, Scarlet’s stare grew assessing, pointed, but not for long. She turned, her fingers going to the back of her shirt to lift the hem. My gaze lowered to the small of her back and I was very, very thankful she’d turned away.

In that moment, I knew I looked anything but neutral.

She was bleeding. A bandage had been placed crookedly and it was soaked through. I couldn’t see the new wound. But I didn’t need to see the fresh cuts to know what lay beneath the bandage. There were plenty of old scars that told me exactly what to expect.

She cleared her throat. “I can’t reach it and I can’t see it real well, even with a mirror. I tried to change it earlier, at the camp, but I think I messed it up.”

* * *

I’d been in this situation before, wanting—desperately—to end another person’s suffering, to take that burden on myself. Despite the harm I experienced in the process, taking my father’s beating in order to free my mother and our family, I’d ultimately rejoiced.

But for a time after, I’d struggled with the idea of being helpless.

Presently, I felt a different type of helpless. Fire in my lungs, my body ready for battle, for action, and my mind regulated to making lists. What needed to be done? Dressing the wound, dealing with the bloodied towel, bringing her something good and filling to eat, pain relievers, cold packs for her face and back, placing another towel on the bed just in case she bled at night.

Oh yeah, and there was that hot chocolate to make, with four marshmallows.

Scarlet showered. She dressed in my pajamas. As predicted, they were too big for her, but she didn’t seem to mind. I left a bundle of gauze on the counter for her in the bathroom, which she pressed to the spot to the best of her ability until I could redress her wound in my bedroom. She took the Tylenol I brought up without question, ate her food—all of it—and poked at the four marshmallows with her finger, dunking them under the surface of the hot chocolate at intervals.

I left to use the bathroom at one point because I wasn’t quite calm. In the middle of her meal, as I did my best not to just stare at her while she ate in silence, I realized who’d cut her.

It was her daddy.

God.

Just the thought. It made me lose my breath. I sat on my bed, not looking at her here, now, but imagining in my mind's eye what had happened to her.

Razor. They called him Razor for the same reason they called my father Romeo. You're named after what you love, and what you're best at.

How had she borne it? Did they hold her down? I couldn't imagine her doing anything other than fight. When my father had come after a twelve-year-old me—after I'd come after him with a bat—I fought until I blacked out. I reckoned Scarlet was probably the same.

So I excused myself, went to the bathroom, changed, brushed my teeth, and made a vow that this would be the last time Razor Dennings ever used his daughter to earn his nickname.

When I returned, the food was gone, as was the hot chocolate. And Scarlet—facing the room, likely because she couldn't lie on her injured side—was under the covers. She stared at my comforter in that same unfocused way as before.

I set my clothes in the hamper and crossed to my bed. When I sat on it, interrupting her line of sight, she blinked. Her attention moved to me, a slight smile on her face.

“Thank you for the food and the hot chocolate.”

I nodded. “Are you comfortable?”

She nodded. “Will you be able to sleep with me in here?”

I shrugged, not wanting to admit I always slept better when someone was in here. When our father would come in, looking to be mean, Jethro would wake up and talk him down, defuse the situation. He'd been our “Darrell Whisperer,” as Cletus put it.

“Will you?” I asked, checking my alarm clock next to the bed. Tomorrow was a half day at school with an eleven o'clock dismissal.

Our momma had made the executive decision that we should all take the day off in preparation for Thanksgiving. I had to go to first period due to that trig test, but then I'd take off as well. We had a lot of food to cook.

"Will I what?" she asked.

"Will you be able to sleep with me in here? Do you want me to sleep on the couch downstairs?"

She quirked an eyebrow at that. "Wouldn't that look strange?"

Despite everything, and the restless rage prowling around in my rib cage, I felt my lips curve in a small smile. "Are you going to answer all my questions with questions?"

She frowned thoughtfully. "Am I doing that?"

I huffed a laugh, unable to help myself from responding with another question. "You can't hear yourself?"

Her smile crept into her eyes. "Does it bother you?"

Now I laughed for real, the inflated pressure in my chest eased, just a little. "You think this could go on all night?"

"Maybe?" she said softly, the side of her mouth tugging higher. Losing some of its focus, her gaze moved over my face.

I didn't move. Instinct had me sitting perfectly still. I let her look. Maybe because my eyes wanted to look at her too.

Scarlet looked a lot like her momma in coloring, but her faintly pointed chin and high, sharp cheekbones were her father's. One day, when she'd shed her adolescence, they'd probably be even more pronounced.

Her eyes were big, her irises light blue. Looking at them now, they reminded me of stained glass in a church. Iridescent? Was that the right word? You know, when the sun shone brightly in the middle of the day and the colors seemed to glow. Hers had a glow, but they also seemed cloudy. Hazy. Sunken.

Beneath her eyes were dark circles, adding to the sunken appearance. She had freckles—everywhere, I reckoned—dotting her pale skin, skin

which looked yellowish at present, like she'd been sick and/or hungry for a long time.

Her lips had always been big; my brother Jethro used to say, when we were kids, it was because she had such a big, bossy mouth; but presently, I wouldn't call them exactly *big*. More like, they were full. Right now, her full lips were a light pink. Before, in the woods, they'd been purplish blue.

The first time I saw her in the forest, when she'd sent me to the ground with a knee to the nuts, I'd noted that her body looked older than her fourteen years. Her face, with the exception of her eyes, did not.

Randomly, I realized that Scarlet was exactly the same age my momma had been when she'd met my father. Darrell had been several years older—nineteen or twenty I thought, but I wasn't sure how old he was for certain—and had wasted no time. My mother was pregnant with Jethro at fifteen and he was born when she turned sixteen.

What kind of person does that? What nineteen-year-old seduces and marries a fourteen-year-old? Despicable.

We, both Scarlet and I, were caught between childhood and adulthood. I knew I'd look exactly like my father when I was finished growing, unfortunately. But I hoped Scarlet didn't look like her momma. Christine St. Claire wasn't ugly—in fact, she was a very pretty lady, if memory served—but she looked tired. Wrung out. Haunted. I didn't want that for Scarlet, I wanted better for her. She deserved better.

“You know, I could help you with your face,” she said, apropos of nothing and making me realize I'd been staring at her for who knows how long.

But then her words sunk in and I reared back. “You want to help me with my . . . face?”

“No, sorry.” She chuckled, looking embarrassed. “Your beard. It's—” She poked her finger out of the covers gathered at her neck, pointing to my

face. “It’s not coming in even. It needs to be shaped. Trimmed. I can help with that.”

I touched my jaw, and was about to question her about beard maintenance, when a thought occurred to me. Scarlet seemed to believe everything was a barter between us. I couldn’t be trusted to help without an ulterior motive.

Of course, I’d reinforced this notion last Sunday when I’d told her the truth about my original intentions. Never mind that my intentions had changed the moment I spotted her dancing and singing in the woods to that Evanescence song. If I were honest with myself, my plan to teach her how to play guitar in order to gain her trust was a stupid one.

I just wanted to hear her sing. That’s why I’d convinced myself to walk blindly into the woods on Sunday. I might’ve told myself I wanted her gone, I might’ve believed it at the time I stepped into the tree line, but it was simply never going to happen.

That said, when she’d made all those nice assumptions about me, I couldn’t let her go on thinking charitable thoughts. My momma had bought the clothes, made the food, left it for her. Not me. And I didn’t take credit for another person’s ideas or hard work.

But now, here, she was offering me something and I was certain she was doing it just to be kind. Maybe I could use her offer as a way to break this cycle between us, earn her trust.

So I asked, “What do you want in return?”

She stared at me, and I was sure she was going to say, *Nothing*.

And then I’d say, *Okay. Thank you. I accept, because I trust you’re doing this ’cause you want to be nice and don’t expect anything in return.*

And then we’d start on a new path.

But instead she said, “More guitar lessons.”

Staring at her, I sighed. I grinned. I shook my head.

Well, that plan failed spectacularly.

Lying back in my bed, I covered myself, reached for the lamp on the side of my bed, and flicked it off. “Sure, Scarlet. Sounds like a fair trade. Good night.”

Maybe all my plans where Scarlet was concerned were doomed to failure.

CHAPTER TEN

SCARLET

“I have no brothers or sisters, so I get all my siblings’ love. But since I can’t take what’s already mine, I end up giving it all to my cat.”

— JAROD KINTZ, THIS BOOK IS NOT FOR SALE

“**W**hen do you turn seventeen?”
“Excuse me?” I licked a bit of strawberry ice cream from my bottom lip.

Like I’d told Ben the day before, I’d never had a milkshake for breakfast. But now that we were here, together at Daisy’s Nut House, having ice cream for breakfast, I was determined to do it as often as possible.

Decadence.

I’d just learned the word *decadence* on Monday. *Ice cream for breakfast is pure decadence.* I added it to my list of things I’d definitely do when I lived on my own in a real house, with walls and a roof and heat and a bed.

Last night, despite the events of the day, I slept better than I’d ever slept. I’d closed my eyes thinking there was no way I’d be able to fall asleep with Billy Winston in the room with me, and then the next thing I knew, it was morning. I didn’t even have any dreams.

Billy had still been asleep, tangled in his sheets when I left. He'd looked so much younger, like the sixteen-year-old he was. I caught myself staring at his face, considering it, and then thinking about it as I snuck out of the house after making the bed, quickly changing out of the loaned pajamas and into my dirty clothes.

When I returned to the campsite, I changed into clean clothes to meet Ben and busied myself with cleaning up. I wasn't going to waste time thinking about my father or what my back must've looked like last night. Nor was I going to obsess about anything that had happened between Billy and me—how he'd stayed and held me even when I screamed at him to leave, how warm and comforting his hands were, how gentle his eyes—no point in that. *Best not to dwell.*

Shaking myself, I returned my focus to the present. Presently, Ben's eyes had dropped to my mouth. "I mean, when's your birthday?"

My birthday? "Uh, my birthday is in May."

"May. . ." He nodded like he approved, as though May was a good month for birthdays or something. His mouth curved into another of his pointed grins, his eyes all sparkly. "What do you want for your birthday?"

Feeling uncertain under the intensity of this strange but wonderful smile of his—a smile he'd been tossing at me ever since he'd picked me up an hour ago—I shrugged, feeling uncharacteristically shy. "I hadn't thought about it."

I wasn't a shy person. Yeah, I avoided people, but that was for their benefit as well as mine. But no one who knew me would ever call me shy. Yet right now? Faced with Ben's cute face and attentions? I felt shy.

"Well, think about it." His voice dropped and I sensed his foot nudge mine under the table. "A girl only turns seventeen once."

The word *seventeen* broke the warm, fuzzy spell he'd been weaving. "I guess that's true," I said, confused. "But I'll be fifteen, not seventeen."

Ben reared back, the sharp smile falling off his face. All the earlier sparkle extinguished from his eyes, and he blinked like I'd flicked something at him. "Pardon?" The question was strained.

"I don't turn seventeen for another two and a half years."

"You're . . ." Now he was gaping at me. "You're *fourteen*?"

I nodded, taking another sip of my milkshake. The way he said fourteen, like it strangled him, had me worried. "Why?" Crap. *Am I too young to be his friend? Is that it?*

I guess I could understand his perspective if this was the case. It would make me like him less, but I'd understand.

He looked down at the table, shoving his fingers in his hair. "I thought—Scarlet, I thought you were sixteen."

"Oh, probably because I'm a sophomore?" I suggested weakly.

"Yeah, and my momma said so when I asked her. And—" He closed his mouth with an audible click, his eyes darting down to my chest and then up just as fast. "Well, never mind."

Truly, he looked distressed and I got the impression he needed a minute. I glanced at the menu. My leg started bouncing under the table and hit his foot. He withdrew it. Awkward. I didn't want him to feel awkward, but I couldn't change my age. *Believe me*, if I could, I would have.

Ben's eyes were hazy, lost in thought and visibly distraught for a good minute. All the while I watched him, anxious I was about to lose one of my few friends. But then he blinked, giving his head a minor shake and bringing me back into focus. I relaxed just a very little when I saw his rueful smile.

"You're very mature for your age," he said earnestly. "Sorry if—uh—I don't know, I made you uncomfortable."

I shook my head quickly, frowning. "What? No. You didn't make me uncomfortable. You're great." I was more confused than uncomfortable but decided not to say as much out loud.

“Yeah, but—” he chuckled, it sounded self-deprecating, and made a face that was like a wince, but not quite “—I shouldn’t be flirting with a kid.”

I sat up straight, my lips parting, my eyes rounded. “What? Flirting? What? Kid?”

“Yeah. *Flirting*,” he said, very self-deprecatingly. And then he laughed. “I am so stupid.”

Flirting? What the what?

I’d known and accepted that—like all my crushes—my feelings for Ben McClure would forever be one-sided, and I was perfectly fine with that. He was five years older for starters. And for finishers, he was Big Ben McClure. I was the only child of Razor Dennings that he’d claimed. His recognition of me as his spawn meant I would forever be followed by a cloud in the shape of a tornado with horns.

“You’re not stupid,” I said automatically, my mind racing. *He was flirting? Was that flirting? How am I supposed to know the difference between someone normal being nice and flirting?*

At the compound, when folks flirted, it was more like, “Hey. Wanna fuck?” or maybe “You should suck my dick.”

“And if it helps,” I added, “I had no idea you were flirting.” I couldn’t imagine *You should suck my dick* or anything of the like coming out of Ben’s mouth.

My admission made him laugh harder. “That does not help, but thanks.”

For some reason, I laughed too. But I was flustered-laughing, my heart doing all sorts of strange things. Of course, it didn’t help that—despite my excellent night’s sleep—my brain was foggy from all that crying.

“I’m sorry.” I leaned forward, hoping . . . *hoping*. Good Lord, I couldn’t quite catch my breath. “Ben, do you—I mean, are you—”

“Don’t say another word.” He rolled his eyes, another self-deprecating action. “It’s fine. It’s great, actually. Lesson learned.” Ben’s expression was

very warm, but it definitely looked less pointed than the others he'd been deploying earlier. *Maybe pointed expressions are flirting?*

"I hope we can still be friends," he said, again earnestly. "And you don't think I'm a creep."

"You are not a creep!" I leaned further forward. "And if you like me . . . like that—"

"No." He shook his head, laughing some more. "I am not having this conversation with you. You're amazing, but you're fourteen. Call me when you're eighteen, okay?"

I twisted my lips to the side, disappointed but also—strangely—buoyed.
He likes me?

Yes. Big Ben McClure, sainted son of Green Valley, likes you.

Well, hell hath frozen over.

To celebrate, I took another sip of my milkshake.

"Still friends?" He grinned, an adorable, boyish hint of pink had settled on his cheeks.

I set my frosted glass to the side and nodded quickly. "Yes! I hope we'll always be friends, Ben," I said with my whole heart.

"Me too, Scarlet. You're a good person." Now he also leaned forward, opening his hand palm up on the table between us.

I placed my fingers in his. "And very mature, apparently."

That made him laugh again. I loved how easily he laughed, and he had such a nice laugh, so friendly. Squeezing my hand, he sighed again.

HE LIKES ME!

Why oh why couldn't I have been born a few years earlier?

"Let's talk about something else," he said, glancing at my fingers where they rested in his. "How's school? You're not eating lunch in the bathroom, are you?"

I tried to give him a stern look but didn't quite manage it. "No. I'm not eating in the bathroom. How's school for you? How's college?"

His smile visibly fell and he withdrew his hand. “Oh, I don’t know. Honestly? I don’t think it’s for me.”

“Really? Why not?” I picked up the remainder of my milkshake, cooling my hands on the frosty glass. I was trying my best to focus on his words. It was difficult when *He likes me! He likes me! He likes me!* kept running through my head.

“I’ve never been a fan of school, did you know that?”

I shook my head, partly because I didn’t know that about him, and partly because I needed to clear it so I could concentrate. He was so cute. But then a twinge of pain radiating outward from my lower back sobered me, chasing the silly nonsense away from my brain. It drove the air from my lungs, and I had to pause and focus for a second before I could breathe again.

Luckily, Ben didn’t seem to notice. “Yeah. College is a lot of sitting and writing and waiting and listening. I’d prefer to be out somewhere doing something, learning about things for myself instead of pretending to care about what a lot of stuffy professors tell me.”

“You didn’t like high school either?” My voice was steady, betraying none of the pain I felt.

“Oh, I liked football and the social stuff. But classes? Nope. I worked at it for my parents. Now, I just don’t know.” He shrugged. “Do you like school? I mean, the classes part?”

The sharp pain dulling to a throbbing ache once more, I thought about lying to Ben and saying I didn’t like school. I had no idea why this thought occurred to me. Why would I lie about something so silly?

So I said, “Yes. I do. I like my classes. A lot.”

He made a face of mild disgust, like he found this information unfathomable. “But why? Isn’t it boring? All the studying useless information?”

“I don’t think it’s useless.”

“It is,” he insisted, laughing again. “I’m never going to need to know what sine or cosine means, so why learn it?”

“But engineers need to know, right?”

Ben lifted his eyes to the ceiling of the diner. “I guess. But I’m not going to be an engineer.”

“What do you want to do?”

He shrugged again, his gaze dropping to the tabletop. A rare gloomy expression arrested his features, though he still smiled. “I don’t honestly know, Scarlet. Sometimes, I feel so lost, you know? All this pressure, to *know* what I want to do, what I want to be. It’s overwhelming.”

I nodded, watching him, even though he had me confused again. I didn’t understand how his situation could be considered overwhelming. He had everything and he was overwhelmed? Could people be overwhelmed by blessings such that they felt like burdens? From where I was sitting, that didn’t seem possible.

Not knowing what to say, I let my attention stray. Movement beyond our booth at the front of the diner caught my notice.

“Oh. Look. It’s Roscoe and Simone.” Gingerly, I leaned to the side, hoping Mrs. Winston was behind her youngest son or close by. I wanted to thank her for everything since I now knew she’d been solely responsible for it all.

Sure enough, Mrs. Winston came strolling in a second later, the twins and Ashley in tow.

“Who’s Roscoe?” Ben asked, searching over his shoulder.

“You know, Jethro’s youngest brother?” I slid out of the booth carefully and stood, waving at Mrs. Winston.

“Oh. Yeah. He’s got so many brothers, I usually just call them all Jethro Jr.”

I chuckled and shook my head at Ben. “They’re all so different from each other. Their names are easy to learn if you take a minute.” I didn’t

know any of the Winston kids very well, but I knew who was who.

Mrs. Winston had broken off from her children. She wore a huge grin as she walked over, like she was so happy to see me, and I was her favorite person in the world.

“Oh hey, y’all,” she called, surprising me with a kiss on my cheek and a shoulder squeeze. The twins and Ashley headed straight for the counter, grabbing stools while Roscoe and Simone had followed Mrs. Winston.

Ben had also stood up, so she greeted him with a kiss as well. “I owe your momma a call, Ben.”

“She knows you’ve got your hands full, Ms. Bethany. Take your time.”

“We have a fairy in our backyard,” Roscoe announced to Ben and me, all matter-of-fact like.

“You do?” Ben grinned down at him indulgently, seeming to enjoy interacting with the eight-year-old.

The little boy nodded, his bright blue eyes wide and serious, as though he were the fairy authority in these parts.

But Simone Payton sighed tiredly at his side, tossing a quantity of long, black braids over her shoulder. “Roscoe. You should not accept—de facto—that an empty plate means there is, without a shadow of a doubt, a fairy in your backyard. We need more evidence.”

“*Five* empty plates. What more evidence do you need, Simone?” Roscoe asked.

Five? That didn’t seem right. I counted in my head: Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday was four. But I hadn’t left one last night. *Unless Billy—*

“A confirmed sighting would be nice. And an interview.” Simone must’ve given this some thought.

“You want to interview the fairy?” This question came from Ben, grinning at the little girl like he thought she was the cutest thing in the whole world. She kinda was.

“Yes,” she confirmed with a nod. “And a DNA test. We should set a fairy trap.”

Roscoe gasped. “Simone Payton! We are not setting a fairy trap.”

“It’s the only way.” She shook her head sadly. Her brown eyes were also sad, like she was grimly resigned to it, and turned from the table. “Come on. Let’s go get a donut and ask Beau and Duane to build us one.”

“I’ll always eat a donut, but how would you like it if someone put you in a trap?” Roscoe frowned at his best friend, walking next to her to the counter. Their conversation trailed after them. “Trapping isn’t the answer. We’ll ask the fairy to come out nicely.”

Just then, the bell over the door rang again announcing another person. I leaned to the side, hoping to spot Cletus—because we had things to *discuss*—but was instead met with the stoic sight of Billy Winston. Stiffening at the sudden and unexpected scorching shock of embarrassment racing to each of my limbs, I quickly leaned back, my brain scattered.

Working to suppress the aftereffects of the shock and find my train of thought, I felt a blush creep up my neck, a simmering spark in my lungs. Additionally, I didn’t know quite where to set my attention.

Crap. What is this? Why am I behaving this way?

Apparently, I would be a mess of a person around Billy Winston now that I’d cried on his shoulder and he’d seen . . . *he saw my back*.

So frustrating.

I lifted my fingers to my forehead to rub the sudden headache between my eyes, but then snatched my hand back. I needed to get a hold of myself.

“We’re just here picking up a pie we ordered for Thanksgiving,” Bethany was saying, and I realized I’d missed some of the conversation. Her eyes flickered to me, a small frown sitting there. “Hey, are you okay, baby?”

I nodded, then forced my lips to curve into something like a smile. “Too much ice cream, I think.”

“You don’t make pie, Ms. Bethany?” Ben, paying me no mind, gave Mrs. Winston a teasing look and I stared at him, wondering stupidly where he’d come from.

Has Ben been here the whole time?

The morning came back to me in a flash: leaving Billy’s room, straightening the campsite, changing my clothes, meeting Ben at the Corner Shoppe at 10:00 AM, eating ice cream for breakfast, the flirting.

Oh. I guess he has been here the whole time. Huh.

Splitting her attention between me and Ben—the look of concern lingering behind her eyes every time they met mine—she answered his question with sweetness and patience. “Of course I make pie, Benjamin. But having Daisy’s apple pie on Thanksgiving is a tradition because it’s better than mine. Now, if only I could find someone to make me pecan pie, I’d be all set. What are your plans for Thanksgiving?”

“Oh, we’re spending it at home,” he answered. “My aunt and uncle are driving over from Nashville.”

“Bringing their family?”

“Uh, no ma’am. It’s just them. They never had any kids.”

I swallowed reflexively, doing my best to follow the conversation, but my mind was still a riot.

For goodness sake, Scarlet. Calm. Down. So what if he’d seen my back, my scars, the new cuts. So what? All the Wraith kids who lived at the compound knew about it, what my daddy did to his kids. I suspected my submission to being cut had made me earn their respect. It also made them afraid of me.

Because if he cut me and he “loved” me, which he claimed he did, what would he do to them?

But I didn’t wish to think about that. Thinking about that made me want to vomit, and I had a belly full of strawberry ice cream. Ugh . . .

Mrs. Winston tilted her head in plain confusion as she studied Ben. “I thought your momma said your aunt was adopting a little girl?”

“That didn’t work out.” Ben said this just as Billy came to stand at his mom’s side.

My eyes decided to look at him without checking with my brain, which was a mistake. Our gazes met. His eyes seemed warmer than usual, and he was wearing that faint smile of his, directing it only at me. It was the one where I couldn’t tell if it was amused or sinister or . . . Wait.

Was that Billy Winston’s version of a friendly smile? I was so deep in my own mind, miring in the muck of mortification, I couldn’t make sense of his intentions. But then, with Billy, I always seemed to be gauging him wrong.

“Hello, William.” Ben stuck his hand out to Billy, taking a step closer to me as he did so.

“Big Ben.” Billy’s monotone response came as the smile fell right off his face and the warmth extinguished in his eyes, like a light switch being flicked from on to off. He accepted Ben’s hand, shook it, let it go. He then placed his arm around his mother’s shoulders and turned to her, opening his mouth as though he was going to say something.

Ben spoke before he could. “Saw your game on Friday. Kind of a bloodbath, wasn’t it?”

Billy glanced at me, then at Ben, looking supremely bored. “It was what it was.”

“Y’all didn’t take any mercy on them, did you? And on their home turf.” Ben shifted his weight again, his arm brushing against mine. “Didn’t even let them get away with a field goal. Pretty heartless of you.”

I watched Billy; the sixteen-year-old’s cold, unflinching eyes frozen solid as they bored into Ben’s sunny ones. The blond was older by over two years, but—seeing them together—it was Billy who looked older. *Maybe it’s because he has that lumberjack beard?*

Whatever the reason, and for reasons I couldn't figure, Billy looking older than Ben made me sad . . .

Wait. I could figure the reason why it made me sad. It made me sad because in every way but age, Billy was older than Ben McClure. It also explained why Ben had thought I was already sixteen. I wasn't mature for my age, I was *old* for my age. And I supposed the same could be said for Billy.

In this way, we had a lot in common.

A stretch of tension followed, during which I worked to stifle my embarrassment—as well as all thoughts related to yesterday's events—and indulged in a mindless moment of looking between the two. Ben wore a smile, but it wasn't one I recognized. It looked hard and mocking and I'd never seen it before. Whereas Billy wore no trace of a smile—at all—his dislike of Ben McClure obvious as the nose on his face.

Billy is always honest, even when he says nothing at all.

Also obvious, he wasn't going to address Ben's question or statement.

Bethany made a sound of distress, drawing my attention to her. She seemed pained, helplessly glancing between Ben and Billy, twisting her fingers. Clearly, she was uncomfortable, and she needed rescuing.

"HOW ABOUT YOU?" I asked way too loudly, grabbing not only her attention, but also a mixture of irritated and perplexed glances from the other patrons. I felt like a dummy and I sensed the weight of Billy's gaze too. I ignored it. My stomach was throwing a fit every time our eyes met.

Instead, I tried again at a lower, normal volume. "Y'all staying around here for Thanksgiving? Or are you traveling somewhere?"

Mrs. Winston gifted me with a grateful smile. "Yes, dear. We're staying here. We have a fairy to feed, after all."

I chuckled at that, her sweetness cutting through my boiling discomfort, lowering it to a simmer. Unthinkingly, I looked to Ben. He was smiling at me quizzically, like he was certain he'd missed something.

But then his stare turned introspective and he tapped my shoulder with the back of his index and middle finger. “Speaking of Thanksgiving plans, you should come over to our house, Scarlet.” After he said this, his fingers trailed down the length of my arm, catching my hand.

My lips parted in surprise, and for motives I’ll never understand, I looked at Billy. I caught the tail end of him glaring at my hand in Ben’s. He blinked once, now having shifted his stare to someplace over my head. Scanning the diner, his bored expression seemed fixed in place as though it had been carved of granite.

Giving myself a shake—because why would I care what Billy thinks about where I spend Thanksgiving? Just because he was nice to me yesterday, saw my scars, didn’t mean I owed him anything—I managed a smile for Ben. “I don’t want to intrude.”

He threaded our fingers together. “Don’t be silly. You got nowhere else to go. You’re coming, and that’s that.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to go.” Billy’s flat-tire voice brought everyone’s attention back to him.

Squinting, irritated at Billy’s flagrantly surly attitude, I squeezed Ben’s hand and answered for myself. “No. I do want to go.” I’d gone to my father yesterday in big part to protect Ben. Of course I wanted to spend Thanksgiving with him. *I earned it.*

Billy leveled me with his frank stare, giving me the sense I frustrated him. “Then you should just say so, Scarlet. Say what you want instead of assuming you’re a bother. You got other options. Don’t let *Big Ben* here make you think he’s doing you a favor.”

“Okay. Okay.” Mrs. Winston, still visibly flustered, turned to her son and placed her hands on his big shoulders, pushing him toward the counter. “We have a pie to pick up, and we’ll see y’all later. Good to see you Ben.”

You too, Ms. Bethany,” Ben said good naturedly. Then, nodding his head once, ground out, “William.”

Billy sent Ben a piercing look, full of meaning. I couldn't read it, but it was impossible to miss. Without saying a thing, Billy allowed his momma to steer him to the far end of the diner counter, the farthest point from us in the entire restaurant.

"Unbelievable," Ben muttered, watching them go.

"What?" Tearing my gaze from Mrs. Winston and her second son, I removed my hand from Ben's before he could feel how damp it was. I needed a deep breath to slow my racing heart, and I looked at the tall boy at my side. He was shaking his head.

"It's nothing." Breathing in through his nose, he sorta rolled his eyes and faced me. "Actually, here's the truth. I can't believe Jethro is related to *Billy*. In fact, I can't believe Bethany is either."

"You mean—"

"They're so different, right? Jethro is so friendly, a good guy, you know?"

Wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans, I lifted an eyebrow at Ben's statement. Jethro Winston had always been good to me, but everybody knew he stole cars for the Iron Wraiths. Whereas Billy was at home, or working, or at practice, or at school, taking care of his family and managing himself like he was thirty-six, not sixteen.

How could Ben not see this?

But Ben made a face, like he could read my thoughts. "There you go again, defending him."

"I didn't say anything." I slipped back into the booth, careful to move slowly and keep my back from touching the bench seat behind me. I needed another pain pill. It was starting to hurt more than just a throb.

"You didn't have to. It's written all over your pretty face."

I ignored the pretty comment for now—admittedly, I'd probably bring out the memory later and let my stomach and heart feel all squishy—and

focused on the facts. “You know, Jethro is a criminal, right?” I didn’t feel like I was spilling a state secret. *Everybody knew.*

“I’m aware folks accuse him of things, but he’s never been charged. And we’ve been friends since forever and I know him. This is a phase he’ll outgrow. I believe in him. People are their choices, yes, but they’re also how they treat others. Jethro treats everyone with respect, and—”

“You mean, Jethro treats everyone with respect except the folks he allegedly steals cars from?”

Ben chuckled, and the laugh left behind a dazzling grin. “What can I say? He’s my best friend. I’m always going to be on his side.”

“Fair enough.” I shrugged. I wasn’t going to argue the anti-Jethro perspective with much conviction because I cared about the oldest Winston brother too. He was just one of those people who were hard to dislike. Strange how I could justify Jethro’s bad behavior because I liked him so much. “I understand. It’s good he has a loyal friend in you.”

“Yeah. He can’t really count on his brother, that’s for sure.” Ben looked over his shoulder to the far counter where the Winston siblings and their momma were. My attention, as though magnetized, followed.

Billy was sitting on one end, his head tilted toward one of the twins, listening and nodding at something his brother said. The sister, Ashley, was having trouble with the other twin, who’d just poured sugar in his water or soda or whatever it was. She looked exasperated and the kid wouldn’t drop the glass sugar container. Bethany was helping, but between the two ladies it was obvious the redhead was more than a handful.

Then Billy lifted his head. Frowned. Said something to the misbehaving boy. The redhead ducked, immediately letting go of the sugar. In the next minute, the boy moved to sit on Billy’s other side, his face and posture showing his repentance. The other twin laughed behind his hand.

“Hey.”

I flinched, my eyes coming back to Ben. “I’m sorry, what?”

He studied me, leaning to the left, blocking the Winstons from view. “You know, you and I have a lot in common.”

“Oh? We do?”

“Yep. We’re both only children.”

I frowned, confused. But then, when I realized what he must’ve thought, I smiled instead of correcting him. I wasn’t an only child. My daddy had more kids—all sons as far as I knew—by all sorts of different women. I’d grown up with them in the compound coming and going. I’d taken care of some of them, for a time, until their mommas figured out how things were and moved on.

But I missed them. I missed their chubby hands and faces and unconditional love.

Ben’s easy smile slid into place. “I’m glad you’re coming to Thanksgiving.”

“Me too,” I agreed, and I found I was. It wasn’t often my father gave me free rein to talk and interact with folks like the McClures (or anybody else for that matter). I was determined to grab hold of this opportunity with both hands for as long as it lasted. I’d earned it, didn’t I? Plus, I’d never had a Thanksgiving dinner. I was curious what turkey tasted like. “What can I bring?”

“Just yourself,” he said, all soft like, confusing me.

Is he . . . flirting again?

Before I could think to stop myself, I blurted, “Are you flirting with me again? Is that flirting?” I pointed at his smile, circling my finger in front of it.

Tracing my face with bright, happy eyes, he laughed. “What am I going to do with you, Scarlet?”

“Well, if it’s tomorrow, hopefully you’re going to feed me.” I answered honestly, giving him a sideways look. *He’s confusing. Does he like me or*

not or what is going on? “And I’m going to see if Daisy has another apple pie. No way am I showing up to your momma’s house empty-handed.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SCARLET

“I love sleep. My life has the tendency to fall apart when I'm awake.”

— ERNEST HEMINGWAY

The first thing I did upon arriving home to my campsite Thursday evening was start a fire. The sun was going down quick, which was why I'd had to leave the McClure's just after dessert. Starting a fire by flashlight was a pain.

Once the fire was in a good way, I sauntered—yes, sauntered—aimlessly while reliving the day. Smiling, frowning, and then smiling again while singing a soft, slow version of “Crazy in Love” by Beyoncé. I wanted to be completely happy, but I was *almost* happy.

Just forget about it, pretend it never happened, then you'll be completely happy. Be. Happy.

I should've been happy. The McClures were so friendly, great cooks, and loved to laugh. *That must be where Ben gets it.* They treated me like a real guest too. They made me go first in the buffet line for the food, Mr. McClure asked me if I wanted lemonade or soda with my dinner, and then he got it for me. I was given a cloth napkin to use. It felt like fancy business and I loved it. Every moment.

I may have had a harmless crush on Ben McClure, but I was crazy in love with his family.

Lowering to my knees carefully, I unzipped the front of the tent and cautiously reached inside for my Walkman, making sure not to pull on the bandage affixed to my lower back. I hadn't changed it since Billy fixed me up on Tuesday, but I'd have to do something about it before going to bed tonight. It didn't feel any worse, I took that as a good sign.

Opening the carriage of the CD player, I twisted my lips to the side. The disc did not suit my mood. Nor did any of the discs in the short stack within the tent. No matter. I knew all the words to the song I was singing. I'd just experienced a whole day of friendly laughter and I didn't feel like I *had* to drown out the thoughts in my head with loud music. For now.

Placing the Walkman inside the tent, I pulled a folded blanket by the entrance into my arms—a special one Mrs. Winston had given me with a waterproof backing—and placed it on the ground near the fire. Then I grabbed my sleeping bag and set it up, but I wasn't quite ready to lie down yet.

I was full. In fact, I was stuffed like a turkey.

Smiling to myself, I decided I needed to make up a few stuffed turkey jokes for next Thanksgiving, or the one after. One day, I hoped I'd spend another Thanksgiving with kind, friendly folks like the McClures.

But my present fullness meant I needed to walk, stretch my legs and stomach before going to bed. Plus, I needed to see if Roscoe had left anything out for his fairy. Obviously, I wasn't hungry, but I could transfer the food to a different container for breakfast. Cleaning the plate and returning it before morning wouldn't be any trouble.

Tucking my little flashlight in my back pocket, I picked my way to the edge of the old Oliver homestead field as there was no real trail to follow, dry leaves crunching under my feet. The sun had just set. Late dusk brownish, yellowish light filtered through the sparse leaves left on the trees

and I could still see my breath in front of me, little white puffs with every exhale.

Despite the cold, it was kinda pretty, honestly. The light gave the forest a filtered appearance, like everything glowed, and the intricate abandoned spiders' webs blocking my path looked almost like decorations.

If I didn't know any better, I might've been tempted to believe in fairies.

As soon as I was, oh, about fifty feet away, I slowed down and crept as soundlessly as possible. If Roscoe was sitting guard by the plate, I didn't want to spoil the fun.

And, admittedly, if Billy were standing guard like he'd done last weekend, I . . . had no plan. Just the thought of seeing him again made my legs stop moving and my heart thump hard. I paused, suddenly tempted to head back to the camp without checking the crate.

Come on, Scarlet. There's no need to avoid him. It's not like you got a crush on him. That last thought made me chuckle. Having a crush on Billy Winston? Ridiculous.

For one thing, in my experience, crushes were nice. I'd had a few and they always left me with warm, light feelings in my stomach and a smile on my face. But not with Billy. Being around Billy felt more like *being* crushed. He was so heavy, so noble, so stern, so honest, and entirely too good-looking. Truly. He was *too* good-looking. He'd end up in the movies or something, I was certain of it.

But you made him laugh, and that felt good.

True. *True . . .*

Never mind that nonsense. I would not avoid Billy. I had no reason to. Plus, I'd made a deal with Bethany Winston and that deal was to keep her kids believing in magic. I was a forest fairy and I had a job to do. So I crept, scanning the field just beyond the edge of the trees.

And I saw him.

Or rather, I saw the outline of him moving around and pacing back and forth. . . ? No. Piling wood in a wheelbarrow. That's what he was doing. The same shock of embarrassed awareness from yesterday heated my insides. *He's seen your scars.*

Even though no one could see me, I shrugged, whispering, "So? So what. He's got scars. Everybody's got scars." That made me feel better.

I tore my stare from his tall form and graceful movements—mostly because I caught myself admiring how tall and graceful he was—and tried to determine whether or not there was a plate left for the forest fairy. I was too far away, unfortunately, and couldn't see inside the crate.

My attention flicked back to Billy. Just like in Daisy's Nut House, my eyes felt magnetized to the sight of him. I reckoned he was almost finished. I reckoned he'd be leaving soon. I reckoned I should probably wait until he left to retrieve the plate, assuming there was a plate.

But then he stopped moving, he turned toward the forest, and I heard his voice call, "Why don't you stop hiding and come out for a second?"

Another shock of embarrassment, the rush of heat, the spark settling in my lungs. I was irritated I'd been caught and how my body was going haywire.

Well. Nothing for it. I wasn't going to hide if he knew I was here.

Inhaling deeply for courage, I took five steps forward and cleared the trees. I walked to him, my hands in my new jacket—one of the clothing items Bethany Winston had bought—as he walked to me. We met in the middle.

Goodness, he was pretty. Even dressed in jeans and a blue and gray plaid flannel, he looked like one of those Greek or Roman statues our art teacher got in trouble for showing us ('cause they were naked). I could still see him, now we were up close. But soon, in twenty minutes or so, he would disappear into the inky night and I'd be left with just a faint outline of his body and his voice.

I had a strange thought just then, that maybe not being able to see him so clearly while we talked would be a relief. Maybe conversations with Billy Winston were best had in the dark, so my brain could work properly without the distraction of his physical appearance. I suspected he'd be easier to know and understand if I didn't have to look at him.

"Scarlet," he said evenly, holding my gaze just as evenly.

My jacket felt too tight. It wasn't too tight, it was big on me. Also, my chest hurt, right in the center. *You're just embarrassed, that's all.*

"Hey, Billy." I sounded breathless, so I firmed my voice before asking, "How'd you know I was there?"

His small amused/sinister/possibly friendly smile made an appearance. "I didn't."

"What? You didn't?" I flinched back, just a smidge.

He shook his head, his smile growing. "I guessed."

I exhaled a short laugh, shaking my head, examining him from a few different angles. That uncomfortable spark in my lungs flared as his gaze moved over me too, but I was happy to see no pity in his eyes. I'd been worried, after what he'd seen, he'd throw pity at me again.

But he didn't. Or if he did pity me, I couldn't tell. Billy didn't give much of his thoughts away. He could've been tallying up the cost of my clothes or estimating my height, I had no idea.

We continued staring at each other. The moment grew thick. You know where the air feels heavy? But strangely, it didn't feel uncomfortable and equally as strange, I didn't feel moved to break it.

Eventually, his eyebrows pulled together and he took a shuffling half step closer. "How're you feeling?"

Continuing to meet his stare, I deliberated how to answer his question. I knew what he meant. I knew what he was asking. His voice held both concern and sympathy. But again, no pity. A crazy thought occurred to me: I wanted to complain about not being able to dance.

I could still sing just fine, but I couldn't dance. I knew it had only been two days, and of all the things to complain about, dancing seemed like the least of my worries. And yet, I was frustrated by the limitation. I wanted to get back to my life; I wanted freedom from the reminder of where I'd come from; I didn't just want to forget about Tuesday morning, I wanted to pretend it never happened.

Not precisely uncomfortable beneath Billy's inspection, but not exactly comfortable either, I turned to look over my shoulder. "Oh, I'm great. Just super full. I ate too much turkey and pie, I think. How about you?"

I sensed him watching me and his attention felt so heavy, so noble, so stern, so honest. *There he goes again, crushing me.* I also sensed him shift on his feet. So I glanced at him just as he lowered his eyes to the ground.

He stared at his shoes and stuffed his hands in his back pockets. "I wasn't asking about Thanksgiving, Scarlet."

When his eyes lifted, they ensnared mine. I felt like I needed to swallow but my mouth was mysteriously dry. Another shock of heat, another simmering spark. Billy Winston had somehow tapped into the thermostat of my body and set it to Arizona in the summer. I'd never been to Arizona, but I was pretty sure they had those days where it got so hot the thermometers broke.

Good thing night was descending, he wouldn't be able to see how embarrassed I was, how red my cheeks were. But then his gaze moved to the left, landed on my cheekbone, trailed down to my neck. I held perfectly still, I didn't even breathe.

"I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable," he said, like he could see the color of my flushed face in the inferior light. "I just want to make sure you don't need any more help."

"Help?" My question came out soft and low.

I didn't like how he was looking at me, his gaze felt like a live wire, dangerous. On the other hand, I liked how he was looking at me, his gaze

felt like something electric, dangerous. A part of me wondered if he understood what his eyes did to people, to girls and women in particular. Did he know how to turn down the intensity? Was this look on purpose? Or was he just like this all the time? Was it something he thought about or could control?

“I still need to teach you guitar, right?” Billy’s concentration zeroed in on my neck, and then drifted to my chin, my lips. “Have you changed the bandage?”

“No.”

“Do you need me to?”

I hesitated. His gaze cut back to mine.

His little smile returned, but he quickly erased it. “You know it should be changed.”

I frowned. He was right. And having him change the bandage would make my life a lot easier. It’d probably hurt less too.

“Okay. Fine.” I crossed my arms.

“Good.” He grinned, a real one, and the suddenness of it discombobulated me. So much so that the next thing I knew, I was walking behind Billy as he pushed the wheelbarrow full of chopped wood back to the house.

* * *

We didn’t sneak in this time.

Billy took me right through the back door, both of us carrying an armful of wood. Granted, his armful was bigger than mine—he had big arms, and he’d only let me carry one little log—, saying he didn’t want my wound to smart—but I helped.

We passed the twins in the kitchen and Billy surprised me by saying, “Beau, Duane, show some manners. Say hi to Scarlet.”

“Hey, Scarlet.”

“Hi.”

Neither of them looked up from what they were doing, which appeared to be taking apart something metal covered in grease.

I looked to Billy, his handsome face grinning ruefully. “That’s them being nice.”

I grinned at him in return, liking this expression on his face—apologetic, much less intense, his handsomeness not nearly as intimidating as it had been outside—dare I say, he almost looked approachable.

“I heard that,” one of the twins said without looking up, his tone salty.

“We can be nicer,” the other said, jumping down from his chair and running over to me. He was about my height and his smile was big and white, though he had grease smudges all over his face.

“Greetings, m’lady,” he said, bowing in front of me. “And how do you do this fine evening?”

The other twin snorted and rolled his eyes. “Get back over here, Beau. I think I got the spring back in and I need your hand.”

“Go on,” Billy said, shaking his head, but he was still grinning. Beau winked at me before taking off.

What a cool kid! I’d barely spoken to either of the twins. But I liked the friendly one immediately.

Billy was off again. I followed. We walked through a doorway and into a huge old-style parlor. I took a moment to appreciate the size of the fireplace, it was gigantic, and I was mildly surprised I hadn’t noticed it when Billy had snuck me in two nights ago or when I’d snuck out early the following morning. Of course, my mind had been otherwise occupied.

Billy walked to the fireplace, releasing his load to a nearly empty cast iron tray. He then placed two logs on the dying fire, using the tongs to arrange them and the bellow to fan the flames.

“Took you long enough,” a voice I recognized said, and I searched for my friend.

Cletus sat in a big, stately chair, covered in a ridiculously large pile of blankets pulled up to his chin. On his head he wore what looked like several hats. A top hat, beneath which was a baseball hat—I could see the rim—and beneath a beanie was just visible. He must’ve been roasting.

“I don’t understand why you didn’t want me to go with you,” the younger brother continued, sounding grumpy. “It would’ve been faster with two people and now I’m near frozen.”

“You are not frozen, Cletus,” he drawled, clearly fighting a grin. His back was to his brother, so Cletus couldn’t see.

“I am. I thought about making my last will and testament—you would be left off, of course. Having you as a brother, I’m sure we’re all gunna die of exposure. But my fingers were so cold I couldn’t hold a pen.”

A laugh escaped Billy, but then he snapped his mouth shut and pressed his lips together, giving me the impression he hadn’t meant to laugh.

Cletus stood, bending his pile of blankets in half and twisting to lay them on the chair. Straightening his top hat, he marched over to the fire, stuck his hands out, and turned his face to Billy. The back of his head was to me, so I couldn’t see his expression. But something about it must’ve been hilarious because a moment later, Billy lost the ability to keep his face straight and he laughed again.

It was a friendly laugh, and it stirred something in my stomach, a flutter of happiness, especially when Cletus also laughed, turning his face back to the fire. Looking at Billy now, standing there trying not to smile, he almost looked his age. The sight warmed my heart.

Standing in profile, the younger of the two asked, “How do you like my hats?”

“They’re fantastic.” Billy’s smile was immense, his eyes moving over Cletus. And then they moved *over* Cletus, coming to rest on me. “You

should wear them every day.”

The grin on Billy’s face seemed to deepen as we looked at each other. His affection for his younger brother was a tangible thing, shining through and softening his eyes without dulling the brilliance of them. I realized I was grinning too. *I love how he loves his family.*

“I’m thinking about getting a smoking jacket,” Cletus said, pushing the hair poking out of his beanie to the side and out of his vision. “Red velvet, if I can find it.”

Now I laughed, drawing Cletus’s attention to me. “Then you’ll look like Santa Claus.”

Billy barked another laugh at my joke while Cletus seemed startled for a minute by my sudden appearance. And then he smiled, big and wide. But just as quickly, his smile fell.

His gaze turned searching and he crossed to me, taking the log from my arms. “You haven’t been at school, Scarlet,” he said, frowning. “Why haven’t you been at school?”

“Mental health day,” Billy answered, saving me from having to lie, and coming to stand at my shoulder. “We’re headed upstairs. Can you keep an eye on the twins? Make sure they don’t bring anything else dirty inside?”

“Mental health *day*? She was gone two days. Not one.” Still frowning, Cletus’s eyes darted between us. “Wait. Upstairs? You and Scarlet?”

His older brother gave him a patient look, but also one that warned not to ask any more questions. “Yes, Cletus. Scarlet and I are going upstairs. If you want to tell Momma that Scarlet is here, go for it.”

Cletus removed his hats, pushing his fingers into his hair in a quick combing motion. “No. I won’t. Momma, Roscoe, and Ash are enjoying their quiet time in the library and I don’t want to interrupt. I just didn’t know—uh—you two were friendly is all.” His big eyes came back to me, concern carved between his eyebrows. “But when you’re done, will you come talk to me? We have things to discuss.”

I nodded, making sure the smile I wore looked relaxed. “Sure, Cletus. We won’t be too long.”

“Really?” His voice came out hoarse and he gulped in an overexaggerated manner. “How long you figure?”

“Cletus—” Billy tugged on the arm of my coat “—don’t be a dummy. Whatever you think we’re gunna do, it’s not that.” Then to me, he motioned with his head. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Giving my friend another unconcerned smile, I turned and walked up the stairs. Billy followed, and I saw Cletus move to the banister on the lowest step and grip it as he watched us go. He looked forlorn.

Suddenly, he called up to me, “Whatever you do, Scarlet, don’t take candy from him.”

I paused, scrunching my face and glancing between Billy and Cletus. The former shrugged, looking like he was on the verge of rolling his eyes.

“What? Why?”

“Because I want that candy. And if you eat it, then there won’t be much left for me.”

Billy chuckled and shook his head. “Come on.”

I climbed the rest of the stairs, grinning at my silly friend. When we reached the top, Billy stepped on ahead, leading the way and opening the door for me to his room. I walked in. He closed the door. He locked it.

Now I gulped, suddenly roasting in my coat.

Without sparing me a glance, Billy said, “Take off your jacket,” and moved to a dresser while he unbuttoned his shirt. It was dirty from carrying the logs.

Usually I would’ve bristled at him, bossing me around like that, but I suspected he was just trying to get this done quickly before we were interrupted. I took off my jacket. Then I took off my sweater, which left me in one of the nice shirts Mrs. Winston had bought for me, a tank top, my bra, and my jeans.

Walking to the bed I knew he didn't sleep in, I hovered next to it.

"Take that shirt off too," he ordered, pulling his flannel from his shoulders.

Nodding silently, I wiped my sweaty hands on my jeans, feeling silly at the depth and breadth of my nerves. I told myself a joke while I removed the outer shirt. *What did the turkey on the dinner table say to the deer head on the wall? Hey, we're both stuffed.*

Billy turned, clutching supplies in his hands—gauze, cotton, disinfectant, that ointment he'd used last time—and marched to the bed, placing the items on the night table. His features already intense with concentration.

While he unloaded his burden, I lay on the bed, stomach down, my face toward the room. I tucked my hand under my chin, folding my arms close, and waited. Billy frowned at the big clear bottle of rubbing alcohol as he began unscrewing it, but then he stopped.

"Shoot. I need to go wash my hands." He made a face, almost like he was sorry. "I'll be right back."

Billy unlocked the door and left in a dash, not quite closing it. I waited. I allowed myself to enjoy the warm fluffiness of a real bed and pillow beneath my body. I waited some more.

Snuggling deeper into the softness, I closed my eyes and sang softly, "Hello bed, my old friend. I've come to lay on you again. Because you're softer than the ground, and help me sleep without a sound," to the tune of "The Sound of Silence" by Simon & Garfunkel.

I heard a footstep, or some other sound making me think Billy was back, and I opened my eyes. Lifting to my elbow very carefully, I turned. Billy stood there, looking at me, all tall and big and strong, his white T-shirt a tad too small for the size of his shoulders and muscular chest. His dark jeans hung low on his hips and he wore a questioning expression on his handsome face. Also, that mysterious, barely there smile curved his lips.

My goodness, he's just . . . too ridiculously pretty.

My mouth went dry. Again. Maybe because there was something invisible abruptly lodged in my throat, *an UOO!*

"Well, go on," he said, shutting the door with his shoulder. He didn't lock it this time. "I've never heard this version before."

I suppressed the odd, flustering emotions, and twisted my lips to hide a renewed flare of nerves. "Did you, uh, wash your hands?"

He nodded, his eyes moving over my body on the bed, sending goose bumps rising in their wake. "Are you ready?"

I gulped again, my heart hammering in the aftermath of his inspection and question. *What the hell, Scarlet? You are injured.*

I'd been cut up by my father about a hundred times—legs, back, stomach, feet—the before and during parts were now way worse than the aftermath. I was darn good at moving on from it, pretending it never happened. I never looked at the parts of my body with scars. I didn't own a mirror. No use wasting time feeling sad or sorry for myself or dwelling on it, right?

Yeah, you've been cut up by your daddy before, you're old hat at this, but Billy is bandaging your wound. Your. Wound. He's not about to . . . whatever. Get a grip.

"Do I look ready?" My words sounded strangled.

"Oh? We're doing this again?" His voice deepened and, dammit, he grinned for real again, again sending my wits scattering.

I felt funny, out of breath, like my body was buzzing, and it made absolutely no sense. *What is this? What is this reaction? Why can I barely think straight? Is it PTSD? Maybe it's PTSD. Yes. It's PTSD from Tuesday. I need to calm down.*

And then he was there, kneeling next to me, his eyes warm and so very alluring in his extremely beautiful face perched on top of his ridiculously gorgeous body. *AND WHY AM I NOTICING HIS BODY??*

“What?” I asked, because I—like a wackadoodle—suddenly didn’t have any idea what we’d just been talking about. My nonsensical thoughts and feelings and flutterings were crushing. But then, everything about Billy was heavy, crushing. Even his attractiveness. *I’m being crushed by Billy Winston.*

“Are we only answering each other in the form of a question?” Billy’s warm gaze settled on my back, his hand moving to the hem of my tank top, hesitating. “May I?”

I sucked in a breath, held it, nodded quickly, and scrunched my eyes shut.

I waited. Nothing happened. I waited some more. Still nothing.

Opening one eye, I found Billy’s face right in front of mine, his forehead wrinkled with what appeared to be intense—and I do mean *intense*—concern.

“Scarlet, honey—” His fingers pushed into my hair at my ear, making me jump. Immediately, he withdrew his hand. “Hey, are you okay? We don’t have to do this now.”

My heart did a big old flip-flop—like a *thunk ka-thunk*—and I sucked in another breath. I exhaled it on a light laugh. The laugh definitely sounded zany, off-kilter. Biting my lip, I closed my eyes again. I couldn’t look at him and think.

Maybe it was PTSD, or maybe all the food had gone to my brain and was making me act like a turkey. Whatever.

Whatever.

But this, all my insane noticing of Billy Winston, needed to stop.

“It’s fine. I’m fine. Everything is fine,” I said, saying the words so I could hear them.

“You don’t sound fine. I can—”

“Please change the bandage. I’m fine.” I made myself smile, opening my eyes, and placing a healthy amount of mental distance between us. The

mental distance was surprisingly easy as soon as I reminded myself of all the actual, factual distance between us.

Yeah. Billy Winston was crazy beautiful and could be sweet sometimes. But we weren't friends. He didn't care about me. He was Mr. Popular and I was Smelly Scarlet. He hated the Wraiths and I was the president's daughter. He'd wanted me gone less than a week ago.

Fact, fact, fact.

Billy had caught me off guard on Tuesday, that was all. His recent kindnesses—then and now—had snuck up on me.

You don't have to go all softhearted and boy crazy every time a cute guy treats you like a human, Scarlet.

True. Very true. And very well said, Scarlet.

Thank you, Scarlet.

You're quite welcome, Scarlet.

"Go ahead," I said serenely. Other than a bizarre sinking sensation in my stomach, I was now completely calm. "I'll lie still."

His eyes searched mine, like I confused him, or the expression I wore was troubling. I thought maybe he was going to ask me something else, but after a moment he shook his head, and then he went to work. Lifting the shirt, exposing my back, peeling off the bandage, cleaning the wound. He even blew on it after he applied the alcohol, his eyes darting to mine.

"Sorry if it stings. I don't have hydrogen peroxide, only alcohol."

"I have peroxide at the camp."

He set back to work, blowing on the spot again before saying, "Next time we'll change it there."

I nodded. And then stopped nodding, realizing what he'd just said. *Next time.*

I gulped for a third time, but I refused to believe there would be a *next time*. He didn't owe me anything, and I expected nothing from him.

Billy picked up the ointment and placed some directly on the wound. I watched him and noticed when his eyes strayed to the rest of my exposed back. Though his expression didn't change by much, I could see he was tallying up the marks, thinking, debating weighty matters. I braced myself for questions, my mind working to come up with ways I could deflect and distract. I didn't want to answer any questions.

"You know . . ." he started, sucked in a slow deep breath, and began again, "When I was twelve, I went after my father with a baseball bat."

I blinked, surprised by the unexpected turn of the conversation. "You went after Romeo—I mean, Darrell—with a bat when you were twelve?"

He nodded, the side of his mouth hitching but his eyes held no smile.

"Why on earth would you do that?" My voice pitched higher because I was shocked and I couldn't control it.

"Someone had to do something to get rid of him." His tone grew hard, making me understand what folks meant when they said *a voice like steel*, and his gaze grew hazy, like he was within a memory.

Unprompted, he said, "He still lived here most of the time back then. But, sometimes—not often enough—he'd disappear for a while. We'd all breathe easier when he was gone, even though each passing minute seemed like a *tick tick tick* of a countdown clock."

"I get that," I said, and his stare refocused on mine. My breath caught. He looked so raw, unguarded, untamed.

"I know you do," he said, low and quiet and rough. But also solemn, like these words we were sharing, or about to share, were sacred.

My heart quickened.

He glanced down at the ointment container in his hands, and then placed it on the night table. "He didn't beat my momma all the time when he was home. Sometimes, when I was real little, it even seemed like he loved us, loved her. I used to get mad at my mother for making him angry, thinking—if she'd just be nicer to him—he'd stop hitting her." Billy chuckled lightly,

a sound completely without humor. “But by the time I was eleven and twelve, I knew the truth. And I hated him.”

Each rapid thud of my heart felt painful, the blood too thick. “What did you do?” I asked before I could stop myself.

He smirked. “She was never going to leave him. No matter how bad he hurt her, she was never going to do it. I had to do something to make her leave him.”

“Oh God, Billy.” A stinging rush of tears pricked my eyes. Unthinkingly, I reached my hand out and covered his. He fastened his attention to where we touched, grabbing my fingers and holding them tightly.

“The day it happened, the day I provoked him, my mother was out. She was picking up everyone from school. Roscoe was somewhere, I don’t recall where. I remember thinking I could do it now that neither Ashley nor Roscoe were home. Jethro was in the backyard, feeding the goats and rabbits. I’d just finished with the chickens. It was just me and Darrell in the house. He was sitting in my grandmother’s chair, drinking beer.”

I squeezed his hand tighter, bracing, my heart hurting so bad.

“I don’t remember my mother coming home, he’d knocked me out. When I woke up, I was in the hospital. My mother told everyone I’d fallen out of a tree.” The side of his mouth hitched again, a glint of perverse satisfaction in his eyes. “She’d made a deal with Darrell: he would leave us all alone, and she wouldn’t press charges. She wanted a divorce, but he wouldn’t accept it, refused to sign any papers. They’re still married.”

“Why didn’t she have him arrested?” The question shot out of me—the level of my anger, my outrage startling me—and he brought his gaze back to mine.

“You know why, Scarlet.”

I breathed out, distressed, restless, not wanting to accept this gross injustice. Except, he was right. I did know why. *The Wraiths*. They

would've seen it as a betrayal by Bethany Winston against all of them. They would've considered her a traitor. She wouldn't have known any peace.

And yet—

“But—but she could've moved. She could've taken you kids and left. They're not all-powerful.”

“A single mom, with no college degree, and seven kids,” he said flatly. “With no other family? No. Scarlet, no. I'm pretty sure she has money left from our grandparents, but not much after Darrell. And definitely not enough to sustain us for years without a good job. Do you know how much childcare costs? Healthcare? A lot. She gets good benefits at the library, flexibility. Folks here know her, look out for her. I understand why she never left Green Valley.”

“She could've sold the house for money,” I said accusingly, knowing I sounded belligerent and childish.

He gave me a small grin, lifting his hand to my hair, tucking it behind my ear, and moving it off my neck; I didn't flinch this time. “That wouldn't have been enough either.”

Huffing, I frowned at him, my nose still stinging. “This is a terrible story.”

“Yeah. It is.” He smiled at me, just a little one, his eyes all soft. “But Darrell hasn't stepped foot on our property since. He's left us alone.”

The tenderness of his lingering gaze sent a surge of restlessness to my limbs. Suddenly, I felt caught, like he'd been spinning a web while I listened to his story, and I hadn't realized until it was too late that he'd just irrevocably bound us together.

“Why are you telling me this?” Now my heart was thudding for a completely different reason.

I was afraid.

I was afraid because good sense told me I didn't want to be bound to Billy Winston. I didn't want a connection with him, I didn't want to

understand him better or at all; I didn't want to know his history, his struggles; I didn't want to look at him and see anything other than the broody kid who I'd argued with as a child, or the broody and gorgeous, cold and aloof star quarterback of Green Valley high school.

I didn't want to *know* him.

. . . *Too late, Scarlet.*

Billy's Adam's apple bobbed, his hand returning to the hair he'd just moved. He gently pushed his fingers into it, stroking and petting and—in that moment, after everything that had just been said—the action paralyzed me.

I got the sense he needed the connection after the story he'd just told, to touch me, to feel something soft. And, DAMMIT, the reckless, nonsensical part of me—the part of me I was forever denying in order to survive and stay sane—wanted to be that something soft for him.

And you know what? It felt so good. It felt more than good. It felt like the beginning of something terrible and beautiful and dangerous and wonderful. The more he touched my neck and hair, played with it, the more he seemed to draw strength from the gentle action, the more I felt myself slipping and falling and surrendering.

His eyes followed the progress of his hand. My heart flip-flopped again—another *thunk ka-thunk*—and again I was noticing how gorgeous he was. But this time I didn't want to look away, because this time it was more than just the outside. I was seeing Billy's strength and vulnerability, and amazingly they were one and the same.

"After, when I woke up," he started again, his cadence lulling. "I didn't regret what I'd done, but I was inconsolable. I did it on purpose, knowing what would happen, but I didn't feel like myself. It wasn't just the bruises. It was like Darrell had taken my sovereignty away, my autonomy. Like he'd taken away my trust in myself."

Now my heart stuttered, stopped, and my eyes stung like I'd been slapped. These words hit a bullseye within me, a secret one, an emotional target I'd never admitted existed, even to myself. My chin wobbled. I stopped it. My vision blurred. I blinked furiously.

He was trying to catch my gaze, but I wouldn't give it to him, looking everywhere but. Billy's palm came to my upper back, rested there. The heat of it seeped through my shirt.

"Scarlet, I don't know how long this has been going on, but it needs to stop."

I pressed my lips together, closing my eyes before tears could spill. "I don't want to talk about it."

Damn him! So this is why he'd told me his story. My mind was frantic. I couldn't think.

Build a wall. One brick at a time. Don't let anything in. Don't let him in.

"I know you don't want to talk about it, Scarlet. I know what you're feeling. Maybe not all of it, maybe not exactly how you feel it, but I got a pretty good idea."

I tried to snatch my hand back from where our fingers entwined, my palm now cold and clammy. He wouldn't let me retreat. Instead, he brought the back of my hand to his chest, pressing it against his heart such that I felt the steady, strong rhythm of him, and that hurt. Everywhere—behind my eyes, my stomach, my chest—it hurt.

"I know what you're up against, but you're not alone. Like you said, they're not all-powerful. It might feel like it sometimes, but they're not."

I sniffled, closing my mind to his words. I couldn't think about this. If I did, I was certain Razor would know about my disloyal thoughts. Maybe it was irrational, but I was convinced he'd know and he'd bring me in, and then I'd never be able to leave. He'd cut me all over, he'd cut my face like he'd threatened to do a hundred times, like he'd done to my brothers and their mommas. And then he'd—

Calm down, Scarlet. Build a wall. . . one brick at a time.

“Let me help you. Please.”

Damn Billy. I never should have come here, I never should have let him help me.

I shook my head, squeezing my eyes shut tighter. “Please stop talking about this.”

The hand between my shoulder blades rubbed a gentle, small circle, staying far away from the exposed wound near my lower back. I barely felt it.

“Okay. Okay, I will. I’ll stop. But I want something in return.”

A laugh burst from my mouth and my eyes flew open. I found his face close, that small smile—which I now decided was a friendly smile after all—curving his lips.

“Oh? Really? What do you want?” My body was shaking, shivering. I’d give him anything, promise anything to get him to stop.

His tongue flicked out to lick his lips, looking torn for a moment, but only for a moment. “I want you to stay here at night, every night. In this house, in this room, with me.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

BILLY

“The lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves.”

— NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI, THE PRINCE

Figuring out what Scarlet needed from me in order to make good choices was impossible because she was the most stubborn, most infuriating person on the planet.

“Hey. Billy.”

I moved just my eyes to her. She held a flashlight pointed at the tall stalks of dead flowers and grass; her gaze tracked the spotlight. We were walking across the field, taking her back to the woods because Scarlet wanted me to be crazy. Obviously.

After I’d cleaned her cuts and I’d told her my story—which I’d never told *anyone* or spoke about *ever*—she wanted to leave. She wouldn’t look at me. And when she did look at me, it was that same look from the first time she’d led me out of the woods and to the edge of the field, the same look she’d given me in my room moments ago, just before I’d cleaned her wound.

No expectations. I was nothing to her. She wanted nothing. She gave and needed nothing. Not a damn thing. Like it wouldn't surprise her at all if this was the last time we saw each other, like she assumed it would be so easy for me if she just disappeared.

She'd wanted the bandage on, she'd wanted off the bed, and she'd wanted to leave, *right now*. It was like being punched square in the chest.

"Billy."

"What?" I snapped.

Scarlet cleared her throat lightly. "What did the turkey on the table say to the deer head hanging on the wall?"

Already frowning, I felt my eyebrows pull together even more. "Pardon?"

"What did the—"

"I heard the question. I just don't understand why you're asking it."

"It's a joke, *Billy*. Just say, 'What did the turkey say?' Sheesh!" She tossed her red curls, which were long and loose down her back. In my bedroom, her hair had shimmered like copper and gold.

"Fine, *Scarlet*. What did the turkey say?"

Making a gruff sound, she quickened her pace, grumbling, "Never mind. Forget I said anything."

Now she was marching instead of walking, her footfalls heavy and determined. Hanging back a few steps, I muttered curse words under my breath.

"I heard that. You kiss your momma with that mouth?"

I gritted my teeth. But bizarrely, I was also smiling. "Please. Explain to me why you won't even consider it?"

"I like my camp and it's not that cold."

"Tomorrow night it's getting down into the thirties. Even our goats are being sheltered."

“Then it’s a good thing I got that new sleeping bag. Maybe I’ll sleep with the goats. I like goats.” Her voice was cheerful, not a trace of sarcasm.

I glared at her back, wanting to tell her she shouldn’t be sleeping in a sleeping bag in the first place, and she’d sleep with our farm animals over my dead body. She shouldn’t be in a tent in the woods either, where there were bears and all sorts of critters, and most especially when it was freezing outside. She was putting herself in danger every night. Maybe she didn’t care about her safety or maybe she didn’t understand? Whatever. I did not understand this woman.

No. Not woman. Girl. She’s the same age as Ashley. Bafflingly, this reminder made me anxious. Scarlet seemed older than Ashley, a lot older. When I looked at Ashley, I saw a kid. My sister would always be a three-year-old to me, pitching a fit because she wanted a blue dress instead of a purple one. Just like my younger brothers, she was someone to protect and worry over.

When I looked at Scarlet, I didn’t see a kid sister. *At all.* What I saw was a strong, sometimes smart, stubborn woman—*girl*—who was struggling and in pain. And yet, she was always eager to laugh, to help, to thank and show gratitude, to search out and cling to the bright side, to find reasons to smile and charm and make other folks happy. In truth, she kinda reminded me of my brother Beau.

Perhaps this similarity to Beau was why the urge to protect Scarlet—though of a different flavor than what I felt about my family—was just as strong. Sure, she’d survived on her own this long. And yes, she didn’t need me interfering, she didn’t need me full stop. *But I need to help, if she’d just let me . . .*

Time to try a different tactic. Clearly, good sense was lost on this woman. *Girl. Not woman. She’s just a girl.*

Catching up so I was once more walking next to her, I tried, “I can sleep downstairs, on one of the couches. You can wake me up on your way out in

the morning. No one will ever know.”

She huffed, but it sounded strange, like there was a sob behind it. *Damn.* I didn’t want her crying. I wanted her safe, and warm, and protected to *just fucking listen for a damn second!*

“Scarlet. Please.” I placed a hand on her arm, a light touch, needing to slow her down. We were almost to the woods, and once she was inside she’d be gone, out of my reach.

She stopped. She huffed again. She faced me. She closed her eyes. “I don’t want your pity.”

Pity?!

A powerful and abrupt stab of frustration meant I had to bite back the impulse to yell at her, grab her and shake some sense into her obstinate brain. I would never, ever do that. But I’d entertain the hell out of the thought.

Instead, speaking through clenched teeth, because she made me so crazy, I said, “Scarlet. If this were pity, I’d say *thoughts and prayers* and go back inside my warm house. This isn’t pity. You are, *by far*, the strongest person I know. *By far*. I wouldn’t dare pity you.”

“Then answer me something.” The words were garbled, like she was talking around something in her mouth.

“Sure.”

“Why are you doing all this? What do you want from me?” Her big eyes opened and searched my face, like she was desperate for answers.

It was dark and the flashlight was pointed to the ground, she couldn’t see me. I could see her though. Her voice almost hid it, but she was already crying. I winced, another punch to the chest.

I answered in the only way I thought might have a chance of working, “If you’re sick, I can’t teach you guitar.”

Her full, bossy lips tugged up at one side even though her chin wavered. “That’s a dumb reason.”

Swallowing around a thickness, I stuffed my hands in my jacket so I wouldn't catch and wipe away her tears. "Well, what reason do you need to hear in order to accept?"

She laughed, like my answer surprised her and she truly thought it was funny. Her smile was big and open and beautiful, and I gaped at it. How could she laugh with such sincerity when she was hurting so bad? How did she do that?

"Scarlet," I whispered, her name spilling out. Pushed by a sense of urgency that made no sense, my feet shifted me closer and my hands were out of my pockets, cupping her jaw. Unable to help myself, I swiped away those tears. I needed it. Her skin was velvet, warm and so soft. "Please."

As soon as I touched her face, she stiffened, her laughter dying. And as soon as my thumbs moved over her cheeks, she relaxed. Or more like, she sagged. Her hand not holding the flashlight came to my wrist. I thought for a second she was going to pull my hand away.

Instead, her face crumpled, and she whispered, "What if he finds out?"

What if . . . ? I frowned, searching her for clues. What was she—

Oh! "Shit." I pulled her forward, wrapping her gently in my arms as a jolt of stunned realization seized my lungs, left me feeling like a right old jackass.

I'd been so stupid. How could I not have seen? She wasn't being stubborn. She was afraid.

"No, Scarlet. He won't." I firmed my voice. "He won't find out. No one will know but you and me."

She pressed her face into my chest and fisted her hands in my jacket, crying harder. "If he—if he—he'll know. He'll find out. And then he'll—and then you and your momma and all your—"

"We won't even talk about it. I'll pretend you're not there. It'll be like I can't see you. We'll be so careful."

She took a deep breath and shivered on the exhale, and then inhaled again. When she breathed out this time, she sounded calmer. Releasing her grip on my jacket, I felt her hesitate, and then her arms came around my middle.

She hugged me back, accepting comfort for just a half minute before retreating, wrapping her arms around herself. I wanted to pull her back to me but was convinced she'd push me away.

"I get to decide when and how often." Her head was angled down and she spoke to the ground. "If the weather is nice, I'll sleep outside."

I said nothing, agreed to nothing. Cold or not, those woods were still full of critters.

She lifted her chin, her eyes narrowed, fierce. "And if I change my mind, if I stop coming, you let me be. Like you said, you'll pretend I'm not there."

"I'll do my best," I hedged. Pretending not to see her wasn't as easy as it had been two weeks ago.

"And I don't owe you anything. And you're not allowed to feel sorry for me." She lifted a finger between us, pointing at me. "And I won't get used to sleeping in a bed. And we don't know each other. We're not friends."

These last few statements didn't sound like they were meant for me. More like she was reminding herself, making demands of herself not to expect anything.

Even so, my lungs hurt all over again and more words spilled out. "Too late."

"What?"

"I can't promise that."

She blinked, giving me the impression she'd halfway forgotten I was there. "Can't promise what?"

Without giving the instinct much thought, probably because it felt so natural, I reached for the hand she held between us, wrapped her fingers in

mine, and brought her knuckles to my chest, like I'd done in my room. "We are friends. That already happened."

Scarlet opened her mouth, maybe to protest, so I quickly added, "But I'd never feel sorry for you."

She snapped her mouth shut, her eyes darting between my face and where I held her hand, like she had a hard time keeping up with what I was saying and doing, like the pitch-black night confused her the way the woods confused me.

I squeezed her fingers, lowering her hand but not letting her go. Turning back to the house, I took advantage of my hold and her confusion to lead her back the way we'd come. Ten feet became twenty, then thirty, fifty, a hundred, and with each step I breathed easier.

We'd made it halfway when she spoke. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why will you never feel sorry for me?" Abruptly, her feet seemed to drag, and I sensed a hesitation in her steps.

"I wouldn't dare." I shifted my grip, holding her palm more securely.

"You wouldn't dare?"

"I wouldn't dare," I repeated, the house in sight now.

"Why wouldn't you dare?" She sounded curious.

Glancing at her, I found her wide eyes searching for my outline. Like her voice, they held curiosity, but there was also something else. Vulnerability. Trust. Maybe hope. This also hurt my chest, but not like a punch. More like when something feels so good it hurts.

My smile was a reflex, but my words were premeditated. I hoped they'd pull an equally spontaneous smile from her. "First, because you're scary as hell," I teased, surprising myself. I wasn't much of a teaser. "And second, the last time I dared, you negotiated four guitar lessons outta me. And now I'm teaching you guitar for the rest of our lives, apparently. Who knows what you'd talk me into next? I don't want to lose a kidney or something."

She did smile, just a small one but it felt like a gift, and muttered, “I don’t need a kidney, I already have two.” Also, thankfully, she stopped dragging her feet.

Thank God.

This track of conversation seemed to be working, and I didn’t want to give her any quiet time to reconsider, so I asked, “What part of me would you ask for? My liver?”

“Nah. I’d want something more essential.” She withdrew her hand and I resisted the urge to grab it again.

In the end, I let her go. She was now keeping pace so there was no real reason to hold on, other than to keep touching her, and that made no sense.

“Than a liver?” I bumped her shoulder, still watching her.

Her gaze forward, her grin grew. “Maybe I’d take your guitar.”

“Ugh.” I clutched my chest. “Might as well take my heart.”

She chuckled. And then her chin lowered. Her hair fell forward, hiding most of her face from view. But she said nothing else.

Neither of us did.

* * *

Billy-

What did the turkey

Say to the deer on the wall?

We are stuffed! Get it?

-Forest Fairy

PS When are you teaching me how to play the guitar?

PPS Save these haikus. They’ll be worth a lot of money someday.

Scratching the rough hair on my jaw, I smiled at the note—the haiku—Scarlet had left on my night table. She still wanted me to teach her? Good.

I read the note a few more times and wondered vaguely if she'd do it every morning from now on. After she'd admitted the truth, that she was afraid, coaxing her back to the house had been easy. Of course, first we had to return to her campsite and snuff out the fire she'd started earlier.

Not easy? Sneaking her inside.

After enlisting Ashley's help with a distraction—second helpings of pie served in the kitchen for my brothers—I brought Scarlet through the front door. Another great thing about my sister, she never asked why I needed her help. She just helped. *Thank God for Ashley.*

I grabbed us some pie while she changed, wearing the same pair of pajamas as Tuesday night. Despite protesting that she was too full, she ate the whole slice and then clear passed out by the time I returned from taking the dish downstairs.

I hadn't heard her leave this morning. She was so quiet when she wanted to be.

Lowering the scrap of paper, I studied the mattress where she'd slept. Just like last time, she'd made the bed, neat and tidy, and my pajamas were once more left in a folded pile at the foot. I wouldn't move them. She could use them again tonight. *And she'll probably need a shower. Where do we keep the extra toothbrushes? I should ask Ashley about girl shampoo. Her hair is so pretty when she wears it down. Maybe she'll want hot chocolate again. Do we have any marshmallows left? I like how she—*

A quick knock on the door startled me from my thoughts. A second later, Cletus stuck just his head inside. He opened his mouth, like he was set on saying something, but then closed it, frowning. Squinted eyes moved from the top of my head to the note in my hand, as though he distrusted me. He then glanced at the empty bed where I'd been staring, then back to me.

"Billy."

"Cletus." My voice was deep with sleep.

His eyes narrowed further. "What are you doing?"

“Waking up. What’re you doing?”

“Standing here, talking to you.”

I nodded once. “Okay.”

His eyes continued to narrow until I couldn’t see his irises, inspecting me like I was one of his science experiments. “You look funny.”

I scratched my jaw. “I know. I need to do something about my beard.”

“No. That’s not what I meant. Your eyes, that look on your face, it’s new.”

Breathing out a laugh, I lifted an eyebrow at my brother. “You know all my looks, do ya?”

“Yes. They’re all documented and categorized in my brain palace.” He stepped inside my room and tapped the side of his head. “That one you’re wearing is new.”

“It’s the face I wear when I get to sleep in. That’s why you haven’t seen it.” Friday through Sunday after Thanksgiving were rare days off from work, practice, and school.

Shutting the door behind him, he paced the floor between me and my desk. “I need to talk to you about two important topics.”

“Okay.” I returned Scarlet’s note to my night table, stood, stretched, and spoke around a yawn, “But if you’re trying to get out of chores, it’s not going to work. You’re the one who wanted to keep the goats. You need to do your share taking care of them. And your dog needs a bath.”

He waved this statement away, like it was a housefly. “Yes, yes. Fine, fine. I will wash Laelaps. This is about something else.”

“Okay. Shoot.” I shuffled to my dresser, picking through for the pair of jeans I wanted.

“First, what’s going on with you and my very good friend, Scarlet St. Claire?”

I cleared my features of all expression. “I wasn’t aware y’all were good friends.”

“We are.”

“Good to know.” Finding the jeans I was after, I shut that drawer and thumbed through my undershirts. I wanted a black one. They were bigger than the white ones, longer.

He stared at me for a few seconds, presumably for me to continue. When I did not, he said, “Billy.”

“Yep?”

“I demand to know what’s going on with y’all.”

“None of your business. Next question.”

He grunted. “Fact: she didn’t come talk to me last night like I asked. Also fact: I saw y’all leave out the back door together. Another fact: she is a good, kind-hearted person who deserves to be with someone who will treat her like a treasure.” He paced back and forth, hands clasped behind his back, saying all this like he was presenting evidence in a case.

“I agree with that last part.”

“Ah ha! So something is going on with y’all.” He stopped pacing.

“I already told you all I’m going to tell you.”

“I’ve always approved of Sam. She’s aggressive, pushy, which you know I like in a woman. I admire her plain speaking. And she’s funny too. Nevertheless, I don’t think it’s right for you—”

“Sam and I broke up.”

“Really? Is that so?” He didn’t sound too upset about it. “You break up with her or the other way around?”

“Yep.”

He huffed. “That’s not an answer.”

“That’s all you get.”

“So that means you broke up with her. Is this because Scarlet—”

“Cletus.” I let my glare rest on him before I finished. “Drop it.”

“Hmm . . .” was all he said, and I thought he wasn’t going to drop it. But then he blurted, “I need money.”

Without missing a beat, I said, “Then you should get a job.”

“The money isn’t for me.”

“And again, you should get a job.” Black undershirt in hand, I opened my sock drawer.

“My birthday is on Sunday.”

“Then wait ’til then. Momma always gives us money on our birthdays.”

“That won’t be enough,” he grumbled. “And I know you got that savings account. You won’t need all that once you get your football scholarship.”

Finding the clothes I wanted, I faced him. “Cletus Byron, if you get a job, you can give your money to whoever you want. Give it all away. I don’t care. But I’m not giving you any money.”

I walked back to my bed and set my clothes down, pulling off my white T-shirt while I suspected my younger brother’s glare bored into my back. I ignored him.

“What if I took out a loan? What if I paid you back? Name your conditions.”

I smirked. “People without jobs can’t get loans. Go open a lemonade stand at the end of the drive. Or a hot chocolate stand. Do something to earn it.”

“Hmm . . .” was his response. Then, he said nothing while I dressed, rubbing his chin, deep in thought, and staring at the floor of my bedroom.

I’d just set my foot in my boot when he snapped his fingers, pointed at the ceiling, opened his mouth, stared at me like he was perplexed by my presence, and then said, “I gotta go. Bye.”

Cletus turned on his heel and left in a hurry, not closing the door. But then, as I set my other foot in my other boot, he came running back in, his hands up, showing me his palms.

“Y’alls last football game is next Friday, right?”

“It’s the last game in the regular season. We’re headed to playoffs for state, though. After Christmas break. Why?”

“Good,” he said, nodded once, and then ran out again.

Staring after him, I wondered if I should be concerned.

That’s not true. I knew I should be concerned. Cletus’s harebrained schemes—and he’d had many—always caused trouble for me eventually. On the one hand, I had a rare day off, to spend as I liked. No homework, no practice, no pressing chores around the house I *had* to do today that couldn’t just as easily be done tomorrow.

On the other hand, Cletus.

Undecided, I sat there, one boot unlaced. Nearly resigned to shelving my plans for the day and intervening before my brother could dive too deep into his latest mischief, my attention caught on the note Scarlet had left. Specifically, the words, *PS When are you showing me how to play the guitar?*

Suddenly, I didn’t much care what Cletus was up to. Let him have his mischief. Let him have his fun.

I owed Scarlet a guitar lesson, and I always kept my word.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BILLY

“People are rarely as attractive in reality as they are in the eyes of the people who are in love with them. Which is, I suppose, as it should be.”

— DAVID LEVITHAN, EVERY DAY

“Hey, sleepyhead.” Scarlet stood at the top of the small incline, grinning, no headphones on, no jacket either.

She’d been expecting me by the looks of it. Luckily, when I made it to the edge of the forest this morning, I didn’t have to wait too long before her voice carried to me. And so my feet carried me to her.

“Sleepyhead? It’s only eight thirty.” I studied her pose, her hands on her hips, her feet braced apart like she was a superhero about to take off into the sky. She was so darn cute and the sight of her had me suddenly nervous.

I couldn’t remember the last time I was nervous. I didn’t get nervous. If something was difficult, I didn’t think about it or worry about it, I just did it.

“Where’s the guitar?” she asked, not seeming to notice my pause. Her grin looked both teasing and threatening. “I was promised guitar lessons.”

“I didn’t bring the guitar.” Refusing to give into my anxious smile, I lifted an eyebrow at her instead. *This is just Scarlet.* I’d been anxious to see

her, but there was no reason to be anxious around her.

Giving me the side-eye—and also lifting an eyebrow—her big grin persisted. “Afraid I’d talk you into giving me your guitar for my birthday?”

“No,” I drawled, finding it harder and harder to keep my face straight. “Your birthday isn’t until May.”

“Afraid I’ll talk you into giving it to me for *your* birthday?” She giggled. “December, right?”

“I’m not afraid of you,” I said flatly. The words left an unexpected aftertaste as soon as they were out, as though they’d been a lie. Which was ridiculous. *I’m not afraid of her.* . .

Frowning at the direction of my thoughts, I continued, “I didn’t bring it because I thought I’d teach you the basics of how to read music. I brought some blank sheet music for today; I’ll bring the guitar tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? You’re coming back tomorrow?” She examined me, like this information perplexed her.

“Yep. Same time tomorrow, just make sure you sing so I don’t get lost. Here.” I shoved a paper plate covered with tinfoil at her, anxious to have her eyes looking elsewhere. I’d carried it from the house, suspecting she might be hungry. “Breakfast.”

Scarlet’s forehead wrinkled as she took the plate. “Breakfast? What’s for breakfast?” Not waiting for me to answer, she lifted the foil and groaned, loudly. “ARE THOSE CINNAMON ROLLS? OH MY GOD!”

“Shhh!” Laughing, her reaction was so darn funny, I shushed her and walked past to place the notebook of blank sheet music paper next to the tent. “I can barely make out your singing at the edge of our field, but I’m pretty sure half of Tennessee heard you just now.”

“Sorry,” she whispered, her nose stuck under the tinfoil.

I took a moment to glance behind me, studying the trees and the flat stretch of raised land. I thought perhaps, after a few more trips back and

forth, even without her voice I might be able to find the camp. The path looked familiar in a way it hadn't before.

"Thank you so much," she said, plainly happy and excited and clutching the plate to her chest. "I love cinnamon buns and I smelled them this morning as I was leaving. Your momma got up early, huh?"

"No, Ash. She always makes these the day after Thanksgiving. My brothers are usually so grateful, they're nice to her for the rest of the weekend."

"They usually give her a rough time, do they?" She made a silly, cackling sound, like she approved of the twins' antics.

Looking at Scarlet, I found myself wearing a perma-grin. Despite my strange nerves, her good mood was contagious. It was great to see her well-rested, well-fed, and seemingly happy. Her skin looked brighter, her features more animated, and so did her eyes.

She'll look like this all the time if she sleeps with you every night, I thought. But then the double meaning of the thought occurred to me all of the sudden. It struck a strange chord, and I was very, very glad I hadn't said something similar out loud.

"Uh, yeah." I scratched the back of my neck, which was mysteriously hot and prickly. "Jethro gave Ashley a lot of grief—when he was at home—but mostly it's the twins causing trouble for her now. Sometimes Cletus, but less than he tortures me. Roscoe is real sweet. I think he tries to make up for the others. Brings her flowers in the spring and puts them in her room."

Scarlet, engrossed by the cinnamon rolls, hummed the song I'd followed from the field, "Wild Horses" by the Rolling Stones. Even her humming was beautiful and I wished she'd do it louder. She strolled to a spread blanket set back from the fire and peeked at the plate again.

Sitting, she inhaled deeply for a third time and closed her eyes. "These smell like heaven."

Content to just watch her be cute and smell and smile and hopefully sing again, I stayed put by the tent, hooking my thumbs in my pockets. “You can have all of those, if you want. There’s plenty more I can bring tomorrow.”

“You know, I’m not going to turn you down. I don’t have that much pride.” She selected a roll and re-covered the others. They’d been warm when I wrapped them.

“Pride?”

Transferring the roll to her other hand, Scarlet licked her fingers of the brown sugar stickiness. The action caught my attention, oddly distracting and . . . fascinating. And that made no sense. I’d seen plenty of folks lick their fingers before. Nothing fascinating about that.

Meanwhile, Scarlet was still talking. I had to focus in order to listen.

“See, if you’d tried to bribe me with cinnamon rolls last Sunday—” she laughed, and I got the sense it was 100 percent at herself “—I’d be long gone right now.”

“Was that just last Sunday?” I scratched my cheek. It seemed so much had happened since then, so much time had passed. I didn’t much want to think about what I’d said or how I’d acted last Sunday.

“Yep. It took less than a week for me to bend you to my will.” Her pretty eyes sparkled; she was teasing again. Inexplicably, I found I liked her teasing. I didn’t generally like to be teased, never much cared for it. The only person who got away with teasing me was Cletus, but that was only because there was no avoiding Cletus. He was an equal opportunity teaser and harasser.

I crouched, saying only, “Hmm,” and picking up a long stick with a charred end. Needing something to do, I readjusted a few of the logs. I suspected the long, sturdy stick was what she used to stir the fire. “I should bring you some fire tools.”

“Don’t bother.” She held her hand in front of her mouth, covering it as she chewed and spoke. “That stick works just fine.”

“You need the right tools, at least a poker, shovel, tongs. Maybe a bellow.”

Scarlet tilted her head to the side and giving me a strange-looking smile. “Billy, I do not need all that.”

“The right tools would make the fire easier to manage,” I argued, still out of sorts, not understanding myself. Maybe I was just in a strange mood this morning.

“But then I’d have to store them someplace and look after them and then carry them around if I left.”

“You’re not leaving.”

She ignored my statement, continuing her thought, “Besides, all the right tools in the world wouldn’t help me any better than that stick.”

All the right tools in the world. The words sounded familiar.

All the right tools in the world . . . Pastor Jones. David and Goliath. That’s where I’d heard those words.

About to press my point on the fire tools, my thoughts were abruptly derailed by the vision of Scarlet—after taking another large bite of her bun—rolling her eyes back in her head. Her tongue slipped past her full pink lips to lick the corner of her mouth. And then she groaned, long and low.

I stiffened, spots at the base of my skull and spine throbbing, a quick pulsing ache, chasing my breath from my lungs.

Now, I was more than fascinated. I was paralyzed by the look of ecstasy on her face, held hostage by her groan of pleasure. Something about both the look and the groan made her much, much less cute, and yet much, *much* more . . . attractive.

It wouldn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out why and the direction of my mind *SHOCKED THE HELL* out of me, like a zap coursing along my veins, and had my hands gripping tightly around the fire stick.

“These are SO GOOD! My biggest dream is to one day have a kitchen. I’m going to be a gourmet cook and—” Scarlet blinked, her eyes growing wide. “Uh, what’s wrong?”

“What?” Caught, I shook myself, fire in my lungs and low in my stomach.

“You’re looking at me funny. Do I have something on my face?” She swiped at her chin, her cheeks turning pink.

“Oh. No.” I stood and speared the ground with her fire stick, twisting aimlessly, requiring a deep breath and *a moment*.

I used the moment to reprimand myself.

What the hell? She’s fourteen. Fourteen. Fourteen. She is underage. She is a minor.

. . . So what? I’m sixteen. And she isn’t a kid.

She’s the same age as Ash, as Momma was when Darrell showed up.

Scarlet isn’t my sister, and I’ve never thought of her that way either. That’s for damn sure.

I’ll be seventeen in less than a month.

Two and a half years isn’t much different than two years.

Hasn’t she been through enough? She doesn’t need your long looks; she doesn’t need you noticing how cute she is or anything else. She needs your help.

The devil on my shoulder had no response for that argument, and I was relieved. Shoving the fingers of one hand into my hair, I glanced at her. She was looking at me like I was strange, which made sense since I was acting strange.

“You okay?” she asked, an edge of concern there.

“Yeah. It’s just, uh, something you said reminded me of something else.”

“What’d I say?”

“When you said, ‘All the right tools in the world.’ Something like that.” This was me grasping at straws, looking for any opportunity to redirect the conversation.

“What’d it remind you of?”

“Pastor Jones was talking about David and Goliath last week and he used the same words.” My hands on my hips, I forced a thin smile and looked at her again, working to see her as just Scarlet. Just normal, plain old Scarlet. Not moaning, groaning, lip licking, sparkly-eyed, teasing, gorgeous, fascinating Scarlet.

Oh good Lord. I was the worst.

“I know that story. It’s about the boy who defeats the giant, right?” She skootched to her right and patted the blanket next to her. “Here. Sit and have one of these, otherwise I will seriously eat them all and give myself a stomachache.”

I hesitated. Fact was, sitting so close seemed like a bad idea right now. But then I relented. I was hungry and being ridiculous. *She’s just Scarlet. Just. Scarlet.*

“Let’s see.” Walking around the fire, sitting next to her, I tried to think back to last Sunday. “Pastor Jones said it wasn’t really about someone weak defeating someone strong, it wasn’t about David and Goliath really. It was about David and Saul.”

“Saul as in St. Paul?”

“Different Saul.”

“So many Sauls and Pauls in that book. You’d think the author would give folks new names so we didn’t mix up the characters.”

Flashing her a grin, she was so funny, I reached inside the covered plate and took the first cinnamon roll I found. I then spent the next few minutes filling her in on the background of David and Goliath and Saul—as she didn’t seem to know it—while I ate my first bun and she devoured a second. Thankfully, there was no more groaning or eyerolling in ecstasy.

Also, thankfully, whatever alarm she'd set off in my body turned off, mostly. Talking about bible verses had been a fantastic idea, maybe the best I'd ever had. No more unsettling throbbing pulses or what-the-fuck-ever. But she was still darn cute, no denying that and no ignoring it now.

"So, according to Pastor Jones," I finished up, "it's about Saul and how he wasn't fit to lead."

"'Cause he didn't defeat Goliath?" She was licking her fingers again.

And again, I found the action distracting, *fascinating*. Gritting my teeth, I tore my eyes away. I breathed out. I worked to focus on what we were discussing. *This is Scarlet, just Scarlet. You've known each other forever. She's no different than she was yesterday. You are not allowed to be attracted to her as anything other than a friend.*

"Uh." My eyebrows pulled together as I struggled to think.

This woman—*GIRL*—had just gone through a trauma and here I was thinking about how beautiful she was. In my defense, I was sixteen. She was funny, gorgeous, smart. Most other sixteen-year-old guys I knew thought about sex constantly, talked about it constantly. I thought about it a lot too, obviously, but I had other things on my mind as well. Important things. Point was, I prided myself on being in control.

Scratching the prickly heat at the back of my neck, I forced myself to concentrate. "It's not really about who defeated Goliath. I think—I think it's, uh, it's because Saul had all the armor and weapons—all the right tools in the world—and he was nearly as tall as Goliath, but he didn't even try. He lacked faith."

Scarlet leaned back on her palms and stretched her legs out, drawing my attention to her. My breath caught. My stomach twisted.

Damn, she's pretty.

"Or, maybe Saul just knew when he was outmatched and intelligently decided to farm out the fighting."

I closed my eyes. I needed another moment, and so I asked (in order to stall), “You think Saul was better fit to lead? Why?”

“He survived, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, but David survived too.” I gathered a deep inhale, opening my eyes and fixing my stare to the blanket. “*And* fought for his people. He didn’t hide or try to get someone else to do his dirty work.”

“That’s because David was an arrogant kid who got lucky at best. At worst, he was a crazy loon with a death wish.”

Now I was laughing again. When I dared to look at her, I saw my laugh also made her smile. We stared at each other, smiling for a bit before her gaze appeared to turn inward. A second later, she laughed anew, closing her eyes and shaking her head.

“What? What is it?” I asked, wanting to know all her thoughts.

Her head still shaking, she laughed harder, nudging my leg with her foot. “I was just thinking, I didn’t even need a sling or rocks to take *you* down. Just my knee.” She peeked at me. “Sorry about that.”

I tried to frown but couldn’t. She was talking about the first time I’d heard her sing, chased after her in the woods, and ended up losing ten years of my life at the point of her sharp knee.

“You’re forgiven,” I said, meaning it.

“So fast?” She seemed genuinely surprised by my quick acceptance.

“You must’ve really thought I was Darrell if you deployed the nuclear option so fast.”

“Nuclear option? You mean a knee to the balls?” Now her grin was huge, her face beaming, her eyes brilliant, bright stained-glass blue. My lungs emptied on a whoosh.

Dammit.

What is wrong with me today? I’d known Scarlet was pretty before now, so why had it not mattered, or seemed so irresistible, until right this minute? I needed to look somewhere else. Anywhere else. But I didn’t. I couldn’t.

“Yes,” I said, my voice rough and low. “That’s what I meant by nuclear option.”

Was it Sam? Perhaps it was Sam. I missed Sam. I missed when we’d—
Nope. Not Sam.

As my momma frequently said, *Don’t go looking for your lost homework inside a blueberry pie, pies don’t eat homework.* Meaning, don’t look for excuses where none exist and don’t avoid taking responsibility for yourself.

The harsh truth was, like many teenage boys, I’d thought about girls and sex plenty, but I hadn’t thought about Sam since we broke up on Tuesday. Not once. And since I’d never been good at lying, not even to myself, I knew all this problematic noticing and staring and thinking had nothing to do with Sam and everything to do with Scarlet.

“You know—” she drew her legs up, resting her forearms along the tops of her knees “—I never understood why men don’t do it to each other more often. It’s the surest way to take someone down.”

“There’s an unwritten man-rule.” I pointed out the obvious, not bothering to remind myself again that she was *just Scarlet*.

Instead, I reminded myself that her father cut her, more than once. She was living in the woods. She was homeless. *She is off-limits.* That helped, finally. The insistent throb dulled to an ache, a jog instead of a sprint.

“What? Y’all have an unwritten man-rule that you don’t knee each other in the balls? That’s a real thing?” She seemed honestly perplexed.

I nodded.

Keep your eyes to yourself, be a good friend.

“Even if you’re getting the shit kicked out of you?”

I nodded again.

Scarlet made a light scoffing noise. “I don’t get boys.”

“Why? Because we don’t cripple each other regularly?” My voice was almost normal.

“But you do. Football?”

I glared at her. Folks who gave me shit about playing football got on my last nerve. There was no way I’d be going to college without a football scholarship. They didn’t like it? Fine. Don’t watch it. Whatever. Unless they were planning to pay for me to go to college, they could keep their opinions to themselves.

Maybe sensing my mood shift, Scarlet leaned forward, her chin lifting stubbornly. “You’ll beat each other to a pulp, you’ll brutally tackle each other on the field, you’ll punch each other in the face and all sorts of violence, but God forbid you damage another man’s precious gonads.”

Sitting cross-legged, she ticked off points on her fingers. She wasn’t going to back down and I was laughing, something about the way she said *gonads* cracked me up.

“Women have the same kind of thing, don’t they? I know you’ve been in fights before.”

“Yeah. When I was three and Jethro tried to take my ice cream. I woulda kneed him in the balls then too, if I’d known what it would do.”

“But with a girl? Have you ever given another girl a titty twister?”

Gasping, Scarlet’s hands lifted to her breasts and she cupped them, rearing her head back as though the very thought were unimaginable.

“Do you have any idea how much that hurts?” she asked, her eyes wide.

Again, I laughed, realizing—even given my odd mood and errant thoughts—I was enjoying myself more than I had in a long, long time. “I have some idea, yeah. I reckon it’s similar to a knee to the gonads.”

“Yeah, I guess . . .” She wrinkled her nose, her eyes scrunching thoughtfully as they shifted over my shoulder. Scarlet didn’t finish her thought and I didn’t prompt her.

We were sitting close, about three feet apart, facing each other. Silence settled between us as the sounds of the forest settled around us. A bird

called to another bird. The wind sent a *hush* through the top layer of the trees. The fire crackled and popped.

After a time, I no longer heard the bird call, the wind, or the fire.

Despite my determination to stop, I was unconsciously taking advantage of our stillness to admire the contours of Scarlet. How her long, copper and gold hair framed her lovely face; the graceful line of her jaw leading to the high arch of her cheekbone; the generous curves and pinks of her lips. Her skin was no longer yellowish, but a healthy, warm peachy color. Her freckles, which had appeared in such high contrast a few days ago, now seemed more natural. Charming.

A funny, sweet, beautiful person; a strong, kind, generous heart; and a seriously shitty life. My stomach sunk.

She deserved so much better than the hand she'd been dealt. Maybe her struggles had made her strong, resilient, but she didn't deserve to be burdened with them. I loved her voice when she sang, but I suspected her spirit eclipsed it as my favorite thing about her. It was a miracle her father's abuse hadn't dulled her stunning spirit.

Yet.

I ground my teeth. How much more could she take? How much more until her daddy made a lasting, visible dent instead of a hidden scar? The thought sent a shiver down my spine, rage pressing insistently against the back of my eyes while cold determination built a solid, immovable resolution within me.

He'll never touch her again. I'll keep her safe. I'll protect her.

I would. Even if she didn't want me to. Even if she wanted to handle things on her own. Even if I had to persuade her, convince her. Even if it meant I had to send her a million miles away.

My determination wavered at this last thought, of Scarlet being anywhere but here. It had only been a week, just a handful of hours, but I knew without a doubt I'd miss her if she left. *I will miss her.*

I redoubled my resolve. She deserved someone looking out for her first, someone who'd set aside selfishness for her sake. So, yeah, I would keep her safe, even if it meant sending her away.

I would.

I will.

Whatever it takes.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SCARLET

“Most people are not looking for provable truths. As you said, truth is often accompanied by intense pain, and almost no one is looking for painful truths.”

— HARUKI MURAKAMI, 1Q84

Billy taught me what he called the basics—the clefs, notes, time, flats and sharps—and I must’ve caught on quick because the actual lesson part didn’t last very long. He only sat next to me long enough to explain the concepts and show me a few things.

Then he gave me assignments based on his ten minutes of instruction. He seemed super eager to get up and move. While I worked, he checked the stakes of my tent, the security of the clothesline’s knots around the tree trunks and cleared fallen leaves from around the campfire.

My stack of firewood seemed to be a real source of frustration for him. Actually, calling it *firewood* or a *stack* was a generous label for the small pile of sticks and rotten, felled branches I’d gathered. He kept frowning at it, questioning me about my fire tools, and scanning my camp with a preoccupied expression on his face.

At one point, I looked up and realized he’d disappeared, so I sang. I stood and sang, “Wild Horses” again until he appeared a few minutes later.

“Thanks,” he said, wearing a broody expression and carrying several large river rocks. “I couldn’t find my way back.”

“What’re those for?” I lifted my chin toward the rocks, deciding not to laugh at him or tease, though I was tempted. Something about the arrangement of his features told me not to.

“I’m putting them around the firepit, it’s safer if you have a buffer,” he grumbled, clearly in a mood.

If he hadn’t laughed so easily at a few of my jokes earlier—like he truly thought I was hilarious—I might’ve wondered if he was irritated with me about something. But in the end, I didn’t think so. He’d been super nice all day, but also super distracted.

We walked to the river together after that. He gathered stones, arguing with me when I insisted on carrying one too. I diffused the situation by telling a joke. He laughed. He took the time to explain his concerns, about my back healing and such. Once I understood where he was coming from, we compromised on several smaller rocks instead of the bigger ones. We walked back companionably enough, me humming, him listening quietly. But he still seemed *off*.

By late afternoon, I started worrying and wondering if there was something troubling him. Maybe something I could help with? But I didn’t know Billy well enough to figure out how to ask him if he needed help. I didn’t want him to take offense or think I was being nosy. So I spent the rest of the day telling him jokes and funny stories to lighten his mood, listening to and enjoying his friendly laughter.

Anyway, after checking my latest “music assignment” around sundown, I walked him to the edge of the field. He didn’t leave until I collected my fairy food from the crate and promised to meet him on the back porch around ten, giving me his watch when I informed him my trusty Casio had been lost sometime over the last week.

“I’ll be on the steps out back at ten. Be there.” He was so bossy.

I rolled my eyes, as though this was a massive inconvenience, and shrugged. “Well, I might be a little late. I have *so much* to do. And a few of my friends are stopping by for tree bark tea and leaf sandwiches. You know how it is.”

His eyes narrowed, but he smiled, sticking out his hand. “See you at ten.”

I accepted the shake without thinking, but our hands didn’t really move. We just sorta stood there, holding hands and giving each other small smiles.

As the seconds ticked on, my heart fluttered uncomfortably and my mind grew restless, spurring me to mutter my usual departing words, “Goodbye, Billy. Have a nice life.”

His smile fell immediately, his stare becoming a glare. “Have a nice life?”

I shrugged, taking back my hand and saying with forced lightness, “Just in case I don’t see you again.”

Billy exhaled a laugh that sounded angry and shook his head. “We just agreed, I’ll see you at ten.”

I nodded. “Okeydokey.”

Narrowing his eyes, Billy walked backward as he left me, as though reluctant to look away. After about twenty feet or so, he faced the house and walked properly toward it. When he did, I stepped back into the tree line, feeling out of sorts, but I didn’t leave. My feet didn’t want to move. I watched him go and my heart jumped when he turned over his shoulder and looked back. I had the absurd sense that he was searching for me. He stopped, faced the woods, and stood there for a minute.

No lie. A full *minute*. Just studying the forest.

Since I didn’t think Billy could see me, I took the opportunity to stare at him. He wasn’t wearing his jacket, but he’d been wearing it earlier . . . *he must’ve left it at the campsite*. Other than the jacket, he’d dressed similarly to yesterday and looked quite dashing (yeah, I said *dashing* and I meant it).

Billy was so handsome, I suspected he'd look like a movie star in whatever he wore. But I admit, I was partial to the flannel, jeans, and boots. They suited him.

He turned slowly and walked back to his house. For reasons unknown, I watched him until he mostly disappeared, and then I strolled to my tent to eat dinner. Tonight, the Winstons had made fried chicken, homestyle potatoes, and collard greens. I was surprised it wasn't Thanksgiving leftovers; regardless, I ate every last bite.

And since my brain kept trying to relive the day, I listened to The Beatles's *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album loudly, on repeat.

Don't get me wrong, it wasn't a bad day. It was a good day. But I'd spent the entirety of it with Billy Winston. Being with Billy—talking to him, being near him, looking at him and catching him looking at me with that concentrated stare of his—still gave me the sense of being crushed. When I allowed myself to remember our day together, my lungs felt too full. I couldn't inhale properly.

So I drowned the thoughts with music until 9:30 PM, and then I put out my fire with its brand-new ring of stones buffer, turned off my CD Walkman, and walked to the homestead. But I did leave the empty, clean plate by the crate for Roscoe to find in the morning. I'd missed the Thanksgiving plate yesterday and felt guilty about it.

Unfortunately, on my way across the field, thoughts of Billy resurfaced (now I didn't have the loud music to distract me) and the closer I got to the house the harder it was to catch my breath. My heart was also behaving funny, beating harshly like it was unnerved every time I recalled something Billy had said, or done, especially when I thought back to the few times I'd glanced up and caught him looking at me.

I was coming to realize that sometimes Billy Winston's looks and gazes were just plain *intense*. He didn't mean anything by it, I was sure. It

must've been simply how he looked at folks. I needed to get used to his eyes, and him. That was all.

But as I approached the back porch, my heart's crazy antics became too much. I, for real, couldn't catch my breath. I stopped, pressing my palm to my chest and taking a minute to calm down. I needed to calm down. I needed to—

“Scarlet.”

I jumped, letting out a little yelp of fright and surprise, and fell backward on my backside. Apparently, when I'm startled, I fall on my big ass.

“Scarlet, it's me. Cletus,” a whisper came from my left and I swung the flashlight around, searching for him and ended up pointing it directly in his face.

He lifted his hand and squinted. “Will you please refrain from shining your high beams at my retinas. You've blinded me.”

I breathed out, closing my eyes and clutching my forehead. “You scared the tar outta me.” My heart finally began to slow, and I laughed my relief. “How'd you know it was me?”

“I could see before. I just can't see now.”

“What do you mean, you could see? It's black as grave dirt out here.”

I heard him move toward me. “Why would grave dirt be any darker than regular dirt?”

“Cletus!” I whispered harshly, laughing again in my consternation as I opened my eyes. “Why're you sneaking up on me in the dark?”

“We have matters to discuss.” He came to a stop in front of me. In the faint light provided by my flashlight I saw he was offering me his hand. “And you didn't come talk to me before leaving with Billy last night, nor did you come talk to me when you snuck back in. Nor did you come talk to me this morning when you left . . . again.”

I didn't take his hand. Instead, I gulped, staring up at the dark where his face should be. "You saw us?"

"Yes. But only because I was looking."

I gulped again. "Does anyone else suspect?"

"No. Not at all."

I lifted myself up all on my own. *Darn*. I was really looking forward to sleeping in a bed again.

"Scarlet, I'm not going to tell anyone."

"It's fine." I wiped at the backside of my jeans, irritated when my hands came away damp. The field was wet. "I really shouldn't have done it. Your momma has been so kind, and it feels wrong sneaking in and lying to her. It's probably for the—"

"Now hold on. Just wait a minute. That's nonsense and we can deal with it in a moment. I need to talk to you about something else first."

Cletus reached for my flashlight and took it before I realized his intention. Then he clicked it off. Then he stepped close and looped his arm through mine.

When he spoke next, his voice was a faint whisper, "I have a plan, but I need your help."

"A plan?"

"Yeah. I have a plan to raise a lot of money. We're going to throw a party at the Weller house on Bandit Lake after the football game Friday and I need you to get Billy there."

What? I was so confused. "I—what—are you—"

"Everything is arranged. We'll charge an entry fee. The place is stocked in liquor, no problems there, and I have Duane, Beau, and Hank on the keg issue."

"Cletus!"

"Don't worry. We can count on them."

“Cletus Byron Winston! Are you crazy? You asked your twelve-year-old brothers to get a keg?”

“If by ‘crazy’ you mean genius, then yes I am. Don’t worry, Duane’s a good driver—for his age—and Beau could talk a policeman into committing armed robbery. They’ll get it done. Lethal team, those twins.”

I shook my head, not knowing what to say.

“I can sense your amazement. You don’t need to waste breath on compliments. Just get Billy there and we’ll call it even.”

“Cletus—”

“Stop using my name. Who else are you talking to? It’s just us.”

I grunted. “What makes you think I can get your brother there?”

He chuckled. “Oh. I’m sure you’ll figure something out. But it’s important he comes. I’ve already told everyone he’ll be taking the tickets and manning the spin the bottle station.”

“You what?!”

“Shhh!” Cletus clamped a hand over my mouth. “What is wrong with you? Don’t you know it’s almost ten and folks are trying to sleep.”

I made a sound in the back of my throat until he removed his hand, and then I leaned close and whispered, “If you want someone to talk Billy into coming, why aren’t you asking his girlfriend? And what do you think she’ll think of him manning the spin the bottle station? Hm?”

“She won’t care. Billy has no girlfriend.”

“Yes, he does.” He had a gorgeous girlfriend, who everyone liked because she was funny and cool and friendly and the prettiest girl at Green Valley.

“No, he doesn’t. They broke up.”

I flinched, startled by this news. “They . . .”

“Broke up. They’re over. He’s *completely* unencumbered. The strings have been severed. Unattached. A free agent, as the kids say these days.”

My heart began racing again and my brain soon followed.

He broke up with Samantha? Or maybe she broke up with him. His mood today, how he'd been so distracted, she was probably the reason. Goodness, I felt badly for him. Maybe he was nursing a broken heart. Maybe he—

“Okay, so we're good? You'll get Billy there?” Cletus cut into my thoughts.

“No.” I shook my head to clear it. “I can't. Did you see your brother today?”

“Yes, I saw him. Just before he ran out to go spend the entire day with you.”

Something about the way Cletus said this made the front of my chest flare with heat, but I ignored it. “Then you must've seen how distracted he was. He's probably upset about the breakup, and you think he'll want to man a kissing station? No. Plus, we're talking about Billy Winston here. He's the most responsible teenager in this town and he'll never approve of using the Weller's house for—”

“Let me worry about that. He'll overcome his moral objections. And you're wrong if you think my brother is upset about breaking up with Sam. He was the one to break up with her, if you need to know the truth, so that's not a consideration.”

“Really?” I asked before I could stop myself, unable to comprehend how anyone could break up with Samantha Cooper. Everyone knew she did the breaking up, not the other way around. For example, she'd broken up with Ben McClure last year. Shock waves had been felt around town for weeks after. Most folks had assumed they'd get married after high school.

“So, again, we're good,” Cletus whispered. “You got your side handled?”

“No. I don't. You cannot do this. Never mind that I'll never be able to talk Billy into coming, but this is a bad idea.”

“It’s the only idea we’ve got, and we need that money. While you’ve been gone from school, things have happened. Carla is sure someone knows it was her who told on Prince, or it’s just a matter of time before someone finds out and turns her over to the Wraiths.”

Snorting my frustration, I tried to decipher something of Cletus’s features. I couldn’t. “Uh, yeah. She’s right. It’s only a matter of time.”

I sensed him shift, though his arm looped around mine didn’t move. “What makes you so sure?”

I didn’t really want to talk about this, but he needed to know. He’d obviously decided to align himself with Carla, to try to help her, and the more he knew about what he’d signed up for, the better.

“I saw my father on Tuesday.”

Cletus made a sound halfway between surprise and alarm.

I rushed to add, “He offered me money for finding out who turned in Prince King. A lot of money.”

“How much money?”

I sighed, and then said, “Five thousand dollars.”

I wasn’t going to turn in Carla. I’d considered it for a half second, but then the thought of handing anyone over to my father and his men made me nauseous. Just the *thought* made me feel sick. I’d even had nightmares about it Wednesday night.

It was okay, though. I was glad to know I’d never be that person, no matter how desperate. I’d never hand anyone over to my father in return for money or safety. I wouldn’t be able to live with it. I’d hate myself or die of guilt and shame.

Cletus was quiet for several seconds, obviously considering this information. The wind picked up, whistling behind me through the dead grasses and flowers of the field. I shivered. It was cold, much colder than it had been this past week. Billy had said something about tonight setting a record for cold temperatures and now I believed him.

Looks like I'll be sleeping with the goats.

"Tell him I did it," Cletus said suddenly.

I blinked at the darkness, confused. "What?"

"Tell your daddy I did it. That'll be five thousand dollars and you and Carla can—"

I ripped my arm from his grip, stepping back blindly, terror seizing my brain and all my senses. "What? No! Hell no, I'm not doing that. You know what they'll do to you?"

"Nothing that hasn't been done before."

I choked. And then I laughed on a bout of fear and disbelief, my eyes and nose stinging. *He has no idea.*

"I am *not* telling my father that. You can get it out of your head."

His hand found mine and he gripped it. "Scarlet, listen to me." He sounded so calm, so reasonable, and so very ignorant. "Take a moment and think about this. That money could send you and Carla far away from here. You could—"

"You ever been cut open, Cletus?"

Silence.

And then, "What?"

"Cut open? Your daddy ever pulled a knife on you?"

More silence, except his breathing. I could hear him breathe. And when he spoke, his voice was strangled, "Are you—are you—"

"Do you know why they call him Razor?" I pulled my hand from his, stuffing it in my jacket pocket. "Do you want to know? Or maybe you want me to show you?"

I couldn't see him, but I knew he could—somehow—see me. He was staring at my face. He saw I was serious. I heard him swallow, but he said nothing.

"So, no, Cletus. I'm not telling *Razor* Dennings that you ratted out Prince King. And don't ask me again."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BILLY

“Moral indignation is jealousy with a halo.”

— H.G. WELLS, THE WIFE OF SIR ISAAC HARMAN

*Your morning haiku:
Just let me know when
You want to tackle that beard.
Or, lumberjack. Cool.
-Forest Fairy
PS Bring your guitar today.*

I didn't bring my guitar.
The more I thought about it, the more I decided teaching her the guitar without first teaching her how to read music was a bad idea. I'd teach her the guitar, but not yet. But soon. *But not yet.*

I dressed. I grabbed breakfast for two and was at the edge of the forest way before 8:30 AM. Scarlet was already singing Bryan Adams's "(Everything I Do) I Do It For You," and although finding my way to the camp was easy this morning, I took my time. I walked slow. I stepped quietly. And at one point, my eyes open but unseeing, I just plain stopped. Shutting off all my senses save one, I listened.

Scarlet had a beautiful voice, but it was more than merely beautiful. She sang as though she lived the words, whatever they were, and she believed them. As my momma's friend Ellie Leffersbee said whenever she saw or heard or experienced something she found momentous, *I was stirred like a gin and tonic and shaken like a martini.*

Scarlet finished the song, holding the last note much longer than Bryan Adams ever had, and then it was quiet.

Why does no one know about her voice? Does the chorus teacher, Mrs. McClure know? She has to.

It was a damn shame, a crime to hide something so meaningful and beautiful from the world, almost as much of a shame as how Scarlet hid her gorgeous, funny, strong self. *They're the same*, I realized. Scarlet and her voice were the same.

Momentous, incredible, and unheard.

It took a few moments longer for me to find my vision and feet. When I did, I spotted her almost immediately through the trees. Her headphones were on, a small smile on her pretty face, and she was hanging up wet clothes on the line.

Now she's doing laundry. I ignored the small twinge of guilt and inhaled a big breath of frosty air.

Last night, I'd opened the back door at ten 'til ten and heard whispering voices. Cletus and Scarlet materialized in the dark, standing just off the back porch. They looked like they were arguing—or she did. He looked upset but not angry.

When Scarlet saw me, she took a step back. From the look on her face I could see she was planning to leave. I had a choice: let her go spend the coldest night of the year alone, in the woods, freezing, or convince her to stay. Convincing her to stay required acting fast, and so I did.

Even after she was inside and up the stairs, I wasn't certain she wouldn't run off first chance she got. Therefore, I took her clothes. It was

under the guise of washing them—which I did—but mostly I took them so she couldn't leave. And now she was doing laundry, probably washing everything in near freezing water.

I wished she hadn't required convincing. I wished she'd stop making everything so hard. I wished she'd just let me take care of her. Tricking her into doing the right thing, the *smart* thing, made me feel like an asshole.

However . . .

Allowing myself a moment to examine her from where I stood, she looked great. Restored. Her cheeks were glowing and not because it was cold outside. Seeing her now, listening to her now, singing another song with her headphones on, her voice loud and strong, her skin and eyes bright and healthy, I couldn't bring myself to regret any of it.

And so, I was reminded of something my Grandmother Oliver used to say to Jethro and me growing up, *God gave us free will so that we'll stumble and learn how to pick ourselves back up. But He also gave us folks who love us, to clear away the obstacles before we trip and fall.*

Second-guessing myself for doing the right thing made no sense, so I wouldn't. Banishing the guilt for good, I climbed the small hill to her campsite, making lots of noise since she had on the headphones. Scarlet did a double take once I reached the top of the incline but kept on singing, sending me a confused-looking smile that seemed to say, *What're you doing here so early?*

Sitting on the blanket, I spread out the food I'd brought, poured her a cup of hot chocolate, and added the four marshmallows to hers and none to mine. Then I set the mug next to her plate. She wandered over as soon as she was finished hanging up clothes, wiping her hands on her jeans and pushing the headphones to her neck.

"You're up early."

"Am I?" I took my time buttering a biscuit. "I don't have a watch anymore, so I don't know what time it is."

Scarlet did her version of a chuckle—which was more like a cackle—and sat cross-legged across from me on the blanket. “If you wanted a watch, then you shouldn’t have given yours away. You’re never getting it back, you know,” she said, leaning forward to steal the butter.

“What if you find your watch? Will I get it back then?”

She took a bite of her biscuit, making a tutting sound when she discovered it was warm enough to still melt the butter. I dropped my attention to the sausage on my plate before I had to witness another of her ecstasy faces.

“Warm biscuits and butter!” she said around a mouthful and a groan. “Is it Christmas already?”

I laughed, ignoring the spikes at the base of my spine and tearing off a bite of my biscuit. Careful to keep my eyes lowered, I decided it was best to change the subject. Clearly, food was a big thing with her and if I didn’t want to be fighting inconvenient thoughts all day, talking about warm biscuits and butter was off-limits.

“Where do you think you left the watch?” I asked, needing to clear my throat. “At school maybe?”

In my peripheral vision I saw her shake her head. “No. No, I think I must’ve left it at the McClures’ on Thursday. I was helping with Thanksgiving dishes and I took it off. I bet it’s at Ben’s house.”

I nodded, glancing at her briefly, and speared the rest of my sausage with a plastic fork, the act of stabbing its fleshy exterior immensely satisfying.

“What? What’s wrong?” Scarlet used her fingertips to nudge my legs. “Why do you look like that all of a sudden?”

“Like what?”

“Like you found a bug in your food.”

I pointed to the cup by her plate. “I brought you hot chocolate.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it. So, why’re you making that face?”

The side of my mouth hitched. She wasn't going to let this drop.

Giving her my eyes, I planned to make another attempt to distract, but instead ended up saying, "Where do you tell Ben you go?"

Scarlet's eyes rounded and she gulped her food, asking, "Pardon?"

"Where did he pick you up? When you went to Thanksgiving over at . . . over there. Where did he drop you off?"

"Uh, at the Corner Shoppe." She wiped her mouth with her sleeve, her blue gaze wide and watchful.

A bitter kind of certainty made the delicious food taste bland. I pushed my plate away. "And he doesn't ask where you're going?"

Shaking her head, she took another bite of her biscuit.

"Does he think you live there? At the Corner Shoppe?"

She wrinkled her nose, laughing lightly. "'Course not."

I nodded. '*Course not*. Of course Big Ben McClure didn't wonder why Scarlet St. Claire wanted to be picked up and dropped off miles from where the rest of her family lived. *Selfish jackass*.

I would've called him a sonofabitch, but his mother was a nice lady.

"Did he send you home with any food? After Thanksgiving?" This time the bitterness bled into my voice and I realized it too late.

Scarlet's eyes narrowed and she turned her face slightly away, like she was inspecting me from a new angle. I was coming to understand her various looks, and this was the one she used when I said or did something she found puzzling. Or troubling.

"What are you getting at, Billy?"

I knew it. I would've bet my letterman jacket he sent her home with nothing.

"Just that I'm not surprised you left empty-handed."

Her lips parted and she made a small choking sound. "You—you don't like Ben."

I shrugged, knowing I looked bored. Ben bored me. He was boring. He was dry white toast and lima beans with no butter. Therefore, other than being irritated on her behalf, this conversation also bored me.

Scarlet's gaze moved over my whole person, like I was something strange. "How can you not like Ben? He's like the nicest, most friendly, most—"

"It's easy to be nice to folks when you're raised by nice people, and everyone treats you like you're God's gift to Green Valley. That's all I'm saying."

"Oh? Is that all?" She made another choking sound followed by another sputtering laugh.

"Yeah. That's all."

"Well," she said, frowning suddenly and sitting up straight. "I think you're being stupid."

"Stupid?" I drawled. "I'm being stupid?"

"Yeah. You don't like Ben because he has a nice family? That's stupid."

"I didn't say I don't like Ben."

"You don't have to say it, Billy—" she reached for her hot chocolate, glaring at me over the rim of the cup "—I am a mind reader."

I felt my lips pull to the side and worked quickly to clear my expression. "You read my mind?"

"Yep. And you don't like Ben McClure."

"That's what you read from my mind."

"Yeah. That and other things."

Now this conversation? Not boring.

I allowed myself a small grin. "You read anything about you?"

Pointedly not looking at me, she pushed around the crumbs on her plate with the pad of her index finger. "Oh yes. Tons of things about me."

"Such as?" I wasn't holding my breath, but I couldn't wait to hear her response.

She huffed. She glanced at the sky. She huffed again.

I grinned wider as I watched her. Scarlet was especially cute today. She'd taken a shower last night and her hair was braided in one long rope hanging over her shoulder. But strands and curls had pulled free and the sun was filtering through the trees behind her, giving her lovely face a halo.

"Well?" I prompted, reaching forward for the thermos.

My movement made her jump and brought her attention back to me. She blinked, adorably out of sorts, her full lips parted. She was so incredibly beautiful when she was flustered. I liked her this way, rattled, struggling for words, blushing.

"What have you read in my mind about you?" I asked again, pairing this question with an uncontainable smile and pouring her more hot chocolate.

"You wish you knew my favorite color." Scarlet glared at me. She was gorgeous when she glared, and I liked her this way too.

I chuckled. "Oh? You heard that in my brain?"

"No. I read it. I can't hear minds, that's just silly. I read them."

"Well since I'm not a mind reader, what is your favorite color?"

"Blue."

"Blue? What color blue?"

She stared at me, her lips parting again like she was about to respond. But then she snapped her mouth shut and frowned, lowering her gaze to the sausage plate.

Scratching her neck, she shrugged. "Well now, that's personal. And we were talking about something else, so don't try to change the subject."

"What are we talking about? I don't remember."

"That you don't like Ben McClure because his family is nice, and—as I've stated previously—that's stupid."

Leaning back on my hands, I crossed my ankles. "That's not why I don't like Ben McClure."

"Ah ha! You admit that you don't like him!"

“Fine. I admit it. But you already knew that, since you’re a mind reader.”

“Why the heck don’t you like Ben? Everybody likes Ben.”

“See, that’s just it.” Restless, I stood and paced away, not sure where I was headed, only that I couldn’t stay still. “Everybody likes Ben. Everybody. And of course they do. Why wouldn’t they? He’s ‘so nice.’ But, again, there’s the problem.”

“That he’s nice?”

I turned when I made it to her tent, searching the ground for her fire stick. “No. I don’t care that he’s nice. But what else would he be? Did his daddy beat him? Or his momma? Did he ever worry about whether or not his brother was in jail, or plot and plan to keep his family safe?” Finding the stick, I yanked it out of the ground and had to fight the desire to stab the earth with it. “Did he ever wonder whether he was going to eat on any particular day, at the whim of his father? Did he ever walk through town and feel folks’ eyes following him, everywhere, waiting for him to make a mistake and prove he’s got bad blood, that he’s trash, just like his old man?”

Instead of stabbing the ground, I turned the stick in my hands, looking for rough spots and bark, tearing them away and giving myself splinters in the process. I didn’t even realize what I was doing until Scarlet was suddenly next to me, her hand covering mine, stopping me. I closed my eyes. I breathed out. I ground my teeth.

But then I felt her other palm cup my face and I heard her soft voice say, “Billy . . .”

I lifted my fingers to hers and pressing her hand to my jaw. She was cold. Her fingers were freezing. She needed gloves. *I’ll bring her gloves tomorrow.*

“No one thinks you’re trash,” she whispered, her voice sounding raw, like just the idea pained her. I sensed her shift closer. “You’re so admired. I admire you. That other stuff is in the past. It’s nothing you need to worry

about. And even if it were, you shouldn't think poorly of Ben because of it. It's not his fault, how other folks behave."

I shook my head, opening my eyes so I could see hers. She was stunning, like this, up close. Her gaze soft and searching, concerned. I took a moment to savor her worry for me, enjoy being the center of her attention.

But I couldn't stand mute forever, so I said, "I don't like him because he's rewarded for something he ain't got any control over and he acts like he does. He hasn't earned it. He hasn't fought for it. It doesn't really belong to him. Folks heap on the praise anyway and he accepts it all like it's his due. So, yeah. I don't like Ben McClure."

Her eyebrows came together, her stare sympathetic. "You're jealous."

I lifted my chin. Her palm slipped from my cheek and I scowled, stabbing the ground again with the fire stick. "You just read that out of my mind?"

"No." Her tone was still soft, her eyes still concerned. "It was on your face."

We locked stares. *Damn right, I'm jealous.*

But not for the reasons she assumed. Truly, I didn't care about Ben McClure. He was a dolt (*dolt* being my brother Cletus's favorite insult at present). But to my brother Jethro? Ben McClure hung the damn moon.

And then, there's Scarlet . . .

"I guess I am jealous," I admitted quietly, dropping my eyes to study the splinters in my hand. "But not like you think."

"What do I think?"

"It's not the praise. It's . . ."

"What?"

I shook my head, trying to figure out how to tell her the truth without revealing too much.

Finally, I decided on, "It's the stability. The constancy of it. The respect. The easiness. People just do what he says, give him what he wants. They

want to please him, make him happy. It's the trust. Folks trust him, believe in him."

My brother Jethro believed in three things: Darrell, the Wraiths, and Ben McClure. But Ben McClure most of all. So, yeah. I didn't care about Ben McClure, but clearly a part of me hated him.

Glancing at Scarlet, I saw she looked confused. "But, Billy, Ben has never given people a reason not to trust and respect him."

"But respect shouldn't be given by default. You haven't ever given people a reason not to believe in you, and yet—" I lifted my arms, gesturing to the woods and the tent and her frozen clothes hanging on the line "—here you are. Staying in a tent behind the old Oliver house."

"I like my tent," she said, cheerfully like always, breaking my heart a little.

She deserved better than a tent and sleeping bag and uninspiring hopes and dreams. What did she say she wanted yesterday? A kitchen?

That's right, I remembered. She'd said yesterday, "My biggest dream is to one day have a kitchen."

A kitchen.

With talent like hers, she should've been dreaming of stardom and stadiums. But instead, all she wanted was a kitchen. Her big dream was a damn kitchen. She deserved so much more and better, and she certainly deserved more and better than *Big Ben*.

Over the course of my life, I'd wanted to punch Ben in the face many times, but never more than last Wednesday when he'd invited Scarlet to Thanksgiving dinner like he was doing her a favor. I hadn't allowed myself to think about it. But now, just the idea of Scarlet with Ben—sitting in his car, him holding her hand like he had a right to touch her—felt like sandpaper rubbing against the inside of my lungs.

"Well, I don't like your tent." My voice rose and an edge of anger entered it, which I knew had more to do with the McClures than her tent.

“Do you think, if you were Ben McClure, Green Valley’s golden son, you’d be sleeping out here? People would be lined up to give you a place to stay. They’d fight over *the honor* of it.”

I couldn’t help the resentful direction of my thoughts, *How nice that must be for him to always feel safe and protected. I wonder what that’s like.*

Scarlet’s eyes narrowed just briefly, and I thought for a second she’d actually read my mind. But then she smiled, like I’d said something amusing.

“What?” I asked, wanting to know what she was thinking.

Taking a deep breath, she unhooked her headphones from around her neck and withdrew the CD Walkman from her jacket pocket, wrapping the audio chord around the carriage body. “It wouldn’t do any good if folks lined up to give me a place to stay, Billy.”

“Oh, really? It wouldn’t?”

“Yeah. It wouldn’t.” She nodded once, with feeling, her smile spreading until she laughed. “Because you’d just keep figuring out ways to trick me into staying with you.”

* * *

“City you most want to visit?”

I snuck a glance at her profile. Scarlet stared forward, her hands in her pockets, her gaze unfocused as we marched through the woods. Leaves crunched under foot with every step and it was so cold my cheeks and forehead stung. I didn’t mind.

We were on a walk. After another music lesson, she’d been determined to show me how to navigate in the forest so I wouldn’t get lost without her. I didn’t much care where we were, so I went along.

We’d talked about my family, a lot. She loved hearing stories about us kids, different pranks we pulled on each other as well as funny memories.

But now, I wanted to know what dreams she had other than one day having a kitchen, if she had any dreams. And if she didn't, then I wanted to help her come up with some, the bigger the better.

"I don't know," she finally responded. "I haven't much thought about it."

"Well then, name any city you'd like to visit."

Her eyes flickered to mine, then away. "You go first."

"Rome."

She grinned. "Italy?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It's the Eternal City. I'd also like to go to Cairo, but Rome is at the top of my list. I want to see the Colosseum, the Pantheon, walk in the ruins. All that human history, great leaders—"

"And not so great leaders," she cut in dryly.

"Yeah, they had some not so great leaders too. But they had Marcus Aurelius, and out of everyone alive or dead, he'd be who I'd most want to meet." I nudged her with my elbow. "How about you?"

Scarlet lowered her chin, her attention on the ground, and she shook her head. "How about me, what?"

"Out of everyone alive or dead, who would you most want to meet?"

"I'm not really sure who Marcus Aurelius is. He was an emperor, wasn't he?"

"Yes, but he was also a philosopher. Dolly Payton—you know her? Daisy's sister? She gave me a book of his philosophy when I started at the mill this year. I've read it at least twenty times."

"What's your favorite of his philosophies?" She was looking at me now, a sweet smile on her face.

"You mean, my favorite quote?" I scratched the hair at my jaw and her eyes moved to the spot, her smile growing.

“Yes, Fuzzy Beard. What’s your favorite quote?”

“Fuzzy Beard?” Now I rubbed my jaw.

“Yep. That’s your name until you let me trim that mess on your face.” She laughed, pointing at my chin with a circling finger. “So, favorite quote?”

Giving her a mock glare, I took a deep breath, pretending to think about the question. I didn’t need to think about it though. I knew my favorite quote.

“‘If it is not right do not do it; if it is not true do not say it.’”

Scarlet’s smile waned, her stare thoughtful as she looked past me. “Marcus Aurelius said that?”

I nodded.

“Not much of a philosophy though, is it? I mean, he’s just kinda pointing out the obvious. ‘If the stove is hot, don’t put your hand on it.’”

Laughing, I touched her elbow and brought her to a stop. I had no idea where we were, and I was enjoying this conversation too much not to give it all my focus.

“But for the time, it was a revolutionary statement.”

She shrugged, still looking thoughtful. “I guess I like poetry better than philosophy, and music best of all.”

“Why music best of all? Other than the obvious.”

“What’s the obvious?”

“I mean, other than the fact that you—your voice—that you can, uh—”

“That I like to sing?” she supplied, saving me from making a fool of myself. I’d been dangerously close to telling her she had the voice of an angel; that I looked forward to hearing her sing more than just about anything; that the sound of it was transformative, she’d transformed me; and that, if she didn’t make music her career, then I’d question everything I knew about the world.

The statements were corny, but they were also true. Even if a fact is cliché, it doesn't make it any less a fact.

"Don't you feel like . . ." she started, stopped, frowned, and began again, "A song with lyrics is all of it, don't you think? Poetry plus all the wordless feelings in the music itself. Complex things, ideas are communicated without words. The instrumental part can make the spoken part ironic—like when the lyrics touch on love, but the accompaniment is loud and angry. I love that. But the score can also make the lyrics more true and sincere, the feelings deeper."

She stared beyond me as she spoke, using her hands for emphasis and huffing when she seemed frustrated by her struggle to find the right words. But I thought all her words were the right ones. Watching her talk about music was almost as transformative as listening to her sing it.

Again, her attention flickered to me and a brief smile claimed her mouth, one that looked self-deprecating. "Sorry. I wish I were more eloquent."

"You are eloquent," I said without thinking but didn't regret it. It was true.

"Sure." She rolled her eyes and snorted lightly. "I guess the short answer is, I love poetry, especially when it's set to music. But I'm not so sure about philosophy."

My feet shuffled a half step closer and I said softly, "How about this quote then, 'The soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts.'"

Her eyes cut to mine, like I'd surprised her, held. "I like that," she whispered breathlessly, like she was telling me a secret. "Who said that?"

"Marcus Aurelius."

Standing close, we looked at each other, a slowly spreading smile claiming her features, and it was like watching a sunrise or a flower bloom—cliché, corny, but still true.

“You know, Scarlet,” I continued, “It’s okay to have dreams, to want things.”

She took what looked like a deep breath, her smile waning. “I know that, Billy. But it’s also dangerous too.”

Dangerous? “How so?”

“Have you ever wanted something you know you can’t have?”

Her question struck such a loud chord within me, I didn’t respond for a few seconds. “All the time,” I finally said, resisting the urge to admire the contours of Scarlet. Again.

“Then you know dreaming can be dangerous. Wanting something impossible can make a person bitter, angry, resentful. It can make you hate the thing you want, and I don’t ever want to be a hateful person.

“So you, what? Don’t allow yourself to want things? That doesn’t seem right.”

Her eyes narrowed and she turned her head, peering at me but still smiling. “Sometimes it’s not about right and wrong, Billy. Life ain’t fair, didn’t you just get finished ranting about the unfairness of Ben McClure’s sainted status in Green Valley?”

Likewise, I narrowed my eyes. “Unfairness doesn’t mean we shrug our shoulders and accept whatever life gives us. It means we fight for what we want, and we take it when we can.”

“I am fighting for my dreams,” she said, her smile spreading, looking mischievous. “I have every intention of living in a real house one day, with a kitchen.”

Now I was smiling even though her statements, meant to be funny, frustrated me. “Dream bigger, Scarlet. You’re not just capable of bigger, you deserve it. Here’s another quote for you, ‘Dwell on the beauty of life. Watch the stars, and see yourself running with them.’”

“Another of your homeboy’s quotes?” she asked softly, her smile also soft.

I nodded.

At length, her gaze lost focus and moved beyond me. She seemed to be contemplating my words. So, naturally, I contemplated her.

Today, her irises matched the color of the sky peeking through the trees, cloudless blue. And her hair, now unbound from its braid, was messy around her shoulders and echoed the deep golds and reds of the leaves covering the ground.

She's the colors of the forest, I realized with a fair degree of wonder. Her skin pale like the white birch, her freckles the rich tawny and light brown of new pinecones, her lips peachy pink and rust red like the river stones we'd used to encircle the firepit yesterday. She was beautiful and wild and genuine, and I could not stop staring at her.

"Any chance I could borrow that book?" she asked, yanking me back to the present. "The one Dolly Payton gave you about Marcus Aurelius."

I blinked—startled by the absurdity of my thoughts, comparing Scarlet to the forest—just as a bird's song filled the air somewhere high overhead, a loud, melodic trill.

"Of course," I said, scratching at the prickly discomfort at the back of my neck as I turned and walked in the direction we'd been heading. "Anytime."

Off-limits.

Scarlet was off-limits. Even if she wasn't off-limits, I had no indication she was dealing with similar, disruptive ideas about me. And that was good. If she gave me any sign, I wasn't sure I'd be able to stop myself from doing something stupid, like kissing those full lips of hers and tasting that big, bossy mouth.

"We'll trade. I'll let you borrow any of my CDs you want," she said, falling into step next to me. "I don't have a lot, but you're welcome to any of them you please."

“Sounds fair.” I stared forward and was punished for my earlier absurdity, struggling not to notice how everywhere I looked I now saw shades of Scarlet.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SCARLET

“... people want to be circled by safety, not by the unexpected. The unexpected can take you out. But the unexpected can also take you over and change your life. Put a heart in your body where a stone used to be.”

— RON HALL, DENVER MOORE

I sat on a huge, felled log facing Billy while he gathered kindling ten or so feet away, a frown of intense concentration making two slashes between his eyebrows. The look on his gorgeous face, you’d think he was solving math equations in his head. One hand and one arm were stuffed with small sticks. I now had enough kindling for six months, at least.

As I watched him—or rather, as I creepily snuck glances at him—I also frowned. Billy Winston was a big old puzzle. A conundrum. A riddle. Let me tell you why.

First, today was Sunday. It was our last day off school for Thanksgiving break and here he was, just like Friday and Saturday, spending the whole day with me. It wasn’t like we were living it up, partying, or doing anything especially interesting. We just hung out. My favorite was when he told me stories about his family, about his sister and brothers and the funny things they did.

Sometimes we talked; sometimes we walked; sometimes we did neither. Mostly, I told bad jokes and he laughed.

Second, he hadn't brought his guitar out to the campsite yet. Instead, he taught me what he called *music theory*. I'd filled half a sheet music book with his assignments, notes he and I had sung out loud without a guitar. He sang a single note, I matched it, and then we harmonized so I could get it in my head.

Oh, yeah, Billy could sing. He'd failed to mention that. And his voice was, in a word, heaven. The first few times we'd harmonized, I felt like the top of my head was on fire—good fire, not bad fire—with the joy of it. Unfortunately, he refused to sing any songs with me, only the individual notes for the benefit of my music assignments.

Anyway, we'd moved on to chords yesterday, and today he had me pairing bass and treble clef, chords and melody, based on certain criteria he'd said was important. *Keys* he'd called them.

Third—and this honestly was the biggest, strangest piece of the puzzle—I hadn't meant to sleep in his room Friday or Saturday night, but I did. He'd talked me into it both times, and please don't ask me how. He just did.

Friday night, he'd come across Cletus and I behind the house, at the end of our discussion. The next thing I knew, Billy had Cletus acting as lookout as he snuck me inside. Billy escorted me to the bathroom so I could take a shower and told me to give him my clothes so they could be washed. Cletus patrolled the hall while Billy did my laundry. I still wasn't over the fact that Billy Winston had done my laundry. He'd probably had to touch my underwear! Ack!

But what could I do? I was already in the bathroom, naked, horrified that I'd just handed over dirty underwear. I showered, changed into the pajamas he'd left on the counter, and let him guide me back to his room. There, wordlessly, he changed my bandage, and then turned off the light,

leaving me alone to go shower himself. Meanwhile, I was still mentally stuck on the laundry.

I'd been determined to sleep at the campsite on Saturday night. I'd even joked with him about how he was so good at tricking me, and I'd been especially resolute since Billy had *folded* my clean clothes—including my underwear AND BRA!—and left them on the end of the bed before I woke up Saturday morning. But again, that night Billy talked me into sleeping in his room. This time he won me over by suggesting we review a few things on the guitar, which was conveniently at the house.

He did not go over anything on the guitar.

Instead, he made me more hot chocolate with four marshmallows, and we talked about shared memories until late. Apparently, when I was five, his momma made a seven-year-old Billy pretend to be my husband in a game of house. I did not remember this, but he insisted it was true. When I continued to doubt, he left and returned less than five minutes later with a photo album.

Inside was a picture of us—I was five, he was seven—and he was holding two naked baby dolls, looking as broody as ever. Meanwhile, five-year-old me was beaming, my arm around his waist, my head on his upper arm, and my hair in neat pigtails. Suddenly, it all came flooding back.

“Your momma did my hair,” I said, touching the photo with wonder. Mrs. Winston had come to one of the Wraith picnics and, upon spotting me running around like a feral animal, took me inside and gave me a bath. “She sang the please and thank you song, and then brushed and braided my hair.”

“She still sings that song to us, when we neglect our manners.” Billy was kneeling in front of me while I stared at the photo of my clean face and tidy hair.

I laughed, grabbing a handful of unbraided hair and bringing it over my shoulder. As far as I knew, this was the only photo of me from that age. My momma had no baby pictures, no kid pictures either. Swallowing some

muddled emotion, I mentally shoved the spikey feelings away. I wasn't going to cry. That would be silly.

Gathering myself, I said cheerfully, "Do you know, I started giving myself a bath every other day and saying please and thank you after that. Your momma said princesses take baths every other day and must have impeccable manners. So I tried to do both."

Grinning, he sat back on the floor, bringing his knees up to rest his elbows upon. "That sounds like something she'd say. But that would never work with Ash."

"Really?"

"Yeah, Ash never wanted to be a princess."

"Huh. I thought all little girls wanted to be princesses." *Or maybe it's just the ones who don't have any hope of being a princess who want it.*

I stared at the photo again, specifically at Billy's expression. Perhaps it was my imagination, but beneath the sour I thought I spotted a hint of his friendly smile. The curve of his lips maybe?

"Not Ash. She hates it when our daddy calls her that." Billy made some movement, drawing my attention back to him. His eyes were unfocused, fixed to some spot behind me. "My sister is something else, so smart. Out of all of us, I hope she's the one to go to college and get out of here."

"You want your sister to leave? Why?"

"Because . . ." he paused, inhaled deeply, his gaze cutting back to mine.

Our eyes collided and the impact jarred my teeth. I breathed through it, telling my heart to settle down.

"The truth?" he asked.

I nodded wordlessly, my stomach twisting. Billy didn't appear to notice how his direct stare affected me. Sometimes, all he had to do was look at me and I couldn't find my words.

"It's not just because she's smart, and good, and driven, and deserves every fine thing. The truth is, I want her gone, out of Green Valley, so she'll

be safe.”

“Safe?”

“From our father, from your father, from his men. Like it or not, ’cause she’s a girl, she’s vulnerable to a certain kind of violence, she’s at risk in a way us boys generally aren’t. Soon, they’ll want things from her they don’t want from us. But when that time comes, they won’t be able to touch her. She *deserves* to be protected from all that, and she will be. I’d do anything—*anything*—to keep her safe, even let her go.”

We stared at each other for a long moment, and I felt certain Billy was trying to tell me something without coming right out and saying it. In the end, I didn’t ask and he didn’t clarify. We went to bed soon after, but it took me a while to fall asleep.

Presently, on this strange Sunday afternoon, as I sat on my big log and his tall form moved about, bending here and there to gather the kindling he apparently considered precious—because why else would he have spent the last two hours collecting it?—I decided Billy Winston made no sense.

His family was the most important thing in the world to him. Anyone who took the time to watch him or listen to him would know this. More and more, as I reflected on it, I understood why he’d wanted to ask me to leave last week. And yet here he was, helping me, sneaking me inside his house every night, insisting on it, putting them all at risk. Why would he do that?

And, while we’re on the subject, why was he here with me now? He may have broken up with his beautiful girlfriend, but what about his friends? Family? Responsibilities? And why did he and his girlfriend break up? What in tarnation was going on?

He must have someplace else to be, other things he’d prefer to be doing . . . Despite his denials of pity, I couldn’t think of any other reason why Billy Winston would waste so many hours here, tidying up my campsite, talking about bible verses and movies and musicians and his family and

history and places he wanted to visit and things he wanted to do, and then asking me about myself, my opinions, my thoughts, my dreams.

He feels sorry for you. That's why he's here. What else could it be?

"You don't have to stay," I said and thought, holding the music notebook to my chest. It was still bitterly cold, but my back was to the fire, so I wasn't frozen. I was fine.

His frown of forceful concentration persisted, and he split his attention between me and the ground. "You want me to go?"

"No," I answered honestly, but also dishonestly.

I wanted him to leave almost as much as I wanted him to stay. Not his fault, but he kept on crushing me with his laugh and looks and conversation and disconcerting ability to talk me into sleeping in his room. After three days of being in his company near constantly, I was feeling unsteady and raw. Plus, I felt bad. He'd given up his weekend to babysit me. I didn't need babysitting. He could go. *He should go.*

"Then I'll stay," he said, like it was settled.

"It's just, I imagine you have other things you'd like to do with your weekend. You can't spend every day with me."

He shook his head, his eyes dropping to the ground, probably still hunting for little sticks. "No."

I sat straighter at that. "No?" What sorta answer was that?

"No," he repeated.

"Are you serious? There's nothing you'd rather be doing?" My face scrunched as I inspected him. He had to be teasing me.

"I could think of some things . . ." Billy's Adam's apple bobbed, and he shrugged. "You need real firewood. We should go to the woodshed and bring some back here. The wheelbarrow won't like the terrain, but I made some canvas carrying bags with Duane over the summer. Those'll work fine."

A laugh of disbelief tumbled out of me and I muttered, “You’re a very strange person, Billy Winston.”

His eyes lifted, crashed into mine, held. I told myself to breathe through the collision, just like I’d been telling myself since Friday.

“What makes me strange, Scarlet St. Claire?” he asked, and something about his voice plus his gaze set off explosions of loveliness and uneasiness in my stomach. This was also something he’d done to me all weekend, just another odd quirk about him, I supposed. I would adapt. Eventually. Maybe.

Assuming we see each other again after today, I reminded myself, just to be on the safe side. Experience told me never to take anything for granted, especially the constancy of people.

. . . Billy is different.

I glowered at the sudden, stealthy thought, disliking how much I wanted it to be true.

Pushing away the loveliness and the uneasiness and my sneaky, creeping expectations of Billy Winston, I crossed my arms. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Am I babysitting?”

“You’re hovering. I’m fine, you know.”

“Oh, I *know*.” An intensely charming smile tugged at his lips, like he found something I said funny, and my face heated. His smiles in particular flustered me, especially when I’d told no joke beforehand and especially when he looked at me like he was looking now.

Embarrassed and not understanding why, I demanded, “Then why’re you hovering?”

“Am I hovering? I thought we were visiting,” he said, just as smooth as melted chocolate—which makes no sense, but both chocolate and Billy’s smoothness made my mouth water, so just go with it—his gaze lowering to where I held the notebook clutched to my chest.

I realized all at once that I'd been holding it too tight. I'd crushed it. And his relaxed *smoothness* made me feel silly. Telling my arms to relax, I glanced down at the notebook. The cover at the corner had been crumpled. Picking at the bent cardboard, I tried to think of something to say, but my mind had gone blank except for crazy thoughts.

How come you're so good at talking me into doing things I've already decided against?

Why are you being so nice to me? And why does it sometimes feel like you're not being nice at all?

Please don't look at me like that, I can't catch my breath when you do.

I want you to leave and I want you to stay and I don't know what's wrong with me.

"Scarlet."

I twisted my lips to the side, working to remove the chaos I was feeling from my features. "Yes?"

"Do you want me to leave?"

Yes. That would be best, a wise voice said between my ears.

So of course I inhaled deeply and said as calmly as I could manage, "I thought we were going to go get firewood."

"Okay. Good."

"But then," I blurted, flustered and irritated with myself for not speaking wisdom, "You should go. You can't tell me carting firewood back and forth between your house and here is how you want to spend the last of your Thanksgiving weekend."

"I didn't say it was." He began making his way up the incline.

"But you just said—"

"How about we make a deal." Billy dropped the kindling next to my little woodpile, dusting his hands off on his pants. "I'll cart the firewood, and you sing."

"You want me to serenade you while we carry firewood?"

He smiled, slow and easy as he walked to me and reached out his hand. On autopilot—because we’d done this fifty times at least over the last few days—I accepted it and allowed him to help me up.

As soon as I was standing, his gaze moved from my hairline down to my nose, lips, and then chin, saying quietly, “I’ll take a serenade from you anytime.”

Thunk ka-thunk. That was my heart. It had been doing the *thunk ka-thunk* quite a lot around him. I ignored it, because what else could I do?

“And you’re not carrying the wood.” He tugged on my hand, pulling me out of my daze and past my tent.

“I will too carry wood.” Struggling to find my bearings, I stumbled after him. “I can carry logs just fine.”

“You’ll carry *a* log.” Billy fit his fingers between mine, pressing our palms together and grinning at me like he was waiting for me to argue and he couldn’t wait.

Snapping my mouth shut, I glared at him.

“Nothing to say?”

Maintaining my glare, I walked next to him. I wasn’t being led anywhere I didn’t wish to go. Not anymore. He wasn’t talking me into anything else. I was sleeping at the campsite tonight, and that was that.

“That’s an awfully mean look, Scarlet.” His grin grew, his brutally attractive eyes glowing happily as he peered down at me.

“Well, you deserve it. Always trying to tell me what I can and can’t do. I’m not arguing with you about this. I’m carrying as much wood as I want and you can take your stupid, chauvinistic opinions and shove them up your pretty-boy ass.”

Goodness. Where had that come from?

Billy’s steps faltered and his mouth fell open, his eyebrows rising high on his forehead. He stared at me, looking shocked as hell. And then in the next moment, he threw his head back and laughed. But he did not let go of

me, instead bringing my knuckles to his chest as his deep, rumbling laughter filled the empty spaces between the trees, surrounding us.

Crushing me.

Yes. I was well and truly crushed as I could only watch Billy Winston laugh, desperately basking in the image of him so delighted and relaxed. I had the odd sense that his laughter also filled the empty spaces inside of me, the neglected, vacant rooms, and even a few places that felt brand-new, like he'd created them.

All that noble honesty he carried around like a boulder abruptly lifted, revealing him. Just him. Carefree and young and happy. Someone he might've been if his burdens hadn't been so heavy, his responsibilities so broad.

It lasted only a minute, maybe two, maybe less, but I had that same sense of being caught afterward, just like when he'd revealed the story of his father and the baseball bat. Billy's laughter had receded, but he'd spun another web while I'd been staring at him, holding his hand.

His grin became smaller and he bit his bottom lip, his gaze dropped to my mouth. "You think I'm pretty?"

"You know you're pretty," I said, oddly out of breath, rattled, needing to anchor my focus to a tree beyond him and waging war against the heat climbing up my neck to my cheeks. Oddly, my eyes stung. I blinked.

His attention was still on me. I felt it, but I didn't dare look at him. I couldn't handle one of Billy Winston's intense stares right now. He'd probably use my scattered wits to his advantage, talk me into something I shouldn't want to do, and then I'd be kicking myself later.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his voice deep with concern, all trace of his earlier humor gone.

I huffed, trying half-heartedly to steal my hand back from him. He didn't let it go, instead taking my tugging as a signal to step closer, filling my vision.

“Scarlet—”

“Are you ever going to teach me how to play the guitar?” I closed my eyes.

He didn’t answer right away, and I *felt* him hesitate, his mind work before he muttered, “It’s only been a week.”

A quality to his voice made me think he wasn’t answering the question I’d asked, but rather he was reminding himself that it had only been a week since we’d struck the deal.

Was that only last week? Why does it feel like so much has changed?

Then he said, “Don’t be angry.”

“I’m not angry.” I was muddled, my head and heart hurt, I was incredibly confused, but I wasn’t angry.

The air shifted and I felt him move closer. A second later, the fingers of his free hand were at my ear, tucking my hair behind it, his fingertips lingering at my neck, sending wave after wave of goose bumps every which way. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t swallow. I couldn’t think. Every nerve in my body strained toward him and I didn’t understand it. *What is happening?*

“Have you ever been kissed, Scarlet?”

My eyes popped open at the unexpected question and so did my mouth and *goodness*, the way he was looking at me—at my lips—I couldn’t describe it in a thousand years. Yet I knew I’d never forget it. Especially since the next thing he did was lower his head, close his eyes, and brush his lips against mine. It was like a thousand little fireworks ignited inside me and I was certain I’d die from the overwhelming feel of it.

Suddenly hot everywhere, a thoughtless, desperate sound left me as he leaned away, sorta like a whimper. Billy’s eyes opened, crashing and colliding and smashing into mine. *Crushing me*. I couldn’t read him or them, but the look made my knees feel like jello and the rest of my body burn and boil.

And then, he was kissing me.

His fingers were digging into my scalp and then fisting in my hair. His other arm wrapped tightly around my upper back, his hand gripping my ribs beneath my breast, crushing me to him. His body was a wall, massive and hard and unyielding. He steered clear of the cuts on my lower back, but the way he held me was rough, like he couldn't touch me in too many places or hold me closely enough.

His kiss was the opposite.

Billy's mouth was soft. *So soft*. The feel of his tongue against the seam of my lips gentle, teasing, yet seeking, asking, wanting. And since my body wanted whatever he wanted, I opened my mouth and he slid right in, groaning as soon as my tongue touched his.

All those vacant, neglected rooms and all those brand-new spaces filled to bursting as his lips and tongue moved, as his fingers twisted around my hair and tugged my head back, opening my mouth wider. My mind swirled, my head dizzy. I might've been suffering from heatstroke.

It shouldn't have felt so good—having someone else's tongue in my mouth—so delicious. So necessary. For one thing, I had no idea what I was doing. For another, I wasn't thinking straight. I was frantic with wanting everything, to experience everything, to feel *everything*. Also, I was mindless. My mindlessness meant it should have been awkward, but it wasn't. It was sweet and beautiful and luscious, better than the best dessert. Better than Thanksgiving dinner. Better than friendly laughter and a warm fire and a soft bed.

It was perfection.

And then, he pulled away.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SCARLET

“Kisses open doors, I've noticed. That one gesture can unlock secrets, ease open feelings. It can't be prevented—these kisses just are. It's how they work. They break into basements you never knew you had.”

— SUSAN FLETCHER, EVE GREEN

“I can't stop thinking about kissing Billy Winston.”
There. I'd said it. Out loud. Unfortunately, saying it out loud had done nothing helpful.

Huffing into my cupped hands, I snuggled deeper into my sleeping bag and tried to think gently warm thoughts; kittens and puppies and Ben McClure's sweet smile, for instance.

Instead, I conjured Billy. Again. And now everything in the vicinity of my rib cage was hot and sore.

“What the hell, Scarlet?” I said to myself. “Stop it. Cease and desist!”

I'd been thinking about him nonstop since yesterday afternoon when he'd kissed me and then pulled away, staring at me like I was a bomb about to go off.

So of course I said, “Leave me alone!” and ran away.

Don't you give me that look!

What in tarnation was I supposed to do? He'd *kissed* me. KISSED! ME! ON MY LIPS!

I'd never been kissed and now I felt besieged by the memory of it—*besieged, I tell you!*—maybe sorta how Troy had felt when those Spartans had attacked. The cinnamon buns on Friday had been his Trojan horse and his words and glances and laughter and looks and patience were the soldiers tucked inside. Especially his eyes. *Yes. Those eyes. My favorite color.*

Great. Now both my chest and my neck were hot. “Dammit.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, but that didn't help at all. I saw his face, smiling at me in that reserved way of his, or with reluctance, or playfulness, or just plain amusement. His deep voice saying quietly, “I'll take a serenade from you anytime,” and “The soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts,” as his gaze speared mine.

More like impaled.

Strange thing about that gaze, it still reminded me of icicles. And even more strange? How peculiar icicle eyes could make a person feel when they were looking at you with warm attentiveness instead of cold disinterest. Somehow, over the last several days, the intensity of Billy's stare had altered and felt more than good. It had felt vital, an oasis. Like a cold drink of water after going without on a hot day, or a—

GAH! I don't want that!

I didn't want Billy to be my oasis. I didn't want him to be vital. I didn't want to count on him, I didn't want to crave his company, and I didn't want to miss him when he was gone.

What I wanted was to forget this weekend had ever happened. I wanted everything to go back to the way it was. I'd been fine before. I'd been happy *before*.

And now I was miserable.

I huffed again, turning from the dead fire and pressing my palm to my neck. If my neck insisted on randomly being hot, the least it could do was

warm my freezing fingers.

“You wouldn’t be freezing now if you’d just gone to the old Oliver house last night and slept inside,” I reminded myself, grumbling.

But then I gulped, shivered, my eyes flying open, and I shook my head. No. No, no, no. Sleeping in Billy’s room now was impossible.

When I’d stayed over Thursday through Saturday, I’d been reluctant, true. But my weakness for a warm bed and Billy’s impressive ability to persuade had eclipsed my good sense. I’d slept soundly every night he’d insisted I stay, and in hindsight I was grateful he’d insisted. My body needed to recover from Tuesday. Besides, I hadn’t been thinking about Billy obsessively *then*.

But now, I would never step foot in that house again. Just the thought—sleeping in the same room as Billy—made me sweat even though I was presently colder than a tin toilet seat in the Yukon. Not that I’d ever been farther north than Bob’s Bait and Tackle on Main Street, but still. I had an imagination, didn’t I?

“I sure do,” I moaned miserably.

For hootenanny’s sake, all I’d been doing was imagining and reimagining our time together. I’d tried drowning out my imagination with music, but of course my Walkman had gone dead. It needed new batteries, and so I was left at the mercy of my overeager brain.

But, gosh, our time together had been so nice. Nerve-wracking, confusing, discombobulating, but nice. *And that kiss . . .* That kiss had me imagining new things, Billy touching me other places with his hands and with his mouth. These new things left my stomach feeling all tight and twisty, my brain in chaos, and my heart doing one long, continuous *thunk ka-thunk, thunk ka-thunk, thunk ka-thunk*.

Stupid Billy Winston and his stupid kiss! Taking over. Invading. Leaving me with no peace. And stupid me for liking it so much.

Sigh.

I supposed most people were destined to have a first kiss. I'd never really thought about it for myself. It was part of the future, a hazy blob of *maybe one day* I didn't have time to think about while I was walking across Green Valley and dodging my father's men. To school, to the library, to the store; thinking about my next meal, and the one after that, rationing food and water; working out how long the money I had would last.

Even with my variety of crushes, like Ben for instance, my brain had never moved past the general warm feelings of being *in like* with someone. Plus, folks at the Dragon Biker Bar weren't big on kissing mouth to mouth, so it's not like experiences from my childhood had set an example.

Yeah, bikers kissed their fuckbuddies. It just wasn't ever the main event and it always looked messy and uncomfortable, sloppy, like people were eating each other's faces off. Nothing at all like what Billy and I had done.

Plus, when the men had their big parties in the main room of the club, they seemed much more interested in the pantsless portion of male-female (and sometimes female-male-female) relations. And thinking about doing *that* with anyone made me feel sick to my stomach.

Except . . .

Scrunching my eyes, I held my breath and did my best not to imagine Billy lifting my shirt to touch me *here*, or sliding his hand into my jeans and underwear to cup me *there*—

“Ah!” I shook my head, my eyes flying open, and I shoved the sleeping bag away, staggering as I stood and gulping deep breaths of frosty morning air. “Don't think about it! Don't think about it!”

I couldn't stop thinking about it.

My brain on overdrive, my body strangely achy and trembling—and not from the cold—I growled at nothing. Somewhere, not terribly far away, the early birds answered, making a ruckus, announcing to the woodland creatures that it was day.

Catching my breath finally, the cold sobering and chasing away most of my shameful imaginings, I glanced at my sleeping bag. I debated crawling back inside. *No. No you will not.*

I couldn't miss another day of school after skipping Tuesday and Wednesday. Folks might notice and then they'd ask questions. I hated it when school administrators asked questions they really didn't want answers to.

Absolutely no skipping school to hide from Billy Winston, Scarlet.

I nodded, agreeing with myself. Besides, I was pretty good at hiding in plain sight. I didn't need to hermit to hide.

Exactly. Time to rise and shine. And if you see him, you just turn yourself around and run in the opposite direction.

Okay!

Good. It's settled.

. . . My heart hurt.

* * *

"Pssst."

I flinched, startling easily because I was on edge. But then I closed my eyes and shook my head. Only one person ever *pssst-ed* at me.

"Cletus." I closed my locker and there he was, leaning against the rectangle two doors down from mine. "No, I don't need to go to the library."

He frowned. "I know. I wasn't going to ask you that."

Glancing over my shoulder, I watched a cluster of students walk past. They paid us no mind. Good.

"Then what do you want?" I whispered, even though I didn't need to whisper.

His frown deepened, his sharp, intelligent eyes searching mine. “Scarlet. You haven’t—uh—stopped in for the last few nights. Roscoe is starting to question the veracity of fairies.”

Sucking in a breath through my nose, I gave Cletus a small smile and shrugged, feeling guilty but not knowing what to say.

He was right. Today was the Wednesday ATK (After The Kiss) and I’d successfully avoided talking to Billy, which included no picking up the fairy food and no spending the night at their house. Obviously.

But that didn’t mean I hadn’t seen Billy. I’d seen him plenty, surrounded by his friends, intensely debonair—Yes. Debonair. I meant what I said—despite his fuzzy beard and wearing one of his signature stoic expressions and penetrating looks. He’d spotted me too, a few times in fact. But I’d been able to maneuver away quickly enough to avoid interacting with him.

Although, to be fair, he’d never chased after me as far as I could tell. *Maybe you don’t need to maneuver after all. Maybe he doesn’t care.*

I rubbed my chest just beneath my collarbone. It was suddenly sore.

Cletus continued to stare at me, like he was waiting for me to offer some sort of explanation. I had none, so I turned from my friend and walked in the direction of my next class. Social Studies. We were discussing Ancient Greece. I was looking forward to it. These days, I was looking forward to anything that might hold my attention and keep my mind off Broody Billy Winston and his lips.

“Pssst!”

My shoulders bunched, and I looked to my left. Cletus had caught up with me and was now *pssst-ing* while hovering at my elbow.

“Would you stop that, please?” I asked. Usually, I found him funny and cute. Today, not so much.

I hadn’t been sleeping well. But on the plus side, I’d made it to school early every morning this week. Waiting for the empty parking lot to fill, I

would step back into the shelter of the woods to fill the time, sitting in a ball with my arms around my legs to warm myself.

And, you know, try and fail to not think about Billy.

But again, on another bright side, thoughts of him had helped me stay warm *and* kept me from thinking about food. The last good meal I'd had was Sunday afternoon, a delicious turkey sandwich with cranberry sauce and stuffing and gravy that Billy had brought for lunch, one for each of us. It was Thanksgiving dinner, but in a sandwich. I'd thought I'd gone to heaven.

But no. That happened later, when he transported you there with his lips.

"Shut up, Scarlet," I muttered under my breath, huffing at myself. I'd been huffing quite a lot lately.

Cletus wrapped a hand around my forearm, bringing me to a stop. "Talk to me. Please. What's going on?"

I didn't meet his eyes, instead tracking another group of students and a few stragglers coming up the stairs. They, also, paid us no mind.

"There's nothing to say and I got to go. I don't want to be late for class."

"You won't be late. We have another ten minutes." His eyebrows pulled together and I got the sense he was scrutinizing me, trying to solve me or something.

He might've been right about the time, he might've been wrong. I didn't know what time it was even though I still had Billy's watch. I'd tucked it in my pocket Monday so I could drop it off to the school secretary.

I couldn't bring myself to part with it, nor could I bear to look at it.

So it moved from pocket to pocket, a watch with no purpose except as a trinket for me to grip tightly when thoughts—of Billy, of loneliness, of hunger, of cold, of being touched and kissed—felt too overwhelming.

Cletus released my arm, reached inside his pants pocket, and pulled out two yellow hall passes. I gaped. Yellow hall passes were also automatic

tardy excusers, which meant they were the double triple platinum of hall passes.

He then took my hand and placed both slips of paper in my palm.

“Take these, you’ll need both.”

I glanced between him and the precious passes which had been signed by the assistant principal and were the equivalent of get-out-of-jail-free cards with teachers. “What? Where’d you get—how come—I don’t need —”

“Come with me.” His gaze suddenly shifty, he indicated with his head in the direction I’d already been traveling, and then took off, clearly assuming I’d follow.

Staring at his back for a half second, I did eventually follow. But I wasn’t certain if I was following him or going to class. I still hadn’t made up my mind when Cletus ducked into an alcove I’d never noticed before. My feet slowed as I approached, and I stared at the navy blue door set a way back from the hall.

Cletus, his hand on the door handle, waved me forward as he opened it a crack. Perplexed, I stepped forward, glancing between him and the slightly ajar door.

“Cletus, what—”

“Trust me,” he said, opening the door all the way and hurrying to usher me inside the small, dimly lit space. I got the sense it was some kind of closet. “You can thank me later. I accept cash and dog treats for Lea as payment.”

I was about to turn, because it was obvious Cletus hadn’t followed me in and he’d already closed the door, when I became aware of another person in the closet.

And not just any person.

Thunk ka-thunk.

Oh God. *Oh no, oh no, OH NO!*

My eyes adjusted quickly. He stood a little way back in the space, enough so that I didn't feel trapped even though this was exactly that. A trap. He wore a long-sleeved black T-shirt, dark jeans, sneakers, and an expression I couldn't read. But his eyes pinned me, that intense stare holding me in place more effectively than any strong grip ever could.

"Billy," I said. Or breathed. Or maybe I just thought his name. I couldn't tell. A shock of panic was currently coursing through my body, making it impossible to think.

"Scarlet," he said softly, and then proceeded to chew on his bottom lip. "How are you?"

"Oh. Fine. And you?" My voice was high and breathy, I was sweating, and my heart was such a bastard, jumping around like all my insides were trampoline surfaces.

His lips curved into one of his friendly, barely there smiles as his gaze moved over me, his Adam's apple moving up and down.

"Honestly? I'm not doing so great," he answered.

"Really?" Dammit. My voice was still high and unsteady. *Calm down, Scarlet!*

"No." He took a step forward, and it was like the entire space shrunk to half its original size. "I'm worried about a friend of mine. She won't talk to me, after I did something stupid."

. . . After I did something stupid.

My heart stuttered; my stomach sunk. His words sobered and saddened me, enough to cut through the frantic disorder of my thoughts.

"You did something stupid?" I crossed my arms, lifting my chin but needing to drop my eyes to his neck. A cold, rising suspicion had me gritting my teeth. *Dear God in heaven, hear my prayer. If Billy says kissing me was stupid or a mistake, please give me the strength and agility to knee him in the gonads and leave. Amen.*

Vaguely, I noted he still hadn't trimmed his beard.

“I’m not sure.” He took another half step forward, his voice now just above a whisper. “But if kissing you means you don’t want to know me anymore, then yeah. It was stupid. And I would be very sorry.”

His words were a riddle. I shifted on my feet, unsure what to do or think or say. Leaving seemed like the logical, wise thing, but I couldn’t get my body to move or turn.

“Scarlet,” he said, close enough now to tuck my hair behind my ear, which he did, his fingers sliding down the column of my neck.

Damn, that felt good.

I had to stop myself from leaning into his touch. I also couldn’t seem to get enough air. I was breathing much harder than I should’ve been given the fact I was holding still, like the running of my mind impacted my oxygen levels the same way actual running might.

“Was it stupid? Do I need to apologize?” he asked, his voice rough like sandpaper as his hand dropped from my skin. “Or may I please kiss you again?”

My gaze cut to his, my lungs feeling like they might burst at the restrained and respectful—and yet not at all respectful and barely restrained—look in his eyes, and abruptly, something he’d spoken to me over the weekend bubbled up to the surface of my mind.

It’s okay to have dreams, to want things.

Oh, how I wanted to kiss Billy Winston again. I’d wanted nothing else, had been able to think of nothing else or dream of nothing else for the last three days. I couldn’t shake the want even though I’d convinced myself wanting Billy was foolish, impossible. I’d convinced myself wanting anything at all was dangerous.

Why had I done that? As though in answer, more of Billy’s words came to me, the quote, “The soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts.”

I’d thought kissing Billy again was impossible, and so it was. But now here I was, the ability to make those dreams and wants something real and

true literally staring at me in the face. So I did something completely crazy. I did what I wanted.

I jumped him.

Or, I jumped *at* him. He was entirely too tall for me to jump.

I wrapped my arms around his neck tightly, pressed my body to his, and took his mouth with mine. I took it like a rookie thief, making all the mistakes, fumbling the goods, and not knowing what the heck I was doing. I could only rely on what I'd been fantasizing about and imagining for the last several days and nights. But I did my utmost to kiss the hell out of him.

Goodness, I felt frenzied. Starved. I couldn't get enough of his mouth and tongue and lips. The taste of him was amazing, like nothing else, and I was sure I was making a mess of everything. However, I must've done something right because he groaned, his hands on me, his touch restless.

Billy's fingers dug into my lower rib cage as though fastened there. He returned my kiss like he'd been lying in wait, ready to pounce, and everything about it was less gentle this time. The way he licked and stroked the inside of my mouth gave me the sense that he, too, had been starving for me.

The next thing I knew, Billy had us turned, my upper back to the wall. As always, he was careful about my wounds, sliding his hands down my sides to grip my hips and keep the bottom part of my back from connecting with the surface behind me. Or maybe, I registered with delighted alertness, that wasn't what he was doing at all.

The way he held me as his tongue slid against mine—his mouth sucking and biting and making me wild—kept the front of our bodies pressed together, the hard planes of his stomach and chest and thighs fastened to the softer valleys of mine. His hips shifted, a small, instinctive movement, but also an impatient one. He groaned again, lower and deeper this time; an unsteady rumble paired with a gasp.

Then, just like last time, he was the one to end it, lifting his mouth and breaking the kiss. But *unlike* last time, he wasn't looking at me as though he was in shock, nor did he remove himself completely. Instead, he lowered his forehead to the wall behind me, his hands sliding once more to my ribs, his heavy breaths against my ear and neck.

"We gotta—" I heard a pause in his breathing, like he was swallowing "—we gotta stop."

I nodded even though I didn't want to stop kissing him, and I didn't want him to stop kissing me. Yet something told me to trust him in this, and so I trusted him. Completely.

His breathing evened after a time, as did mine. I became slowly aware that what we were doing, what we'd just done, was incredibly foolish and irresponsible. But I didn't regret it. It was like, I wanted it to be right, so I willed it to be right, and that was that. Maybe this wasn't how right and wrong worked for most folks, but I'd learned through hard experience a long time ago that sometimes *right*—especially when the goal was survival—was relative to needs and circumstances rather than an absolute.

"Hey," he said, yanking me out of my thoughts. He'd leaned a bit away though our bodies still touched, and he was close enough to steal a quick kiss, which he did before asking, "Are you okay?"

I nodded, dazed. "Yes. I'm fine."

"Oh, *I know*," he said, using the same inflection he'd used on Sunday, flashing that same intensely charming smile. This time, I was too astonished by what had just happened between us to feel embarrassment. I could hardly believe where I was and who I was with, let alone comprehend that this was the second time we'd kissed.

Second. *Is this real life?*

Billy's fingers at my sides flexed, giving me the sense he was itching to move them. He did not.

"Thank you for meeting me," he said, his tone more serious, sincere.

“You shouldn’t thank me for that.”

He flashed me a grin, there and gone, and then lifted an eyebrow. “Why not?”

“I didn’t know I was meeting you.”

His lips parted. I could see I’d surprised him.

“Cletus didn’t tell you? Are you serious?”

“As a subpoena,” I said unthinkingly, repeating a response some of the bikers said when asked the same question.

Billy’s mouth fell open a bit more, and then he bent his head to my neck and laughed. Big shoulders shaking, his arms slid around my upper back, and he gave me the most incredible, full body hug.

I melted.

Yes, he’d hugged me before, but that had been for comfort, to console me, like he would’ve done for anyone.

This embrace was different. Familiar. Personal and special and only for us, for the feel of each other. It made me warm and restless and starving all over again, especially since his beard and lips tickled, making me squirm.

And then Billy placed a kiss on the sensitive skin where my neck met my shoulder; his tongue swirling, his teeth giving me a quick bite. I stopped squirming because my entire body *shook*. It shook and my stomach twisted with both pleasure and pain, the sensation a new and alarming one.

“Gughra,” I said, the nonsensical sound slipping past my lips, the back of my head hitting the wall behind me.

I thought he’d scattered my wits before. Nuh-uh. *This*. Now. Right here. My wits were so scattered, I doubted I’d ever find them again. And since I had no wits, I didn’t care one hoot about the lack of them. *Hoo-ray for no wits!* This whole having hopes and dreams and wants thing was *the best*.

I watched him through half-lidded eyes as he leaned away. His attention trailed over me—my hair, my lips, the spot where he’d kissed my neck—

and I took note of the slightly smug glint behind his stare as well as an edge of something else . . .

Oddly, I didn't mind his smugness, but the *something else* had me fighting another shiver.

Abruptly, his gaze seemed to cool, turn inward, like he was thinking about or recalling serious and important matters. Heaving a giant sigh, Billy's attention dropped. He stepped away. Hands shoved in his pockets, he nibbled on his bottom lip again.

"Cletus should've told you. I'm sorry about that."

"Apology accepted." Again, I spoke without thinking. Words were bypassing the filters in my brain now that my wits had disbanded.

The side of his mouth tugged upward, but he still didn't give me his eyes. "We have a lot to talk about," he said. "Will you meet me again?"

"Absolutely," I automatically agreed.

His gaze lifted, another collision, making my eyelashes—and a few other parts of my body—flutter at the force of it.

"I have practice until five." His stare softened with what looked like hope. "Will you sing for me again, so I can find you?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BILLY

“It is not true that women cannot keep secrets. Where they love, they can be trusted to death and beyond, against all sense and reason. It is their weakness, and their great strength.”

— MARY STEWART, THE HOLLOW HILLS

C letus whistled. In my truck. While I drove.

I didn’t make him stop for two reasons. One, it was his birthday. And two—

“You’ll be seeing Scarlet tonight, I suspect.”

Flicking on my turn signal, I glanced at my brother. He was grinning at me.

“You’re welcome,” he said, clearly enjoying the moment. “And for the record, yes. Yes, Billy. Yes, you do owe me one. A big one.”

There was no point in reminding my younger brother of all the times I’d saved his ass without asking for so much as a thank you. I wouldn’t ever do that, make him feel like a burden or like I kept score. He wasn’t and I didn’t.

Instead, I turned my attention back to the road and played along. “We’re not getting another dog.”

“Oh, that’s fine.” He rubbed his hands together. “I have something else in mind.”

“I’m not buying you a smoking jacket either.”

“Of course not. I didn’t expect you to. A smoking jacket is a very personal purchase. The velvet must be of a fine quality, but also with fiber length and weight to my particular taste.” Cletus sounded like he’d given this a lot of thought. But then, he always gave everything a lot of thought.

Speaking of which, “I’ve been meaning to ask—” I readjusted my hands on the steering wheel, making sure I sounded casual “—how’d you get those hall passes?”

After Scarlet agreed to meet me later this afternoon, she’d handed over one of the hall passes Cletus had given her. We’d stolen a few more memorable kisses. Then we’d gone to our respective classes.

When Cletus had told me he could get his hands on them, I hadn’t doubted him, and I hadn’t questioned him too much on the subject either. But now, seeing as how Scarlet and I were on extremely friendly speaking terms again, and I didn’t have the pressure of desperation and remorse haunting me constantly, it occurred to me that perhaps I’d put my brother in an awkward situation. I should never have asked him to get those passes.

It had been wrong, irresponsible, selfish. In retrospect, I didn’t know what I’d been thinking.

“How I got those passes is none of your business.” He snorted, like he couldn’t believe my *audacity* for asking. “I do not reveal my sources.”

I understood the irony of the situation, that I’d been the one to ask him to break the rules. Yet, I still needed to be sure he wasn’t doing anything that might land him in a heap of trouble.

“If you’re stealing hall passes from the—”

“I’m doing no such thing.”

“Then how’d you get your hands on them?”

“Do I pry into your private affairs?”

“All the time.”

He made a clicking sound with his tongue. “I mean, did I ask you why Samantha Cooper—your ex-girlfriend—keeps hounding me about talking to you? Or did I ask what happened between you and Scarlet in the AV closet? No, I have not.”

I made an irritated sound. “You know I have no idea why Sam wants to talk to me. When she tells me what’s up, I’ll be happy to share.” Samantha had been leaving me notes in my locker all week and telling Cletus she needed to talk to me about something important.

However, she hadn’t given either of us any clues about the subject, nor had she been home when I’d stopped by her house on Monday and Tuesday. It was like she wanted to talk to me, but she didn’t want to talk to me. I didn’t understand her.

“And what happened with Scarlet today isn’t the same, Cletus, and you know it. Stealing from Assistant Princi—”

“I already told you, I didn’t steal them. I don’t steal. I’m not a thief. For one thing, I don’t have enough black in my wardrobe for it. And for another thing, there’s plenty of ways to get what you want without stealing.”

“Hmm,” was all I said.

“Hmm,” he mimicked, crossing his arms, giving me his version of a stern look.

We passed a stretch without speaking, leaving each other to our own, private thoughts regarding the day’s outcome. I was glad for the quiet and the time. The last few days, focusing had been near impossible. Not seeing Scarlet, not listening to her laugh or sing or tease me had weighed me down. I’d been tired, distracted, short-tempered.

And then, there was that kiss.

All week—most particularly at night, when all the lights were out but I could still see her empty bed and the pajamas she usually wore—I’d been reliving our kiss in the woods, asking myself what had gotten into me, what

had possessed me? *Possessed* was absolutely the right word. Looking back, it was like I'd been possessed.

Now, I'd kissed girls before. It had always been premeditated, it had always been fun, and I'd always been very much in control of myself. Kissing Scarlet hadn't been planned. Or, honestly, fun. It hadn't been fun last weekend and it hadn't been fun today. Both times, control had been an ingredient in short supply.

That's not to say I didn't enjoy it. I most certainly did. I more than enjoyed it. I got the sense I needed it, and that made no sense at all.

Kissing Scarlet is like . . .

Leaning my elbow on the windowsill, I pinched my bottom lip lightly between my thumb and forefinger.

It's like—

"Don't give yourself an aneurysm." Cletus's dry statement interrupted my thoughts.

"Pardon?"

"You look like you're thinking so hard you might break something over there."

Shifting in my seat, I flipped on my blinker again, this time for our driveway.

"I thought you'd be happy, Billy." My brother's voice held the faintest note of concern, but mostly he just sounded irritated.

"I am happy," I said flatly.

It was best to hold my thoughts close to the vest with Cletus. Any expression of emotion, whether it be happy or sad or disappointed, he seemed to tuck away for future reference. Our momma prayed daily that he'd grow up to use his powers for good. On Sundays, so did I.

Cletus made a grunting sound. "Don't ruin my birthday with your *mood*."

Since I wasn't the one with mood problems, I said nothing.

“Maybe you should invite Scarlet to the family party tonight.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but Cletus hit his thigh, cutting me off.

“Actually, yes. I demand you invite Scarlet. That’s what I want for my birthday.”

“Okay.” Shrugging, I turned onto our driveway.

“Okay? Okay? That’s all I get? No, ‘Thank you Cletus for inviting my girlfriend to your birthday party’?”

Oh. I see.

He was trying to get me to admit what was going on with Scarlet.

Bringing the truck to a stop in my usual spot, I engaged the emergency brake, cut the engine, and turned to my brother. “Thank you, Cletus, for inviting my girlfriend to your birthday party.”

He flinched, his eyebrows near shot off his forehead, his eyes rounded to the size of quarters, and his mouth dropped clear open.

“Careful, Cletus,” I said, exiting the truck amidst his stunned silence. “With your mouth hanging open like that, you’re liable to eat a fly.”

* * *

After making a quick stop by the house to pick up something, I ran to the edge of the field. We’d done sprints during football practice, but I wasn’t tired. A single word chanted between my ears, *girlfriend*.

I’d meant it, what I said to Cletus in the truck. If I had my way, that’s what Scarlet would be. Friday, after the game, I’d take her out. Saturday, after work, we’d go out again. Sunday, maybe we’d have another picnic at her campsite. She could try to teach me how to navigate the woods while I pretended to listen between me kissing her.

We’d spend my birthday together. And on Christmas I’d give her something special. A guitar of her own. *Yes!*

Maybe Ash wouldn't mind sharing a room with Scarlet and she'd stay with us. Maybe she could just stay all the time without me having to sneak her in from the cold. She was so great, I couldn't wait for everyone to finally see her. To know her. To know about us. My mind raced with plans and as soon as I was fifty feet from the tree line, I slowed, straining my ears, listening.

I couldn't hear her.

It was very possible I couldn't hear her sing because my brain was on overdrive and my heart was beating fast and loud. I stopped next to a tree, gripped it. I then closed my eyes and slowed both my thoughts and my breathing and listened harder.

The wind. Crickets. A frog. But no—

“Hey,” she said.

My eyes opened and there she was, standing a short distance in front of me, looking uncertain.

“Hey,” I said, my feet already moving. Something relaxing at the vision of her, something critical, and I realized I'd half-expected her to avoid me again.

“Hey. So, didn't you—oh!”

Interrupting her with a kiss, I carefully placed one hand between her shoulder blades and pushed the fingers of the other into the hair behind her ear. Her soft lips had the flavor of surprise. I took advantage, seeking out her tongue and making a sound of approval when she gave it to me. She had such a sweet taste and she was always so hot—her skin, her mouth, everywhere I touched—except her hands. Her hands were always freezing.

Pulling away, because we needed to breathe, I rested my forehead against hers and lowered my hands to her hips. *Upper back, the sides of her torso and hips, neck, hair, arms, fingers, face, shoulders*—these were the places I was allowed to touch. I'd made a list after we'd kissed in the AV

closet and things within me had escalated unexpectedly. Lack of control was not acceptable. Therefore, boundaries.

“Didn’t you see me?” Lifting her forehead, she leaned away to catch my eyes even as she worked to catch her breath. “I was right here when you walked up.”

I breathed a laugh and gave myself a moment to just look at her beautiful face. “I did not see you.” I’d missed her. A lot. How was that possible?

She laughed too, tilting her head to the side. Light from the late autumn sunset played through the trees and in her eyes. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.” I slid my hand from her hips to her hand, lacing our fingers together, touching only the safe places.

Her attention flickered down and then to the side. “Are we always going to greet each other, uh, with a kiss? From now on?”

“Only if you want us to—”

“It’s what I want,” she said on a rush, stole another quick kiss, and then leaned back and grinned with her whole face. “It’s what I want,” Scarlet repeated, bouncing on the balls of her feet, her fingers squeezing mine.

I licked my lips, tasting a trace of her there. “Good. Because it’s what I want too. And it’s good you asked, because I want you . . .”

Her eyebrows pulled together, she stared at me like she was waiting for more. “You want me . . . ?”

Crap. I licked my lips again, realizing I’d messed up what needed saying by making it sound like I’d left the thought unfinished. But that was it. I wanted her.

So I nodded. “Yes.”

Scarlet’s eyes narrowed. “You want me.”

“I do.” My heart was racing.

She gave me a confused-looking smile. “That’s it?”

“Well—” I ignored the fidgety energy low in my stomach and at the base of my spine. “That comes with a lot.”

“Like what?”

“Like being official.”

Her eyes grew big.

I rushed to add, “And seeing each other every day, or as often as you want. And you should have my letterman jacket. You should wear it.” *What the hell?* Where had that come from?

Scarlet reared back an inch. “Your—your—your jacket? Do people still do that?”

“We should.” *Oh man.* I was seriously messing this up.

She scrunched her nose, turning her face to peer at me out of the corner of her eye. “Billy Winston, are you teasing me?”

“I am not teasing you.” I shook my head, my attention dropping to her full lips. I had the very odd and sudden desire to bite them. “But I don’t want to pressure you into anything you don’t want to do. So, I’m asking, do you want me?”

I waited. And as I waited, my chest felt like someone was inflating a balloon inside it, a hot, heavy balloon, and it was pressing outward on all sides of my rib cage.

“Yes,” she finally said, the word a soft whisper, more breath than sound.

Lifting my eyes to hers, I tensed, stilled. Although Scarlet had said yes, she looked scared out of her wits.

The balloon expanded.

“Honey.” I released her hand and cupped her jaw. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she said, louder. But there was still a wary note in her voice and a look of panic in her eyes that had the hairs on the back of my neck standing straight up.

I shook my head. “Scarlet, I don’t believe you.”

A sound fell out of her, followed by a hastily sucked in breath. A sob. Her chin wobbled before she could firm it.

“I do want to be with you, but no one can ever know,” she said on a rush, and the shards of her broken words cut deep, they tore a secret, hidden part of me.

I flinched, my eyes stinging, feeling like I’d been slapped, and my hands dropped from her face.

She grabbed my wrist lightning fast and tugged. “Listen to me, please. Just listen. No one can know, and you—you *of all people*—should understand why. If my father found out, he would—” Her voice cracked, her face crumpled, pain radiating from her eyes like the cold, hollow light of moonbeams.

I reached for her, curling my fingers around her neck and bringing her cheek to my chest. “Shhh. I got you.” My other arm wrapped around her upper back and I took a deep breath.

Dammit. She was right.

I’d been hasty, foolish, thinking of myself, thinking of kissing her whenever I wanted, driving her to school every morning, eating lunch together, holding her hand, taking her to prom even. It was like I’d been drunk on the idea of an impossible, normal future with Scarlet, and she’d made me a pot of hot, black coffee, sobering me up.

“Please don’t be mad,” she said around another sob, wrecking me.

“No. No, I’m not mad. Of course,” I agreed, needing to swallow again, my mouth suddenly dry, my stomach sour. “Of course, we’ll do this however you want.”

Her body relaxed, the hands that were fisted in my shirt loosened and her arms came around me, squeezing me tight. I held her too, disappointment warring with reason and good sense.

She’s right. You know she’s right.

Hadn't I been irritated with Ben McClure all those weeks ago? Thoughtlessly pulling Scarlet through the cafeteria by her hand, knowing talk of it would get back to her father. I didn't understand the full extent of what she'd suffered *then*. Now, I knew.

I don't have the excuse of ignorance. I know.

My arms tightened and we held each other for a time, alone with our own thoughts. Scarlet pulled away first and I let her go. Stepping back, she crossed her arms around her middle.

"Sorry I cried." Her gaze darted to me and then away.

"You don't need to apologize for that." I wanted to touch her again, keep holding her, but something told me not to.

"Well, I won't do it often." Her tone was light and self-deprecating. "Just at funerals and weddings and birthdays and toilet paper commercials and when I see babies and when I stub my toe."

"So noted." My mouth twisted to the side, her attempt at humor wasn't necessary, but I got the sense she needed it, and she needed me to smile. Maybe a subject change was in order. "Speaking of birthdays, would you mind coming to Cletus's birthday party? He 'demanded' I ask."

"Uh, sure. When is it?"

"Tonight."

She stood straighter. "Tonight?"

"Yep. I should be getting back. I still need to put the pie in the oven."

"Pie?"

"Yeah. I made most of it yesterday. It still needs to be assembled and baked. He likes sausage gravy pie for his birthday instead of cake—you know, biscuits and gravy? Well, it's like that, but a pie with carrots and other vegetables. He says it's the most efficient food since it can be eaten as breakfast, lunch, or dinner, and it's technically a pie since it has the crust. I think he just doesn't like cake."

I was rambling. I *never* rambled. I told myself to shut up.

Scarlet chuckled, and I tried to maintain my smile, but it didn't feel right on my face, so I let it drop.

"Hey, if you need to bring your homework, you can do it at the house."

"Oh. No. I'm good. All caught up."

I nodded and tucked my hands in my jacket pockets, deciding it was best not to touch her again if I wanted to leave anytime soon. My fingers encountered the soft, fuzzy items I'd picked up from the house before running out to the woods.

"Oh." I withdrew them, flattening the two pieces of leather into a pile before holding them out for her to take. "These are for you."

Scarlet's eyebrows pulled together and she glanced between me and my offering. "What is it?"

"Gloves."

Her forehead cleared, her gaze holding mine like I'd stunned her. "Gloves?"

"Yes." I took her hand and placed them in her palm. "Your fingers are always freezing. You needed gloves, so I got them for you."

Slowly, her eyes lowered. She stared at them, rubbing her thumb over the suede. "They're so soft."

"Well, they'll keep your hands warm. They might be a little big, since I didn't know your size, but the inside is lined with wool."

Scarlet pressed her lips together and carefully fit her hand inside one of the gloves. "Thank you, Billy."

"You're welcome."

"I love them," she said, like she was talking to herself, and she frowned. Her features looked close to crumpling again. But then she scrunched her nose and shook her head, laughing as though just the act of laughing could dispel tears.

Lifting her gaze, she gave me a big, cheerful smile that was ruined by her watery, sad, moonbeam eyes.

“I love them so much.” Stepping forward, she pressed her lips to mine, her now gloved hands fisting in my shirt. “Thank you,” she said against my mouth.

“You don’t need to keep thanking me.” I covered her hands. “Taking care of you is something I want to do.”

She nodded, still forcing a smile. “Then I want to take care of you too.”

I frowned at that, something about the words striking an off chord. But she didn’t see my confusion as she’d already pressed her cheek to my chest, snuggling close. I hid my agitation by hugging her again, tried to diffuse the persistent sense of wrongness—about keeping our relationship a secret—by reminding myself her safety was what mattered. *That’s what’s important. That’s all that matters.*

She was right. We couldn’t tell anyone about us. I *knew* she was right. We could be together, but it had to be a secret.

And I hated it.

* * *

“Where’s Scarlet?”

I straightened from the oven, closing it while I set the last of the sausage pies on the counter, and glanced over my shoulder at Cletus.

“Didn’t you invite her?” Hands on his hips, he looked well and truly distressed.

“I did,” I said, removing my oven mitts. “She said she’d come.”

He frowned like my words gave him a bad taste in his mouth. “She didn’t come with you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

I shrugged. “Guess she didn’t want to.”

My brother stared at me like I was a new species of something truly bizarre. “She didn’t want to? Well why not? What is she, blind? I know she’s not an idiot.”

Despite myself and my mood, I smiled at my brother’s not-so-veiled compliment. “Thanks, Cletus.”

“Don’t thank me for your genetics.” He affixed his attention to the floor, looking confused. “What is wrong with her?” he asked under his breath, then continued the conversation, “I’m going to find out.”

“Leave Scarlet alone. She’s been through enough.” I turned off the oven, thankful I hadn’t burned the sausage pies. I was so distracted, the fact that they’d come out of the oven unsinged was a miracle. “Did Duane set the table yet?”

“He did. But I told him to set a place for Scarlet.”

“That’s fine. She said she’d be here.”

“Who’s coming? Who is *she*?” Ashley jogged into the kitchen, making a beeline for the cupboard where we kept the mugs. It was also where she hid anything she didn’t want the twins to find. They hardly ever used mugs.

“Scarlet St. Claire,” Cletus answered, his eyes moving over me. “She’s a friend of mine. I wanted her to come.”

“Oh. That’s great, Cletus!” Ashley twisted over her shoulder to give him an excited smile. “I’m happy to meet her, then.”

“You’ve met her before, you just probably don’t remember. And it’s not like that,” he said absentmindedly, making a face. “We’re just friends.”

“Oh.” Ashley sounded disappointed. My sister was always trying to pair us up, looking for romances where none existed. Her favorite books were love stories. I didn’t like the ones with the sad endings, and the ones she recommended always had sad endings. “Well, I’m happy to meet her in any case. Say, would you keep an eye out for me? Make sure Duane and Beau are occupied?”

“I’ll be a lookout,” our momma loud whispered as she hurried into the kitchen. “I got the twins setting up the garland and ornaments, let’s hope they don’t break anything. Thanks, Cletus, for putting the tree in the stand.”

“My pleasure, mother dear.”

“I’m after the birthday candles now. Cletus, do me a favor and get your presents out of my bedroom? I know you know where they are. Just put them on the sideboard.”

“Hey, Momma.” I walked around the large kitchen island as Cletus exited, not needing to be told twice. “Did you remember to pull out my birth certificate? I still need it.”

“Oh, baby, no. I forgot again. Um.” She rubbed her forehead, pulling out the silverware drawer and reaching in the back. “Billy, don’t forget, Ash, Roscoe, and I are going to Knoxville on Friday and spending the night for Ash’s Girl Scout thing, and the twins will be over at Hank’s. That means you need to keep an eye on Cletus and make sure he’s fed before your football game. You know how he doesn’t eat if no one reminds him.”

“I know, and I remember. What about the birth certificate?”

“Uh, oh yes. Sorry. That’s right. I forgot, when do you need it?”

“Next week. Applications are due. Everything else is finished. Can I just get it myself? I know where they are.”

“Do you know where the candles are?” My mother asked Ashley. “You know if your brother doesn’t have exactly sixteen *new* candles on his pie, we won’t hear the end of it until next year.”

“So can I get it?” I pushed, tapping my fingers on the counter.

“I think you put them in the pantry.” Ashley was now kneeling on the counter, peering at the top shelf of the cupboard. “I know I put that taffy up here for Cletus. Those boys better not have eaten it or I swear I’ll spray their clean laundry with perfume again and put black licorice in their chocolate milk.”

Meanwhile, my mother nodded, saying, “Yes!” and then turned for the pantry.

Taking that as permission, I left the kitchen and speed-walked down the hall to the library, just in case she changed her mind. My mother could be cagey about us messing with the personal documents. I understood why. Ordering new social security cards and the like was a pain. She didn’t want anything getting lost.

But I just needed a copy of my birth certificate, that’s it. Mrs. Hill, the school secretary, wouldn’t mind making me a few copies. And then I’d put it right back tomorrow afternoon. At this point, if I waited for my momma, I’d miss the deadline.

The key was behind the flowerpot on the bookcase. I unlocked the file drawer, I thumbed through the hanging files, and—upon finding nothing named Birth Certificates—I pulled out the one labeled, Legal Records.

Placing the file on the desk, I opened it and scanned the first page.

And then I blinked at it, startled.

And then I read it for real.

And then I straightened, covering my mouth with shaking fingers and breathing out, “Holy shit.”

The sound of the door closing behind me had my head whipping around and my eyes meeting those of my mother’s.

“Billy,” she said as sternly as her sweet voice could manage. “You know you are not allowed to—”

“You adopted Beau and Duane?”

She stopped halfway to me. She closed her eyes as though absorbing the impact of something hard and heavy.

Holy shit.

Holy fucking shit.

My mother breathed out. She opened her eyes. They looked bracing, pained. But she nodded.

My hand came to my forehead and I stumbled backward, my ass landing in the office chair. “Oh my God.”

“They don’t know.”

“Obviously,” I muttered, glancing at the notice again, reading it *again*.

Father: Darrell Winston

Mother: Christine St. Claire

“Scarlet’s momma—” I tried to swallow. I couldn’t.

If Duane and Beau had been raised in the life, they might’ve suffered what Scarlet had, maybe worse. *And if Scarlet had been raised outside of the life . . .* A swell of guilt choked me. My eyes blurred. I couldn’t shake the notion that Duane and Beau had been saved, but Scarlet had been left behind.

God.

“Yes,” my mother confirmed. “Christine, Scarlet’s mother, is their biological mother. Scarlet is their, uh, half-sister.”

Feeling, thinking too much made me sick to my stomach. Duane and Beau, my brothers.

Christine’s and Darrell’s.

Darrell’s and *Christine’s*.

. . . *That sonofabitch.*

That evil, wretched, worthless piece of shit.

He’d cheated on her. He’d cheated on her *all the fucking time*. And then, he made her—

“Shit.” I bent forward, my elbows on my knees, my head in my hands. “Shit.”

“Billy. Baby.”

After everything he’s done to her, the beatings, the gambling, the cheating.

I shook my head, thinking and saying, “He made you raise his bastards.”

My mother made a strangled sound, a noise of distress. In the next minute she was in front of me, kneeling, glaring up at me with fire in her eyes.

“Don’t you ever, *ever* call your brothers bastards, you hear me? Those boys are my babies. Same as you, same as Jethro and Ash and Cletus and Roscoe. They’re a part of me.”

Seeing her rare flash of temper made me realize what I’d said, how it had sounded, and I closed my eyes, unable to bear the pain and recrimination in hers.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—they’re my—I would never—”

“You will never tell them the truth. Never.” Her tone was hard, unbendable. “They will never know, and you will take this to your grave.”

“You’re never going to tell them?” I asked, my voice gravel. I leaned back in the seat, taking a deep breath, and then opened my eyes.

My momma stood, arms crossed, jaw set in a rigid line, she gave her head a resolute shake. “No. Never.”

“Why?”

“Because, if their own brother reacts like this—” she lifted her chin, peering down at me with disappointment “—how do you think the rest of the world will treat them? And also because . . .” Momma paused, her frustration yielding to a bigger emotion.

It was one I recognized immediately as it had often been present when I was younger. Thankfully, not so much anymore.

Fear.

“You can’t tell anyone, Billy. Promise me. *No one* can know. Promise me.”

“Okay.” I stood, hugging my mother, hating to see her this way. I’d never wanted her scared like this again. “I promise. I promise.”

“Billy, I’m serious”—she clung to me, her voice cracking—“Christine is Razor’s old lady. Razor doesn’t know. If he knew, he’d kill them.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SCARLET

“I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,
in secret, between the shadow and the soul.”

— PABLO NERUDA, 100 LOVE SONNETS

I cleaned up the campsite Thursday afternoon after finishing my homework, shaking out all the blankets and tidying up the “woodpile.” Billy’s kindling was almost gone. I’d been a lazy hunter-gatherer, preferring to burn the excess sticks rather than search for larger logs.

Everything neat and organized, homework done, Walkman batteries still dead, I checked Billy’s watch. It was 4:17PM. I could’ve walked to the Corner Shoppe and bought some batteries, a task I’d been putting off for days, or I could sit and wait for Billy.

Lowering myself to the blanket by the fire, I rested a cheek on my knees and closed my eyes. I listened to the sounds of the wood crack and hiss, my mind drifting. Inevitably, it drifted to Billy.

I hadn’t seen him at school today, but I did have our conversation yesterday at the edge of the woods, Cletus’s birthday party last night, and what happened after to think about. And I’d been thinking about those events plenty. All day.

“But thinking about it again won’t hurt,” I said, feeling my lips curve.

Cletus’s party should’ve been nice. We’d decorated their Christmas tree all together, something I’d never done before, but was apparently tradition on Cletus’s birthday.

Also, the Winstons were welcoming, sociable, and hilarious. The friendly twin in particular, Beau, he had some real good jokes. We’d spent a stretch over dinner trying to out-pun each other. He was punny, but I was pretty sure I’d won. And Ashley had been so nice! She’d French braided my hair. I’d never had that done before.

Yes, it should’ve been a great night, except I spent the entire time worried Billy was angry with me.

Out of everyone, Billy was the least friendly. Even the grumpy twin cracked a smile a few times. Whereas Billy was quiet and withdrawn, barely looking at me or anyone. I don’t think he spoke three words the whole night. That is, not until I tried to leave.

“What did you expect?” Presently, I mumbled to myself, laughing a little. “Maybe the only reason he wants to be with you is so he can be sure you spend every night under a roof.”

I left out the front door and Billy materialized out of the dark with a plan to sneak me back inside. He’d still seemed withdrawn, and he made no move to kiss me. I didn’t get the sense he was angry with me, more like he had a lot on his mind. Anyway, despite him being out of sorts, I just wanted to be near him.

I readily agreed to sleep over, taking a shower and spending the night in Billy’s room. In Billy’s pajamas. With Billy sleeping just a few feet away.

“Goodness gracious, Scarlet. It’s not like y’all were sleeping in the same bed. Get a grip.” I rolled my eyes at myself, turning away from the fire, my face suddenly hot.

I hadn’t slept at first. My mind was stubbornly switched on and wouldn’t turn off. Billy also tossed and turned, though he tried to be quiet

about it.

But then, sometime in the middle of the night, I heard his faint whispered, “Scarlet.”

“Yes?” I answered immediately, like I’d been waiting for him to say my name. Maybe I had been.

He stood, walked to my bed, and knelt beside it. I heard him but couldn’t see much more than a shadowy outline. His fingers found the nape of my neck just fine, pushing into my hair like it was something we now did all the time.

“I forgot to kiss you, when you arrived. I’m sorry,” he said, which was silly. He couldn’t kiss me in front of his family if we were keeping things a secret. Then he asked, “Can I kiss you now?”

My breath caught and I nodded, again my response immediate, like I’d been lying here waiting for him to ask. But I only nodded. I couldn’t speak and I was convinced Billy could see me just fine.

The air seemed to shift and swirl, changing as he bent. The way his hand slid from my neck to cup my cheek, purposefully touching every inch of me along the way, set off those little fireworks again low in my stomach. His thumb traced along the line of my cheekbone and the vacant rooms inside me filled to bursting.

And then, Billy gave me the sweetest kiss. A warm, careful, massaging, lingering press of lips that made me feel like I was a treasure. Like a princess. *Sleeping Beauty*.

But instead of waking me with a kiss, he’d guided me into a dream. A beautiful dream where only us, and our perfect feelings for each other, and this perfect moment existed. I gripped his hand where he touched my face, needing to hold some part of him, giving into a silly notion that doing so would allow us to travel through the dream together. I couldn’t imagine ever leaving him behind.

Too soon, his lips separated from mine. Kissing the corner of my mouth like he couldn't help it, he lifted his head, just an inch.

"Let this be our first kiss," he whispered, and I felt the breath of his words on my lips. "The others don't count. This is our first."

"What? Why?" I smiled, confused and curious, but I was also more relaxed, my heart beating easier. Reaching for him, I clumsily found his fuzzy jaw with my searching fingers. How amazing was it, to touch another person just because I wanted to? To feel their skin and warmth and smile with my fingertips?

Pretty freaking amazing.

"Because I meant it with my whole heart," he said, his voice rough. Turning his lips to kiss the center of my palm, his tone grew fierce. "You deserve the best, Scarlet. Only the best. And I swear, I will always mean every one of our kisses. Every single one."

Every single one.

I'd slept like a damn baby after that, probably smiling in my sleep like a weirdo.

Billy woke *me* up the next morning, grinning at my flustered confusion as I dashed around the room aimlessly like a ping-pong ball. Being a gentleman, he quickly left me to change. Wanting to give him something, take care of him in some small way, I scribbled a quick haiku on a piece of paper, leaving it for him to find later,

Using just your lips

We had a meaningful kiss.

And yet, I miss tongue.

No time to overthink, I placed the paper on his pillow, not even sparing a moment to sign it. Billy (with a sleepy Cletus as lookout) snuck me out. The two of us then walked to the woods and ate a breakfast of bagels and

cream cheese on the way, holding hands while we laughed about all sorts of funny things.

I didn't remember the specifics of the funny things, probably more stories about his siblings because he knew how much I liked them. But I did remember our shared laughter. It sounded so much more than friendly, and I loved it. Mine plus Billy's more-than-friendly laughter, together, was now my most favorite sound.

Presently, sighing and smiling at the memory, I chuckled at my foolishness, at all the stupid hiding I'd been doing since Sunday. The misery I'd put myself through had been dumb—in hindsight—and could've been avoided if I'd just *talked* to Billy. Continuing on a philosophical note, hindsight was the best and the worst. It frequently made you feel stupid, but it also offered a chance to peek into the future and what might happen later in a similar situation.

"I'd do things differently, that's for sure," I said to the air, nodding at this proclamation. "I'd talk to him. I should've talked to him. Some folks, there's just no use running from."

"Who're you talking to?"

Startled, I lifted my head, glancing around until I spotted Billy. *Thunk ka-thunk*.

"Hey there, Scarlet." Standing at the edge of the camp, he gifted me with his small, friendly smile.

Meanwhile, I was both frowning and smiling, confused. He was early and I hadn't been singing.

"Hey there, Billy. You found the campsite?"

His smile widened. "Yep."

Huh. "Well, how about that." My smile won out over my frown. "What brings you to my neck of the woods?" I said. It was funny because I literally lived in the woods.

“I brought something.” He lifted a black case, his features relaxed and easy, but also expectant.

Relaxed and easy was an extremely becoming expression on his handsome face, and it helped me feel likewise relaxed and easy despite the handsomeness of his face.

“Oh?” I said, turning more completely toward him.

“Yeah.” He nodded once, still grinning, his eyes on me as though he didn’t want to miss a second of my reaction.

Strolling to me, he opened the black case and I felt like a moron because HE TOOK OUT A GUITAR!! AAAHHH!!! How had I not realized the mystery black case was a guitar case? *Too busy coveting your . . . your Billy.*

My heart leapt at the sight of it. Standing hastily, I clasped my hands together under my chin, my eyes bouncing between Billy and the guitar.

“That’s a guitar,” I said, like a dummy. But I didn’t care.

His smile was now massive. “Yep.”

“Are you—” I found I needed to swallow before I could speak. “Is today the day?”

He hesitated, his smile slipping as he studied me. “I’m sorry I didn’t bring it before. I should’ve.”

“Sorry? Don’t be sorry!” My voice pitched high, like a squeal, because my heart was bouncing around, this time with crazy excitement. This might’ve been the best day of my life.

He laughed at my obvious eagerness, but he looked mildly confused by it too. “I would’ve brought it earlier if I’d known—”

“DON’T WORRY ABOUT IT!” I reached for the instrument, but then snatched my hands back. “I’m sorry. I’m just—I’ve always wanted to learn how to play an instrument, but I never thought it would happen, so I didn’t allow myself to think about it, like making friends with a mermaid or meeting my favorite actress. This is—I just—can I touch it?”

Billy watched me with obvious fascination, his eyebrows pulling together like he didn't know what to think. Even so, he held it out. I felt his stare on my face as I gazed longingly at the instrument. As gorgeous as my Billy Winston was, today I only had eyes for his guitar.

Carefully, carefully, I wrapped one hand around the neck and supported the lower bout with my other. My arms felt electrified, like maybe I could fly, as I brought the glossy wood body to my chest, flipping it around slowly so that the sound hole was facing out.

"Am I holding this right?" My words were breathless, but *whatever*.

I glanced up in time to see him nod, but then he dipped his head to one side, inspecting me. "Uh, more or less. You need to move your hand here." He captured my hand in his and moved it further down the neck. "It might be better if we sit down. I didn't bring the strap."

Billy set the guitar case aside and looked around, pulling me by the elbow over to the big tree trunk lying on its side. "Here, sit there." He guided us to the makeshift seat, and he reached his arm around me to position my hand, the uneven beard at his jaw brushing my temple as the wall of his chest pressed along my shoulder and arm.

And oh my goodness, I could *smell* him, much better than when we kissed or hugged, my nose and lips brushing his neck. He smelled faintly of the Oliver house—home cooking and woodsmoke—spicy, clean soap, and mint.

Quite suddenly, I felt a jolt of something not related to the guitar in my hands but also electric, and it cleared all coherent thoughts from my brain in a single flash. Now, okay, maybe I'm going to sound like a loon here, but him leaning over me sent a hot shiver down my spine, landing with a reverberating *GONG* low in my stomach. And then I got warm stomach.

No. That's not right.

I'd had warm stomach before—with Ben for instance, and with Poe Payton, and with Poe's cousin, Charles Boone Jr. This was not that. This

wasn't even the little, delicious fireworks from when we kissed. This was *hot* stomach. Super hot. Like Billy dwarfing me with his big body set off a full on fireworks display in my insides. And it was twisty.

Sorta like when you imagined him touching you . . . places.

Startled by the shameful—but not at all unpleasant—direction of my thoughts, I held my breath. When he pulled back, his attention on my arms and hands and the guitar, I closed my eyes.

“Okay, there. Like that,” he said, not seeming to notice my turmoil.

I felt him lean away, as though inspecting me, and so I held perfectly still, unsure what to do about this frenzied onslaught.

After a beat, he laughed lightly. “Scarlet, you’re going to have to open your eyes if you want to play.”

“Just give me a minute,” I croaked.

He gave me less than a minute. “You look like a statue. Do you want to be a statue holding a guitar? Or do you want to play it?”

Right now? A statue.

Bracing myself for . . . something, I opened my eyes and stared forward, finally releasing the air from my lungs. In front of me were my legs, and beyond were woods. Brown and white tree trunks and dead leaves and cold air, and the small cluster of primrose that had been blooming every day despite the cold.

“What’s wrong?”

I shook my head, breathing in deeply, the strange, hot, twistiness persisting.

“We don’t have to do this right now—”

“You didn’t kiss me,” I blurted, now totally breathless. “You said we’d always kiss when we saw each other, and you didn’t . . . kiss . . . me.”

I felt him study my profile for a long while and I sat there, about as awkward as a clown at a funeral, a mixture of embarrassed and hyperaware. But goodness, I wanted him to kiss me. I couldn’t shake the sense that I

needed to touch him, his lips on mine, his hands on my body, and nothing about it felt shameful. It was crazy, and I didn't understand, but I knew I *needed* it or else I'd go insane.

Eventually, he stood. My stomach dropped and my eyes lifted, magnetized to Billy Winston. I tracked his long form, his body's graceful, unhurried movements. He returned to where I'd first spotted him hovering at the edge of the campsite. I fought desperate disappointment, not understanding what was going on.

Why didn't he just kiss me? Where was he going? What—

He turned. He faced me. A look of such raw intensity—one of his *impaling* looks—on his gorgeous features, I thought I might pass out from the impact.

“Hey there, Scarlet,” he said, repeating his earlier greeting. But this time, he used his melted chocolate voice to add, “Come here.”

* * *

It was official. Today was the best day of my life.

Eyes closed, strumming the guitar, Billy sat on the big log and the sun set behind him, making his shape more of a single silhouette with a long shadow rather than individual parts. I faced him, two or three feet away, my legs under me on the blanket.

Presently, I sang Tom Petty's “Free Fallin’.” Billy provided accompaniment and listened, and I watched him.

After setting to rights our lack of a hello kiss—which took about twenty minutes to rectify and included stumbling and falling to the blanket by the fire, barely breathing through most of it, and ended with him pulling away, standing up abruptly, and walking off somewhere for five minutes—he picked up the guitar upon his return, handed it to me, and said, “No more kissing unless you don't want to learn the guitar.”

It was a tough choice.

This was our eleventh or twelfth song, I'd lost count after Dolly Parton's "Jolene." He'd patiently taught me for about an hour and a half before my hands got tired and my fingertips started to smart. Then he'd taken over and we'd been singing random songs ever since.

At the chorus, he usually joined in and this time was no different. We harmonized, singing and holding the word *free* way too long, so long I started to laugh. Billy didn't open his eyes, but his smile was huge, especially when I went higher rather than try to match or come close to his deep voice on the next line.

Just as soon as I sang the last note to "Free Fallin'," Billy switched to a new melody, starting up the next song without pausing. I recognized it at once and lifted to my knees, clasping my hands in front of me.

"I love this song! I love Johnny Cash."

He opened his eyes and they settled on mine, his grin tender. "Me too. Ready? We'll sing it together."

"The whole thing?"

He nodded.

"Okay, but after can we sing 'Jackson'? I'll do June Carter's part and you do Johnny Cash?"

Billy laughed. "I'm not sure if I know all the words." He continued strumming, playing the intro to "Ring of Fire" over and over. It was the musical equivalent of treading water.

"I'll help you with the words. I know 'Jackson' by heart." I grabbed his knee and squeezed it. "Please?"

Nodding, he opened his mouth wider, and then started singing "Ring of Fire" without me. I wasn't upset, not at all. He had such a great voice, and this was the first time he'd sung all on his own. When he got to the first chorus, I did the *ooooohhh* and the *down, down, down* parts, making him

laugh more than sing. Then we were laughing together, trying to sing at the same time, and I decided something definitively.

This.

This was the best sound. Singing with Billy Winston and his guitar while fighting laughter. Never in my life had I been so happy. Never in my life had I imagined or dreamed such happiness was possible. And nothing existed beyond right now, this moment, and Billy's smile.

We also laughed and sang through "Jackson," with me standing up halfway through, unable to contain myself. I loved how June Carter belted out her part, telling Billy he was a *big talking man* and that he was *making a fool of himself*, with feeling. Which, of course, had him laughing so hard he couldn't sing. But he kept playing the guitar, so I filled in for him, doing both roles and trying to lower my voice as much as possible for Johnny's bit.

Gradually, I became aware that night had fully descended and both of us had neglected the fire. It was dark and I was tired, hungry, and cold. But I didn't want to stop. I wanted to sing with him forever.

Alas, it was my voice that betrayed me. I hit an off note and immediately Billy stopped playing.

"Hey, are you okay?"

My body shivered as a gust of wind whipped through the camp. "Yep. Great." *Darn it.* Now my speaking voice was hoarse.

He made a short, grunt-like sound. "No. You're freezing. It's got to be past seven thirty by now. We should head to the house."

"Just one more song?"

He was already standing. "Tomorrow."

I sat back, grumbling, "Tomorrow you got a football game."

"I'll see you after the game. And we have Saturday after work. And Sunday after church."

Twisting my lips to the side, I waited for him to finish moving around, arranging things, now convinced Billy could see in the dark.

When he was finished, he walked over to me, his hand coming to my shoulder. “Do you need any clothes?”

“Uh, yeah. Let me grab some.” Shoot. That’s what I should’ve been doing while he was getting his stuff together. I guess I was really tired after all.

In the end, it didn’t take me long to stuff my things in a bag. I also grabbed my flashlight. Billy could see in the dark, but I couldn’t. Hand in hand, his guitar case over his other shoulder, we walked out of the woods and to his family’s field, neither of us talking. I was too busy reliving our kisses and laughter and singing, too content in my memory to notice the silence.

But about halfway to the house, I sensed Billy’s attention on me, so I glanced over.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, but—” he cleared his throat “—before we get back to the house, we need to talk.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” He used his leverage on my hand to tug me closer.

There’d been a time when I’d wished all of our conversations would happen in the dark, so that my brain wouldn’t short-circuit when we spoke. Not anymore. Glancing in his direction now, I was frustrated. I couldn’t make out his features as well as I wanted.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing is wrong. We just need to set some boundaries.”

My steps faltered. “Boundaries?”

He kept on walking, leading me forward. “Yes. Rules. Like, when we’re in my room, what we can and cannot do.”

I quickened my step so that we were walking side by side again. “I don’t follow.”

“Scarlet, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I have a hard time keeping my hands off you.”

“Oh,” I said, my heart being faster at his lovely words. “Well, me too. Off you, I mean. I don’t have trouble not touching myself . . .” *Oh God, kill me now.*

“Is that so?” His voice turned teasing. “Tell me more.”

I huffed, my face now flaming. “You know what I mean,” I mumbled, mortified.

He chuckled, making me huff again, and then he brought us to a stop. “Here’s the thing,” his tone was serious again, mostly. “I think it’s real important that you keep sleeping in the spare bed, in my room.”

“Okay . . .”

“So I don’t think, when we’re inside the house, we should kiss or touch each other. That should be the rule.”

I frowned, once more wishing I could see him better. “You don’t want to kiss me inside your house?”

“Oh, no. That’s not it at all. I *do* want to kiss you inside my house, in my room, on my bed. Very much.” His voice turned chocolatey again, making my mouth water and a shiver rise inside me, starting low in my stomach and coiling around my heart.

“And that’s why we should make the rule,” he continued, his words carefully light while the weight of his obscured gaze felt like the opposite. “Rules remove temptation—uh, mostly—and set limits. You sleeping somewhere warm, *indoors*, that’s what’s important. I want you to feel safe with me, always.”

“I do feel safe with you.” As soon as the words were out, words I hadn’t planned on saying, I felt how true they were.

I'd never felt safe with anyone, not like this. Not in every sense of the word. But I felt that with and for Billy.

From what I could see in the dim illumination of the flashlight, my admission earned me a shy-looking smile, one that seemed both pleased and humbled. It took my breath away. He was so beautiful sometimes, like now, all shapes and shadows, I had trouble concentrating.

So my brain still short-circuited sometimes. So what? It's worth it.

"Good, I'll always put your safety first. Always," he said, quietly, solemnly. "Then we agree? Once we step inside the house, no more touching?"

"Okay. But—" I scrunched my face, feeling restless at the thought of not being able to touch him "—not even holding hands?"

He gave me a small smile. If I was reading it right, it looked pained. "I think it would be best if we didn't."

Hmm. I didn't like that. "But when we're outside of the house?"

"Then touching's fine."

"All touching?"

His Adam's apple bobbed with an audible swallow, like he had something thick and sharp there, and I sensed his eyes move between mine. "Within reason."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, you can touch me however you want."

"But?"

"But . . ." He laughed uncomfortably and—no lie—even in inadequate light I could see he was embarrassed by something. Billy's cheeks above his beard burned and he wouldn't meet my eyes.

"What? What is it?" My smile was automatic. I loved this, making him blush, and my mind shifted through the last few minutes, trying to figure out the source of his adorable discomfort (so I could make it happen again).

Sighing, he looked over my head, he looked to the right, he glanced at the ground, and then he sighed again. “Scarlet.”

“Billy.”

“I want to be with you. Never doubt that.” Billy released my fingers, his hand traveling up my arm to my neck, pushing into my hair. “And when you’re ready—if you’re ready—I hope you’ll want me the same way. I’ll touch you where you touch me, I’ll put my mouth where you put yours. But I’m never going to move faster than the pace you set.”

Good Lord in heaven, that sounds wonderful.

“What if I want to go the speed of light?” I blurted in my excitement, but I wished the words back as soon as I’d said them.

I’m not ready.

I wanted to be ready.

In fact, I couldn’t wait to be ready.

But not yet. It’s still more scary than interesting.

His gaze lifted and seemed to glow, even in the dark. I breathed through the jarring collision, waiting with bated breath for his answer.

“You’re fourteen,” he said softly, carefully, like I was a treasure. Like I was *his* treasure. “The last thing I ever want to be for you is a regret.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

SCARLET

“Family cannot be determined by blood. Family is determined by actions. Family is about trust. Family is about acceptance. Family is about love. True family is earned, not born.”

— SARAH BRIANNE, VINCENT

The inevitable happened on Friday, the day after my best day ever. I was walking across the student parking lot, passing the left taillight of Charles Boone’s truck. Someone called my name. Innocent as could be, I glanced over my shoulder toward the owner of the voice.

Mistake.

Jethro Winston. Sitting halfway on his bike. Just there. Grinning at me like he was happy to see me. My stomach hit the pavement.

Shit.

On instinct, I glanced around, looking for others. I found them. *Chains. King. Gears. Runner. Tank. Gunner. Crow.* Seven. There were seven more of them, scattered all over the place. *Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.*

“Hey, Scarlet.” Jethro set his helmet on one handle of his bike and sauntered over to where I stood rooted in place. Jethro always sauntered, it was just his way.

My mind a swirl of panic by the time Jethro stopped in front of me, I knew he saw the wildness in my eyes, because he lifted a hand like he was approaching a startled animal, his grin small and gentle.

“Hey there. It’s okay.”

How could I have been so stupid? What had I been thinking? My heart joined my stomach at my feet and a rush of freezing, numbing reality rushed through my body.

You haven’t been thinking. You’ve been dreaming.

I always left school out the back door, or a side door. I’d always been careful to take a meandering path to the forest entrance. Walking along the perimeter of the parking lot, or doubling back just in case someone was watching me, or going around the stadium in order to take the long way so as to be sure I wasn’t followed had been normal.

Regardless, in order to get to the wooded path, I had to first walk beyond the student parking lot. The entrance to the forest and my trail was at the far corner of the lot, and that was that. It wasn’t that I thought I could avoid my father and his men forever, it’s that I wanted—*needed*—to be brought in on my own terms, after I’d mentally prepared.

I didn’t want to be ambushed, like today.

Today, my guard was down. I’d allowed myself to get too comfortable, I’d stopped being careful. Instead of doing what I always did, instead of *thinking*, I’d exited the front doors of the school right after the bell rang. Amid the standard chaos of buses lining up, and students leaving, and cars pulling out, and kids meeting up with their friends, I walked in a straight line across the parking lot to the corner. None of my classmates were interested in me or where I was going. Who would care to notice? Right?

My mistake wasn’t the directness of my path to the trail, because I’d been right. None of my classmates noticed, they didn’t care where I was headed. No, my mistake was threefold:

First, using the main doors to exit.

Second, not taking notice of my surroundings because I was so anxious to get going so I could write down and work on a song that had been running through my head all day.

And third, I'd walked across the student lot, a space accessible to a motorcycle.

Fucking hindsight.

"Hey now. No reason to worry." Jethro had such a nice voice. Calm, reasonable, kind.

It wasn't Jethro Winston I was worried about. He was a joker, charming, downright sweet in comparison to his club brothers. Yeah, Jethro was a criminal. He was the best car thief in Tennessee. And he was good with the ladies, bringing in new and willing women (women, not girls) all the time for the other members whenever he was in town, which was rarely.

Everyone liked Jethro, even me. He'd intervened a time or two on my behalf, on the behalf of other kids of members in the compound. He'd stepped between me and an angry biker more times than I could count. It had been Jethro all those months ago who'd shown me where I could camp behind his family's house, given me the tent and money and blankets and lighter, and dug the firepit. He'd saved me, in a way.

But we both knew why he was here now, and it wasn't to save me.

"Let me go. Please. Please let me go," I begged softly, blinking away the sting of tears.

His eyes hinted at remorse, but the line of his mouth was firm. "Scarlet, it's fine. It's just you and me."

"Then why're all of them here?" I gestured vaguely to the rest of the bikers. "Why bring seven men?"

"They're not for you. They're here looking for someone else. I'm here for you, just me. I promise. I won't let anyone hurt you."

"You and I both know you can't keep that promise." My eyes bounced from Tank to Raymond King. But even in my state of terror I realized

Jethro was right. They weren't paying attention to me. They seemed to be looking for someone else.

Jethro gave me a rare frown. "Red, we've known each other a long time and I think of you like a sister, okay? I care about you. If I give you my word, you can count on it. I asked to come. I wanted to pick you up because I wanted to make sure I was the one to bring you in. Your daddy just wants to talk."

I shook my head, biting my bottom lip to keep it from wobbling.

"Please, Red. Just come with me." He stepped closer, holding out his hand a little. "When I asked, Razor said he just needs to speak with you."

"He never just talks and you know it." I cursed the tremor in my voice, my attention moving from Runner to Gears. Neither of them were looking at us.

"And you know that as soon as I found out he was cutting on you, I got you out of there. You should've told me sooner."

"Well, you've never been around much to tell, so . . ."

He made a frustrated sound. "Please. I promise"—his voice turned fierce—"I will stay with you."

I glanced at his hand, knowing I didn't really have a choice. But movement in my peripheral vision spooked me and I jumped away. King—Raymond King, Prince King's daddy—was sitting just beyond my line of sight and he was perpetually impatient. If any of them was going to march over, pluck me off the ground, and carry me like a sack of potatoes, it would be him.

But to my infinite surprise, it wasn't King that had caught my eye. He was still sitting on his bike, glaring at the school, paying us no mind.

It was Billy.

Oh no.

My stomach sunk past my feet and into the earth, and the terror I felt now—maybe because it was for Billy and not for me—made me dizzy.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit! No. No!

Billy, walking toward us and flicking his glare between me and Jethro, wore an expression meaner and angrier than a pissed off badger. I'd never seen him look anywhere near this upset. I gulped, not knowing what to do, or what he was going to do. But I begged him silently with my eyes to stay away. When it came right down to it, I'd known my daddy would want another visit, I was resigned to it. I just hadn't counted on it being so soon.

But instead of staying away, Billy startled me by shouting to his brother, "Hey! Jethro."

Jethro tensed, his eyes closing for a beat. A curse slipped past his lips, and then he muttered something like, "Here we go." But when he turned toward Billy, Jethro was smiling. "Oh, hey Billy. Fancy running into you here. That fine girl of yours around? I'd like an introduction."

Billy made no reaction to his brother's comment, coming to a stop next to and slightly in front of me, stepping into Jethro's personal space and forcing the older Winston brother to back up.

"You need to leave," Billy said with such authority, I half-expected Jethro to listen.

Jethro's eyelids lowered into a glare and he chewed on the inside of his bottom lip, the action reminding me of Billy, which was strange. I knew they were brothers. They looked alike in small and big ways. But they were so incredibly different.

"This isn't a good idea." Jethro's voice was hard, but it also held an edge of pleading. "Walk away. Please."

Instead, Billy crossed his arms. "Fuck off."

Jethro's jaw tightened. "I'm serious. Walk. Away." Then, with a meaningful glare, Jethro looked around at each of the MC guys, as though to say, *This isn't a fight you can win.*

"Fine. I'll walk away." Then, facing me, Billy said, "Let's go, Scarlet."

I stared at him, shocked, unsure what to do.

On the one hand, he was offering me a way out. *For now*. But at what cost? We walk away now, they'd just get me later. And then they'd make an example of Billy. Whether Billy Winston liked it or not, he was in the life because of who his father was. Sure, he might've been skirting the edges of it, about to break free when he left for college next year, but for now he had to live by the club rules or die by them.

Saving me now meant a visit from someone else later, and I couldn't bear the thought of Billy being hurt because of me. He needed to let me go with Jethro, but before I could find the right words to tell him so, I became aware of someone else approaching. Billy's eyes moved between mine, intent, intense, pleading, and then lifted to glance over my head. Whatever or whoever he saw made him blink in surprise and then tense. I turned on autopilot, following his line of sight, and my heart leapt.

Ben.

Like an angel from heaven appearing at just the right moment, it was Ben McClure, and Ben McClure was Jethro's best friend. If Jethro would listen to anyone, it was Ben. Billy wouldn't be able to intervene without consequences, but Ben could. He could buy me time, then I could turn myself in. *Later.*

I breathed out my anguish and breathed in hope.

"Jethro?" Ben's stroll was easy, his gaze untroubled, his smile wide. "Hey. I thought that was you!"

Jethro's spine straightened and a grin split his face as soon as he saw Ben. Seemingly forgetting about me or his errand, he met his friend halfway and they embraced, patting each other on the back and laughing as they separated.

"Ben. Man, it's good to see you. How's your mom? How's college? You in town for a while?"

"She's good. It's good. Everything's great. I'm in town for the weekend, but I was home last week for Thanksgiving. You should come over, if you

want. We'll catch up."

Billy made a sound behind me, something I was sure only I heard, but it reminded me of an enraged yet wounded animal and I turned slightly to look at him. His attention was fastened on the two men who didn't seem aware of anyone but each other. He didn't look angry as he watched their interaction. Or rather, he didn't look *just* angry. He looked wrecked.

Hurt.

Heartbroken.

Jealous.

The look on his face and in his eyes had my fingers itching to hold him and kiss him and make him feel as treasured as he'd made me feel just yesterday. But then, in the next second his eyes cut to mine, hardened, shuttered.

I glanced away quickly while heat rose to my cheeks. I got the sense I'd witnessed something I wasn't meant to see. I also thought maybe—if I'd had the time to think and consider, if we weren't surrounded by Iron Wraiths and I wasn't scared out of my mind—this moment would've been an extremely meaningful one for understanding the sweet, noble, beautiful, but deeply complicated boy at my side.

I could still feel the weight of Billy's eyes on my profile as Jethro and Ben approached, their easy, happy conversation discordant to my ears given the tornado of feelings whirling around my head.

"Billy," Ben said, reaching out his hand.

Billy took it. They shook quickly, released. "Ben," was all he said, his voice still cool and remote.

"Looking forward to the game tonight," Ben said with that strange smile he reserved for Billy Winston.

Then to me, he abruptly leaned forward, grabbed my hand and placed a kiss on my cheek. "Hey ya, Scarlet. Glad I found you." Ben leaned away, leaving me flustered, but he didn't go far. Instead, he slid an arm around my

shoulders and pulled me close, away from Billy. “Wanted to see if you were up for catching a movie tonight after the game or something.”

Oh my God. What is happening?

I opened my mouth to speak, but alas, no sound. No thoughts neither. My brain was like a wasteland. I was one of those computers who couldn’t compute.

But I did notice something. At Ben’s greeting of me, Jethro reared back an inch and glanced between us. “I—uh—are you two . . .?”

Ben squeezed my shoulders. “Don’t ruin things for me, Jet. I’m still working on her.”

Error. Error. Cannot compute.

Jethro returned his attention to me and studied my face with a thoughtful kind of bewilderment, as though he were calculating all manner of incomprehensible things. I rolled my lips between my teeth and told myself not to look at Billy, though every part of me burned to do so. Instead, I met Jethro’s gaze, working to hide my shock. Good thing I was so afraid, I’m pretty sure all Jethro saw was my fear.

After a protracted moment, Jethro released a quiet breath, his narrowed eyes coming back to Ben. Lowering his voice, he said, “What are you doing? Why are you doing this?”

“It doesn’t seem like she wants to go with you.” Ben’s smile waned, but it didn’t extinguish. “So maybe I’m trying to save you from your worst impulses, my friend. Or maybe I’m telling the truth.”

“You know I have to take her.” Jethro’s words sounded pained, truly remorseful.

Now he feels remorse? Now?

“I do not know that.” Ben’s smile persisted, like what Jethro had said was funny, and he shook his head. “Also, I don’t know what’s going on, but she looks terrified. I’ve never known you to terrorize women, Jet. So until I sort things out, Scarlet is staying with me.” I glanced up at Ben in time to

see his smile soften, turn tender. Looking at Jethro with infinite patience, he added, “And you can thank me later for sparing your soul another dark mark.”

Jethro winced at this last bit, as though Ben had landed a punch instead of speaking gentle words. “You don’t get it, Ben. This ain’t so simple. You might delay things, but her daddy wants her. Scarlet belongs to the Wraiths.”

“She doesn’t belong to anyone but herself.” This severe, impassioned statement came from Billy, and my heart lodged somewhere in my esophagus as it tried to escape my body, seeking him.

I had to close my eyes so I wouldn’t look for him, or do something completely insane like reach out for him and beg him to run away with me. I would never do that. I would never ask that of him. He had a family, brothers and a sister and a momma who counted on him, who needed him. And I suspected he needed them just as much.

Meanwhile, Ben ignored Billy’s statement, saying to Jethro, “Then tell him she belongs to me now. Tell him whatever you need to. If she doesn’t want to see her daddy, then I think she shouldn’t have to, unless you can change my mind.”

Close behind me, I heard Billy make a low, rumbling sound, impatient and angry. Jethro and Ben stared at each other.

At length, Jethro released a huge exhale, his eyes dropping to mine. “This is about Carla,” he whispered. “Razor knows. King knows. They’re not mad at you, they just want to make sure you didn’t have anything to do with it.”

I licked my lips, struggling to find my voice and finally managing to croak, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Jethro nodded. “Good. But you and me need to talk. I’ll find you in our spot, just me. And if you see Carla before I do, you tell her it’d be better for her to disappear. Okay?” Jethro wasn’t making a threat. I could tell he was

wanting to warn her before anyone else got to her first. I could also see he was concerned about me.

Taking a step back, his eyes lifted and locked with his friend's. "I'll let her daddy know Scarlet had plans tonight that would've been hard to break without causing a scene. But I'll also tell him I questioned her and she didn't know anything. I'll see if that matters. If it doesn't, I can't guarantee I'll be the one to pick her up next time."

"You make it matter, Jet." Ben smiled warmly at Jethro, maybe so anyone who was watching would think this was just a friendly conversation, or maybe because all he felt for the other man was warmth. "But if Scarlet's daddy is worried about her, just tell him she's with me."

* * *

"Are you sure you don't want to go to Daisy's? Get a milkshake?"

I shook my head, dividing my attention between the road and the rearview mirror. I didn't hear any bikes, I didn't see anyone follow us out of the parking lot, but that didn't mean it was safe.

I'll have to go see Razor. I shivered at the thought, cold dread a heavy, suffocating weight around my neck, making me slump. My cuts from last Tuesday—*was that just last Tuesday?*—had scabbed over and now itched instead of hurt.

"Scarlet." Ben's sunny voice interrupted my thoughts. "Talk to me. Why didn't you want to go with Jet?"

"It's a long story."

"He would never hurt you."

I tried to paste on a smile. "I know that. I trust Jet."

That was a lie. I didn't trust Jethro.

It's not that I thought he would hurt me, but he was a recruit. His father was important in the club. Once you wore the patch, that was it. Even if

Jethro had second thoughts, and the few times we'd interacted I suspected he did, there was no way out. There was no escape.

So maybe it was more accurate to say I trusted Jethro more than I trusted any of the other Wraiths.

"Can you drop me off at the Corner Shoppe? It's right up here." My knee was bouncing. I pressed on it. Not just the Wraiths had my nerves going haywire, it was also Billy.

Dear Lord, please, please, please let him be at the campsite. Please don't let him be doing anything stupid.

After Jethro backed off, Ben had walked me to his truck and opened the door for me to hop in. I'd turned, looking for Billy. He'd disappeared. In my experience, boys (and men) did seriously stupid stuff when they were mad, and Billy had been pissed.

Ben laughed lightly; I felt his gaze move over me. "You've already asked me three times to drop you off at the Corner Shoppe. I told you, I don't mind."

"Okay. Thanks." I caught myself biting my thumbnail and stopped. *I should've just gone with Jethro.* If I'd gone with him, I'd be at the club. Maybe my father wanted to talk, maybe he wanted more, but then it would be done and over with and I'd be able to get back to . . . *to Billy. He'd take care of me. He'd change the bandage and make me hot chocolate and kiss me.*

But now I didn't know where Billy was, or what he was doing, or if he was okay, and it was my stupid fault. Next time, I would just go with Jet and be done with it.

"Hey, so." Ben shifted in his seat. "There's supposed to be a party tonight up at Bandit Lake. Are you going?"

"Uh . . ." I blinked at the road, then at Ben, then at the road again. *A party? What?* "I don't know."

"If you need a ride, I don't mind taking you. You could be my date."

I frowned, my gaze dropping to my lap, my mind working to sort through his words. And actions. And everything.

He likes you.

He'd said as much last week at Daisy's, when we'd had breakfast. Or, he'd almost said it. But then he'd gone on to say I was too young, right? So why was he asking me to a party as his date?

"Ben, I'm sorry. But, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, Scarlet. Anything." His eyes flickered to mine, a shy smile on his face.

"I'm real confused. You said last week that I was too young for you, that you being nineteen and me being fourteen meant I was too young."

His eyes widened and his smile disappeared as his lips parted, as though he had something to say. He said nothing.

So I continued, "The thing is, I think you're a great person. I always have. But I have to agree with you. I'm too young to be dating someone nineteen. And anyway, that doesn't really matter because I've got strong feelings for someone else, someone closer to my age. Real strong feelings."

Goodness, I was getting choked up. And my hands were fisted in my pants so tight, I had to close my eyes and use a mental crowbar to relax them. *Please let Billy be okay.*

The truck slowed, jostled, and I opened my eyes. Ben had pulled us into the parking lot of the Corner Shoppe and placed his car in park. His attention fixed to some point beyond the windshield, Ben was frowning.

"So you can see—" I cleared my throat because I sounded funny and started again. "So you can see why I might be confused. I thought we were friends, and I want us to be friends, but that's all we're likely to be, and I thought it was important that you know."

His stare dropped to the steering wheel and cleared his throat. "You can be real blunt sometimes, Scarlet."

I frowned, struggling to look past the weeds of my own worries and understand what he was trying to tell me. What did me being blunt have to do with anything?

Impatient, I said, “Okay. And?”

Ben chuckled, shaking his head. “But I guess, given your upbringing, I’m not surprised you got sharp edges.” He looked over at me, a frown in his eyes but a smile on his mouth. “Is it Cletus? Cletus Winston? I’ve seen y’all together.”

I shook my head, reaching for the door. “Ben, it doesn’t matter who it is. I just wanted to be honest, because I value you as a friend and—”

“I’m not surprised. You’re gorgeous, innocent, sweet. Of course someone would want to snatch you up.” Ben’s blue eyes moved over my face, a wistful smile on his lips. “But you should be with someone who softens those sharp edges, not someone who cuts new ones. Cletus Winston is a troublemaker. My momma says he’s always getting into fights. Based on who his daddy is, I guess that makes sense too. But you could be with someone better, if you wanted.”

I stared at Ben, searching his face, confused all over again. He looked worried for me, concerned. I leaned forward, covered his hand with mine and squeezed it.

“Are we still friends?”

He glanced at our fingers and turned his palm up, speaking to our joined hands. “We’ll always be friends, Scarlet. And if you’re ever ready to be more than friends, we can be that too.”

My fidgety levels skyrocketed at his words and suddenly, I just wanted to get out of the truck. Arranging my face in what I hoped looked like a smile, I squeezed his hand one more time and then took mine back. I didn’t know what to say, but I felt like I needed to say something.

So I opened my mouth and hoped I wouldn’t make things weirder. “Good to know, Ben. Good to know.” I tossed my thumb over my shoulder

and opened the door. “I got to get going now, but don’t be a stranger. Unless you want to be, then be a stranger. But I hope you’ll be a friend instead.”

He pressed his lips together, peeking at me and shaking his head like I was funny. “See you soon, Scarlet.”

“Okeydokey!” *Blah*. Whatever. I didn’t have time to worry about my awkward.

So with one more little wave, I hopped out of the truck, shut the door, ran to the road, looked both ways, and then darted into the woods. I ran the whole way to my campsite, which wasn’t far but did require me leaping over logs and tree roots like a friggin’ gazelle. Which I did.

And as soon as the campsite came into view, so did Billy. He turned, straightened upon spotting my quickly approaching form, and then started running toward me.

THANK YOU LORD THANK YOU LORD THANK YOU LORD!

I didn’t stop, but I did drop my backpack so I could run faster. He met me halfway, opening his arms, and scooping me right off the ground as soon as we met.

“Oh, thank God.” His face came to my neck, breathing me in, one hand fisted in my hair and the other at the small of my back.

But then suddenly, he jerked his hand away from my spine. “Sorry. Did I hurt you? How’s your back?”

“It’s fine. Just itches.” I didn’t let him set me away, instead wrapping my arms tightly around his neck and hugging him to me again. “Thank you for coming here right away and thank you for not doing anything stupid.”

His face was bowed to my neck again, his lips against my skin. “You thought I was going to do something stupid? Like what?”

“I have no idea. Boys do such stupid things sometimes, I’ve found it best not to contemplate it.”

I felt his small smile beneath my ear. He placed a kiss there and we held each other for a long moment, our hearts slowing along with our breath.

I slid my hands to his shoulders and backed up a step, taking a good look at him. “Are you okay?”

His eyebrows did a funny little up and down dance on his forehead before he said, “Are you kidding? You’re asking me? Are *you* okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said, and then—because this was Billy—decided to add a touch of honesty. “Just a little rattled.”

He captured my hand with his, bringing my knuckles to his lips, kissing them. “I would think so, your hands are freezing. Scarlet—” He tugged me toward the campsite and we walked together, him rubbing my fingers to warm them. “What are you going to do? I can’t believe they let you go.”

Needing to be closer, I leveraged our touching hands to move his arm along the back of my shoulders, pressing my side to his. “I’m hoping Jethro can smooth things over with my father, make him believe some story so when I head over there tomorrow, he won’t be too—”

“What?” Billy pulled away suddenly, holding me at arm’s length, examining me like I’d just grown another head. “Head over where?”

“To the club. To the Dragon.”

He reared back. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am serious.”

“Scarlet, no. No. There’s no way you can go back there. He’ll—he’ll cut you again, and—”

“It’s okay.” I reached for Billy’s hand.

He flinched out of my reach before I could touch him. “It’s not fucking okay!”

“Listen. It’s not like it takes very long. It’s usually pretty quick. A half hour tops.”

“Oh my God.” His hands came to his forehead, his fingers spearing into his hair. “Listen to yourself. Just listen.”

Now I flinched, sputtering, “What other choice do I have? I’m his *daughter*. I belong to him.”

“Like hell! You don’t belong to him, Scarlet. You’ve never belonged to him, just like my mother never belonged to my father. Go to the police. Tell them. Show them your scars.”

What? Is he serious?

Stumbling backward, I shook my head. “I can’t go to the police. You know my father has people there too. I might be safe for a while, but then —”

“Leave!”

“What?”

“I have money saved. I will give it all to you. You have to leave.”

My mouth opened and then closed. I couldn’t think. *He wants me to leave?*

“I can’t,” I choked, my mind a mess. *I thought Billy cared about me.*

“Why?” he demanded.

“I don’t . . .” I started, my words more breath than sound because I was so confused. *I can’t believe he wants me to leave.* “I don’t have anywhere else to go. I have no one.”

Billy exhaled like his lungs were broken, like he couldn’t hold in the air. The next thing I knew, he’d pulled me against him, wrapping me tight in his arms, and kissing my cheek and neck.

“We’ll get you out of town. We’ll—”

I pushed him away, stepping out of his embrace, unable to listen. “I don’t want to go. I won’t go. It’s not your decision.”

“Scarlet—”

“No. *No!* My father doesn’t think I know about Carla. He’ll let me go after. He usually lets me go.”

“Usually?!” he exploded, his eyes moving over me like I was crazy. “And who is Carla? Carla Creavers? Gears’s daughter? What does she have to do with you?”

I glanced to my right, wrapping my arms around myself to hold the feelings inside, betrayal, shock, and so much more. “It’s nothing you need to worry about. Just—I have to go see my father. If I don’t go, he’ll just send someone after me again, and they might—”

“Please. Please don’t do this.” He reached for my shoulders, held them, his fingers flexing. “We’ll take out my savings and send you someplace safe. We’ll—”

“It’s not your decision.” I shrugged Billy off, stepping around him and marching to the camp. I couldn’t believe him. I couldn’t. Out of everyone, I thought he’d understand. I didn’t have a choice, not if I wanted to stay in Green Valley with *him*. Didn’t he want to be with me?

He wants to send me away.

From directly behind me, voice firm and low, he said, “I can’t let you do this. I won’t let you go back.”

I stopped short, the hairs on my arms rising, and I turned slowly to look at him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Before Billy could answer, the sound of a branch snapping and several pairs of shoes crunching on leaves had me twisting toward the newcomers. A shock of fear traveled up my spine, but it was followed immediately by relief, then confusion, then fear again as I saw who was coming.

It was Cletus. And next to him, tucked under his arm and looking scared out of her wits, was Carla Creavers.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BILLY

“I wonder if things can happen too early or too late or if everything happens at exactly the right time. If so, how sad and beautiful.”

— SIMON VAN BOOY, *THE SECRET LIVES OF PEOPLE IN LOVE*

I glared at Cletus. He glared back.

“That’s your plan?” I asked, unable to keep the frustration from my voice, just like I was unable to fathom any part of this situation now that everything had been explained to me.

“That’s the plan. And if you’ve got a better one, I’d be happy to take it under advisement. But we’re running out of time.”

I clenched my jaw, my gaze shifting to Carla Creavers. She was lying on her side at the edge of the fire, rolled into a ball. Her face was tear streaked, and her skin was the color of ash. I’d known of Carla prior to now. She was Gears’s daughter by his first old lady. Gear was a high-ranking member of the Iron Wraiths in charge of their chop shop. He was also a real SOB who liked to beat his kids with tools, like long wrenches.

Cletus had just spent the last twenty minutes laying everything out, how Carla had informed on Prince King and the other Wraith kids, got them expelled; how it had taken until just this afternoon for the Wraiths to figure out it was her; how Cletus had snuck her out of school and used Scarlet’s

trail through the woods to escape; how Cletus planned to send Carla to a niece of Mrs. MacIntyre's in California where she'd live and go to school. Carla would go by bus, on her own. He just needed the \$500 for the ticket and her food, which brought us to the party tonight.

The party.

"You don't think Momma is going to notice you staying out all night?"

My brother scratched his jaw. "Momma is gone to Knoxville tonight with Roscoe and Ash, remember? Ashley has that Girl Scout indoor camping thing and they're not due to return until tomorrow afternoon."

Dammit. I'd forgotten about that.

"What if the cops are called?"

"To the Weller lake house?" Cletus made a face. "No way. That place ain't near nothing, no close neighbors on either side. We'll keep the doors closed facing Bandit Lake so the music doesn't echo over the water. I told everyone to park at the Cabot house, the one with the huge driveway, enough for thirty cars at least, if, uh, this guy I know parks the cars. And it's been vacant since that lady—Christine something—died a few years back."

"And you're charging admission?"

"That's right. I got the wristbands, blue for drinks, white for designated drivers."

I glared at Cletus. He glared back.

"I can't let you do this."

"It's not your decision, Billy," he said firmly, and his words had me glancing at Scarlet.

She sat on the big tree trunk, almost in the same spot where I'd been sitting yesterday while we sang together. Her arms crossed. Her expression vacant. Her eyes on me.

It's not your decision.

I returned my attention to Cletus. "It is my decision, and you're not doing it."

“With all due respect, it’s already happening,” he said, sounding sorry but not sorry. “You got a football game in less than a half hour. If you don’t leave now, you’ll be late and tonight’s the qualifying game for the playoffs. How do you think your team will feel if you don’t show up?”

I loved my brother, I did. But he was a master emotional blackmailer and he knew just the right strings to pull. And so, even though I loved him, I also hated him a little sometimes. Like now.

“I’ll call it in to the Sherriff’s department when I get to school, before I suit up for the game.”

“Go ahead.” He shrugged. “I got that covered too.”

“I’ll call the Sherriff directly, then.” I pushed away from the tree, stalking toward my brother.

He stuffed his hands in his overall pockets and stood straighter. “The Sherriff is on vacation. Good luck reaching him in the Bahamas.”

I grit my teeth, frustrated. SO FRUSTRATED.

“Cletus—”

“Let him do it.” Scarlet stood, her arms still wrapped tightly around her middle. “Just let him do it, Billy. Everyone at school already knows. People will show up no matter what and this way he pays for Carla’s ticket to California. She needs to get out of here. You know she does.”

I lifted my chin, not yet ready to concede defeat. “I’ll pull the money from my savings.”

“No.” Scarlet shook her head, walking slowly toward me. “No, you won’t. There’s no time. Banks are closed ’til Monday and she needs to leave *tomorrow*. If they find her, no one will ever see her again.”

Carla made a sound, drawing my eyes to her form. She’d tucked her face against her knees. She was crying.

I huffed a laugh with no humor, and turned away from her. “This is so fucked up.”

How had we gotten here? How had this happened? Why hadn't I been able to stop this? Protect Cletus? Protect Scarlet?

"Just . . ." Scarlet's voice was behind me, and a moment later I felt her hand on my left shoulder. "Just surrender, Billy. You can't control everything. Sometimes you have to surrender."

Breathing hard, my mind spinning, I shook my head. I just needed to think. There had to be something I could do. Something I was missing.

"Carla will be safe." I sensed Scarlet's hesitation right before she pressed her front to my back, wrapping her arms around my waist and laying her cheek on my shoulder. "Just let Cletus do this," she whispered, her voice pleading. "If anyone can pull it off, it's him. And then Carla will be gone, and the Wraiths will stop looking for her. She'll be out of their reach and everything will go back to normal."

And then we can be together, just like before.

She didn't have to say it. I heard her intentions loud and clear. Except, I couldn't live with myself knowing she was here, within the reach of her father, just so she could also be with me.

"Please," she whispered, squeezing me. "Please. Do it for me. Do it for us. Nothing has to change."

Gathering as much air as I could into my lungs, I closed my eyes. They hurt. Everything hurt. I was so angry, at Cletus for keeping secrets, at Scarlet for letting her father cut on her. It was just like my mother all over again, except this time there was no way to save Scarlet because she was so damn stubborn and—

Do it for me.

My eyes popped open, the chaotic fury narrowing, focusing, an idea forming. *A bargain.*

Keep her safe, that's all that matters.

Swallowing thickly, I peeled her arms away from my body. I turned. I faced her. I crossed my arms. There was no way I'd be able to touch her and

do this.

“Fine.” I nodded, shifting my glare to Cletus. “You can have your party. I won’t interfere, if . . .”

Cletus’s eyebrows rose slowly. “If?”

I returned my attention to Scarlet, swallowing again, knowing there’d be no way to take the words back after I said them. But I had to do it. She wouldn’t save herself, so it was up to me.

“If Scarlet goes with Carla to California.”

She recoiled, blinking like I’d slapped her and stumbling back a step. “What?”

“If you go with Carla, tonight, to California, then I’ll let Cletus have his party. He can raise the money. But you’re both going. Tomorrow.”

* * *

I was going to be sick.

Three minutes left in the game and we’d just scored another touchdown. The other team was good, but we were better. I’d played well. We’d be going to the playoffs. My teammates were congratulating each other, and my coach was telling them not to put the cart before the horse. This didn’t stop them from congratulating each other, they just did it quieter, out of earshot now.

“You going to the party, Billy? After?” Charles Boone hit me in the shoulder, all smiles as he removed his helmet. Sweat dripped from his temples and he had a bruise forming under his left eye where he’d been elbowed through his helmet, a shadowy black circle discoloring his dark brown skin.

I shook my head, taking off my helmet and unscrewing the top of the Gatorade bottle I’d just been handed.

“Really?”

“Really.” I took a drink and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

“That’s strange. I heard you were gonna be in charge of the spin the bottle station.” He laughed, hitting me in the shoulder again.

I scowled at the bottle cap in my hands, the walls in my mind keeping everything in check—keeping me focused, keeping me from thinking about how, after tonight, I might never see Scarlet again—were crumbling. Once she left, she would never be able to come back to Green Valley. Ever.

My self-control was crumbling.

What am I doing here?

I glanced at the scoreboard and the clock beneath it. Two minutes and seven seconds remained. We were running out of time. I needed to talk to her. Just because she’d be in California didn’t mean we had to stop knowing each other. But if she left on a bus tomorrow before we had a chance to talk things through—*I need to leave*.

She’d been furious with me after I’d given my ultimatum. She’d refused to look at me, speak to me, acknowledge my existence. She’d run off into the woods and I would’ve chased her, but Cletus stood in the way. By the time I got around him, it was too late. I couldn’t follow her. I’d get lost trying to find her.

And she probably won’t sing for me anymore.

I closed my eyes.

“You okay, man?” Charles had dropped his voice, probably so no one else would overhear.

I nodded, taking another drink from the bottle, working to repair the walls and keep it all going, keep myself in check.

The buzzer went off, marking the end of the quarter and the game. People cheered. My teammates knocked me around, hitting me on the back and stomach and shoulders, rubbing my head and screaming in my face excitedly.

I stood, extracting myself from the moment I wasn't really part of and grabbed my helmet. I walked across the field, leading the end of game tradition of telling the other team, *Good game*, and then I walked off the field for the locker rooms. None of this mattered. I had to find her. I had to convince her to go and I couldn't let her leave angry.

Don't let her leave at all.

Grimacing at the selfish thought, I shook my head. She had to go and now was her chance. If Razor didn't cut her the next time she went to the Dragon, he'd cut her again. I'd rather her safe, far from her father, even if it meant she'd never talk to me again.

"Billy!"

I turned, my heart pushing against my sternum at the sound of my name, hope inflating me as I scanned the crowd for the voice. It had to be her. I needed it to be Scarlet. But then Samantha Cooper broke away from the cheerleaders, jogging toward me, and I deflated.

I took a step back and giving her a head nod. "Sam."

Her gaze moved from my eyes to my chest and back up. I was preoccupied, but I wasn't so much in my own head to realize she looked nervous.

"Are you okay?" she asked. Not waiting for me to respond, she grabbed my hand and came closer. "I, uh, I need to talk to you."

"Right now?"

She nodded. "Yes. Actually, yes. Because if I don't tell you now, I might not tell you, and then I'll—" She swallowed, or tried to, her eyes bouncing between mine. "Come find me after you shower, please. Don't run away after I tell you this."

I blinked, the desperation in her voice clashing against the desperation in my heart. "What's wrong, Sam?"

"I'm—" She pressed her lips together, her eyes shiny with unshed tears.

The roar of my happy teammates sounded distant even though I knew they were approaching. Soon, they'd overtake us.

"What is it?" I pushed, suddenly impatient. I didn't have time for this. I needed to find Scarlet. I needed to—

"Oh Billy." Her voice broke. "I'm pregnant."

* * *

I arrived at the party just before 11:00 PM, numb.

After dropping off Sam, I'd gone home and walked to the edge of the woods, not feeling the cold, not feeling anything. I didn't expect Scarlet to sing for me. She wasn't singing, so I found my own way. Her campsite was empty. The firepit was cold and dead. She wasn't there.

I didn't remember the walk back to my truck nor did I realize where I was headed until I pulled up to the old Cabot place.

And then Duane—my little brother—jogged over to my car. The image of his red hair and salty expression cut through my brain fog like a katana through, literally, anything.

"What the hell are you doing here, Duane?" I asked, pissed off. *I swear, when I find Cletus . . .*

"Hey, Billy," he said, business-like. "You want to park here, it'll be five dollars."

"But we'll give you a good spot!" Beau appeared next to Duane, grinning. "And five dollars is a discount, for family members and people we like."

"So, just you," Duane said flatly.

Duane and Beau will be over at Hank's, my momma had said. I doubted this is what she had in mind.

Glancing between them, I wondered what the hell had been wrong with me. Where had I been? What had I been doing? How had Cletus arranged

all this, roped our little brothers into parking cars at a high school party, and I'd been oblivious.

You've been with Scarlet.

This realization had my heart seizing, the searing pain stealing my breath for a second. I had to close my eyes. *I can't. I can't think about being with Scarlet now. I can't.*

"Are you okay, Billy?" Beau asked, his voice quiet. "You look . . . did you get hurt during the game?"

I shook my head, opening my eyes as a new cloak of numb determination settled over me. All sense of feeling on lockdown, I opened the door, slid out, and left the keys in the ignition. I'd have to deal with my twin brothers later.

"I'm not paying you, but you will get me a good spot. I won't be long." Not waiting for a response, I walked between the already parked cars to the gravel road, making my way to the Weller house and having no idea what I was going to do if Scarlet was there. But I would figure it out

Any hope I'd had for us and the future was now gone. I had a baby on the way. And that was that.

Samantha's dad wanted to help me with college—she'd informed me—as long as I stayed in Tennessee. He'd suggested University of Tennessee. He was a fan of their football program. He also wanted us to wait to get married—Sam said—until I'd played college ball and graduated. Then he wanted me to work with him selling cars at his dealership in Merryville.

I would not be accepting Mr. Cooper's help.

I would take care of my family, but I'd do it my way, which included asking Sam what she wanted and making her future a priority. We'd decided things while sitting in my truck, parked in the school lot as all the other cars cleared out after the game. She talked and I listened, narrowing my focus to getting through the next several hours, because what the fuck else was I supposed to do?

Sam and I would be getting married as soon as possible. She wanted to be married before the baby was born. I'd talk to Dolly Payton about alternate hours and increased shifts at the mill since I'd be seventeen in less than a month. I'd figure out college later. I'd go maybe when our child was in elementary school. Sam would start college in the fall after the baby was born, just like she'd planned. We wouldn't have to take out too many loans since she had a merit scholarship for tuition and books.

And I would never see or speak to Scarlet again. I'd decided. Married to one woman and longing for someone else wouldn't be fair to anyone. I would let Scarlet go.

I would.

I would.

I will.

Hank Weller was at the door of his family's lake house, wearing all black, a green visor, and sunglasses even though it was night. This kid was Beau's best friend like Ben was Jethro's. He was the only child of two psychiatrists who'd had him late in life after they'd already retired, and he was super weird.

"Billy Winston, the dreamboat quarterback. You drinking or driving? Because you can't do both and everyone has to wear a band." He pushed up his sunglasses, revealing his eyes, and then held up blue wristbands in one hand and white in the other.

"Give me the white one," I said, scanning the crowd inside. It was a lot of people. The music was loud once you got close, but I hadn't heard it when I drove up or when I walked over. Impassively, I noted that Cletus had been right, he was going to pull this off.

"The white one is for designated drivers, and it's ten dollars." Hank tucked the blue bands under his arm and held out a hand. "Cash only, exact change 'cause I don't own a bank. Yet."

I glared at him. "Give me the white band, Hank."

He stared at me and I could see his indecision, but I got the sense his motivations were backward. He wanted to fight. He wanted to push the limits and see how far I'd go.

I shook my head and leaned in close. "I've had a shitty night, Hank. You ever had a shitty night before?"

His stare persisted, but I sensed the change in him from morbidly curious to sympathy. "Yeah man, I have." He nodded, looking older than his age, looking older than me. "Here's your band," he said, waving me in.

I accepted the white band Hank offered, wrapping it around my wrist and sharing an odd commiserating stare with him before entering the house. I'd expected it to be trashed but it wasn't. The couches and tables were covered in painter's plastic, the area rugs were missing, and anything glass had been taped up. But there were cups on surfaces, loud music, and lots of bodies.

Methodically, I searched the rooms. It took longer than I would've liked since it seemed everyone wanted to talk to me about something. I shrugged them off, one person after another, until I made it to the den in the back, one of the only rooms without music, and my attention caught on Scarlet's profile.

I had to close my eyes again, rein in the urge to experience the devastation I'd been holding at bay. *Later. I'll deal with all this later. I'll think about all this later.*

Once I was sure I wouldn't stomp into the room and do something selfish or foolish—like grab her by the hand and suggest we run away together, tonight, right now—I gave myself permission to look at her again.

Dispassionately, I saw she was sitting on the floor as part of a huge circle. Other kids, more than twenty, were also in the circle, including Cletus. About the same amount were standing on the periphery of the room. One boy was kneeling in the center of the circle, laughing and reaching for something on the floor. A bottle.

What the—

The boy spun it, stepping back, and I recognized him. He was on the JV football team, a defensive end. My eyes darted to Scarlet and then the bottle.

“Ohhhhh!” The voices in the room rose up in unison as soon as the bottle stopped on a girl.

The boy looked shocked as his brown eyes lifted, connecting with the girl’s. He seemed nervous. Even in the mediocre light, his brown skin seemed to flush with embarrassment. But he also looked excited.

The girl, twisting one of her long, black braids around a finger, looked bored.

“Well?” she said, tilting her head to the side, her dark eyes narrowing.

His grin grew and he stood, walking over to her. She also stood, crossing her arms, still looking bored. But then he must’ve kissed her because the room grew loud again with sounds of encouragement. I wasn’t watching. My eyes were on Scarlet.

If that bottle lands on her, I swear I’ll— I choked on nothing, my hand balling into a fist as I pressed it to the doorframe, losing the battle against my swell of jealousy, anger and resentment rising up.

Before I decided what I’d do, Scarlet said, “Okay, Daniella and Curtis are out, Janell and Kenny are in. Take your spots. Darlene Simmons, it’s your turn.”

Someone yelled, “Go get a room, you two!”

I hadn’t noticed until right this second, but Scarlet held a clipboard on her lap and a pencil in her hand. Her head had been down this whole time, her eyes on the paper on the clipboard, paying no mind to the action around her. It was an awfully visible spot for someone who preferred to hide.

Two kids took the places Daniella and Curtis vacated while Darlene stepped up to the bottle, giggling, and flipping her long, straight red hair. I stood there, my mind working during this momentary reprieve. I was sure if

the bottle landed on Scarlet, Darlene wouldn't kiss her. Darlene Simmons thought everything was gross—greenery, babies, most kinds of food—everything.

Giving the bottle a whirl, Darlene stepped back and I gathered a breath, deciding I'd just have to walk in there, pull Scarlet out, and—

And . . .

And tell her I was getting married to Sam? And tell her I was expecting a baby? And tell her after she left tomorrow—because, I swear to God, she was leaving—we'd never be able to speak to or see each other again?

How could I do that? *She needs me.*

She trusted me to take care of her, I knew she did. She had nobody, *nobody*. I couldn't just make her leave, and then walk away. And now the dam had broken, now the feelings were rushing in, the terrible truth was—eclipsing even my sense of duty—I couldn't stop thinking about how badly I wanted her.

It felt like bleeding and making no effort to cauterize the wound. It felt close to madness. I knew, with absolute certainty, I'd dream of her and her spirit and her voice for the rest of my life. The belief was soul deep, in my bones and muscles and skin, but particularly in my heart.

The walls were falling, crumbling, breaking. I was being crushed under the weight of my desire to be with her always, a desire that sought to overturn my honorable instincts. I was suffocating with it.

"What the hell?" Darlene's irritated words interrupted my thoughts. She flipped her red hair over her shoulder. "I'm not kissing him. Gross."

Agitated, torn, uncertain what I was going to do about Sam and the baby or Scarlet, I incidentally glanced at the bottle and then to whom it pointed. It was pointed at Cletus.

Silence, as much as silence was possible at a house party, flooded the moment as everyone's eyes moved to my brother. And so did mine. I'd never seen him appear uncomfortable before, not like this. He was taking a

deep breath, and I recognized he was struggling to turn this into a joke, but even I—standing thirty feet away and caught in the disorder of my warring thoughts—could see his ears were red. He was flustered, humiliated.

“I’ll kiss him,” a voice said, breaking the tense moment. *Scarlet.*

Every gaze moved to Scarlet. And so did mine. Paralyzed by wonder, I watched as she stood, setting the clipboard aside, and walked to Cletus.

Someone said, “Hey! I thought Scarlet wasn’t playing?”

“Hush, Ben,” someone else reprimanded.

I held my breath, transfixed by the fire and dislike in her eyes as she walked past a scoffing Darlene. Then Scarlet was grinning at Cletus, lifting an eyebrow.

“Stand up handsome and give me a kiss.” She held out her hand. He took it, looking as stunned as I felt.

Her gaze dropping to his mouth, Scarlet’s smile widened. She whispered something, and then put her arms around his neck and kissed him. The room erupted in cheers.

His hands bunched at his sides, eventually settling on her waist.

I breathed out, my eyes and nose stinging, blinking away tears as I watched them, watching Scarlet rescue my brother. Watching Scarlet rescue her friend. If she stayed in Green Valley, her father might find out about this moment. He might punish her for it. Obviously, she knew this was a possibility, but she’d rescued Cletus anyway.

But then, that was Scarlet. Brave, beautiful, strong, sweet, funny, stubborn Scarlet.

God. Protect her, keep her safe, and I will do what’s right. I will let her go.

She didn’t need me to rescue her. She could rescue herself. *She doesn’t need me.* Watching her now with Cletus, this, also, I felt soul deep, in my bones and muscles and skin, but particularly in my fractured heart.

Scarlet and her beautiful spirit would be just fine *as long as* she left. Neither would last if she stayed in Green Valley within the reach of the Wraiths. Her father would crush her, body and soul. I couldn't let that happen. My responsibilities might've shifted, Sam and our baby had to be my priority now, but I wouldn't let Scarlet down either. I'd find a way to convince her to leave.

And then, I'd find a way to let her go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SCARLET

“Love doesn't conquer everything. And whoever thinks it does is a fool.”

— DONNA TARTT, *THE SECRET HISTORY*

Leaning away from Cletus, I opened my eyes and smiled up at my friend. “Now, was that so bad?” I said the words so only he could hear. Everyone else in the room was making such a ruckus, I didn’t have to whisper.

Cletus’s mouth pulling to the side, he gave his head a subtle shake. “I owe you one, Scarlet.”

I laughed, sliding my arms from his neck. “I’d say we’re even.”

“Cletus and Scarlet, you’re both out,” came Charles Boone’s laughing voice from somewhere behind me.

Cletus leaned to the side, his hands still on my hips. “You taking over, Charles?”

“Sure thing, Cletus. Go take a break with your girl. And Darlene, you’re out too.”

Darlene made a sound of protest, arguing that she should get to go again, but I didn’t stay to hear her tantrum. Cletus was leading me by the hand toward the French doors at the back of the room. We ducked out,

trying not to open them too wide as we left. It was still cold outside, and the Weller house was cozy.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he said, pulling me along the deck until we were away from the doors. Letting my hand drop, he leaned against the railing. “But thank you.”

“I assure you, the pleasure is all mine. You’re a good kisser.”

A breathy, shy sounding laugh tumbled out of him and he shook his head. I couldn’t see him real well, but I hoped he was blushing now for good reasons instead of Darlene’s snit.

“You know, that was my first kiss.”

“Was it?” *Huh*. Well. How about that. Maybe all Winstons were just great kissers.

“Indeed,” he confirmed, nodding. “Thanks for making it memorable. I’d much rather kiss you than Darlene Simmons.”

I laughed again, also leaning against the railing and crossing my arms against the cold, my jacket was somewhere inside. “Well, Cletus. I’m honored. And I hope one day you’re able to give someone, just as awesome as you, her first kiss.”

A small, thoughtful smile tugged at his mouth, the light from the interior windows giving his face and crazy hair an orange glow. Cletus glanced down at his shoes, took a breath, and then lifted his eyes again. “Will you please reconsider?”

My smile fell away and so did my good mood. “About leaving?”

“Billy and me, we can go to the store first thing in the morning, get you and Carla snacks, supplies. Whatever you need.”

I was already shaking my head before he’d finished. “No. I’m not going.”

“We have plenty of money to send you both, more than enough, even after Hank takes his cut.”

“No, Cletus.” I crossed my arms around my middle. “Please stop pushing me on this.”

I heard him heave a big sigh. “Is this about Billy?”

I thought about lying, because the truth made me feel stupid and weak. But instead, surprising myself, I said, “Yes. Yes, it’s about Billy. I’ve never felt like this before. I think I need him. I’ve never—I can’t . . . I’ll do anything he wants. I just want to stay with him.”

Cletus made a short grunting sound. “Scarlet, what if the roles were reversed? What if Billy was the one being abused by his father and he wanted to stay just to be with you—” Cletus lifted a hand as I opened my mouth, raising his voice over my protest “—even if leaving meant he’d be safe, but he wanted to stay, suffer through it, so you could be together. Would that sit right with you?”

My stomach fluttered uncomfortably, imagining the scenario Cletus described. “It’s not the same.”

“It’s the same, and you know it. You’d want him to leave, right?”

My chin wobbled, so I pressed my lips together, glancing over my shoulder and into the night. The peaks of the trees blacked out the sky in places, but beyond I could see the night sky reflected in the lake. My vision blurred. Neither the moon, the sky, nor the lake offered me any answers.

“I don’t want to leave him, Cletus. I just found him.”

My friend stepped closer and, after a brief hesitation, placed a hand on my shoulder. He then patted my shoulder. “There, there.”

A sad laugh burst from my lips, and I shook my head. “‘There, there’? You need to work on your sympathy and comforting skills, Cletus.”

“I’m not good with crying women. It muddles the brain. So stop crying and listen.”

“I’m not crying.” I shrugged his awkward hand from my shoulder, sniffing. “You make good points, but I can’t—”

“Y’all can write to each other, you can talk on the phone, right? He can visit you in California. Heck, maybe Billy will go to school out there. You never know.”

My throat tight, my heart aching and hoping and torn. Even so, my voice was scratchy as I choked out, “I’ll miss him so much.”

“And he’ll miss you. But, Scarlet, let me ask you this: if there was no Billy, what would you do? Would you go? Would you take the chance to escape? Have a home and a roof? Or would you stay?”

I released a watery sigh, not wanting to answer because I knew exactly what I’d do. *I would leave in a heartbeat.*

Cletus gave me a tight-lipped smile, his eyes moving between mine like he could read my thoughts. Maybe he did, because the next words out of his mouth were, “You and Carla will leave tomorrow morning. Best to leave from Knoxville. Honestly, it’d be even better if you left from Nashville. Maybe Billy and I could drive you over.” He seemed to study me for a minute before adding, “It would give you two more time together, time to talk.”

I blinked rapidly against the unshed tears. “Doesn’t Billy have work tomorrow?”

“He should call in sick. He never takes a sick day. And I’m sure he’d see driving you as something more important than work. He only went to that football game tonight because I wouldn’t let him chase after you. Plus, it was their qualifying game for the playoffs.”

Happy for the subject change so I could collect myself, I asked, “Was he expecting lots of college scouts?”

“I don’t know, I doubt that’s why he went. More like, he hates letting people down and his team was counting on him.”

I nodded, my heart giving a little twist.

I’d been acting like a fool, and yet I still didn’t want to go. I knew I should go, I knew it made the most sense, I knew Cletus was right—that

we'd be able to write to each other, and talk on the phone, and maybe he'd visit—but it wouldn't be the same.

"Are you okay, Scarlet? Do you need another shoulder pat?"

"No, Cletus. I'm good on shoulder pats for now. It's just, I hope I didn't add to Billy's worries."

"You did," Cletus said flatly. "Lay one of your kisses on him and I'm sure he'll forgive you."

I rolled my eyes and chuckled. At the same moment, the noise level of the party increased, sharpened, like someone had opened a door, allowing the music and friendly chatter out of the house. Both Cletus and I turned toward the sound, and I straightened away from the railing, my heart *thunk ka-thunk-ing*.

"Billy," I whispered, twisting my fingers.

He was looking at me, of that I was sure, but I couldn't make out his features very well. His back was to the light of the house. But goodness, even though I was happy he was here, my nerves were going haywire too.

But it was Ben's voice that said, "Scarlet," as he stepped away from Billy and walked toward us, his hands stuffed in his pockets. "You and Cletus snuck out. I didn't even see you leave."

"Oh. Hey, Ben." I gave his silhouette a small smile in greeting—wondering that I hadn't seen him before he spoke—but then immediately returned my attention to Billy's approaching form.

"You came," Cletus said to his brother. "How was the game?"

"Billy was great," Ben answered, standing in the spot next to me so that he was between me and the Winston boys. "Star of the game. Glad I left the team in such capable hands."

I looked at Cletus and then at Ben, unsure what to say. Ben had been standing on the sidelines during spin the bottle all night, saying he was there to keep an eye on me. Since he'd used his teasing smile, I assumed he was just teasing.

But now here he was. Again. His presence was beginning to feel oppressive.

Cletus ignored Ben and frowned at his brother. “You’re the last to arrive. Why’d it take you so long?”

“Sam needed to talk to me after the game.” Billy finally spoke, his cadence stunted and monotone, almost robotic, his attention affixed to his brother.

“Good. She’ll stop pestering me?”

“Yeah. I think so. Then—” he glanced at me, his blue gaze glinting in the moonlight “—I stopped by the campsite to find—uh, to look for y’all. It was empty, so I came here.”

I swallowed around something hard, I reckoned it was my heart. I needed to talk to him. I’d been an idiot to run away earlier. I’d promised myself, after going those three days avoiding Billy for no reason and causing myself a load of misery, I wouldn’t run and hide from him again. I’d promised myself I’d talk to Billy. What was the point of hindsight if I just kept making the same mistakes over and over?

“Wait, wait.” Cletus grabbed Billy’s arm. “Wait a minute, what do you mean there was no one there?”

“Just what I said. There was no one there.”

Ben took a side step closer to me, his arm brushing mine. “What campsite are y’all talking about?”

“Shit.” Cletus shoved his fingers into his crazy hair, his eyes dropping to the deck. “Shit.”

“What?” Billy glanced between me and Cletus. “What’s wrong?”

Cletus shook his head, clearly dismayed. “Carla was supposed to be there. She was supposed to stay put.”

“Do you think they have her?” I asked, breathless with terror.

Ben shifted even closer, his body pressing against my back and side. “What are y’all talking about? What’s wrong? Is Scarlet in danger?”

“I think she’s headed to the bus station. She had a little money, not a lot, but a little.” Now Cletus was rubbing his forehead. “I think she’s scared and is taking off, not waiting for us.”

“If they find her—” I started, my voice breaking, unable to finish the thought.

Billy’s eyes collided with mine, held, and I saw intention there, determination. *It could’ve been you*, he seemed to say. *This is why you have to leave.*

But then Ben stepped forward, breaking my line of sight and demanding, “Someone want to tell me what the heck is going on?”

* * *

Cletus, as always, had a plan.

The first thing he did was fill Ben in on a truncated version of the backstory. Then Ben was given his orders: find Jethro and make sure the Wraiths didn’t have Carla. I was impressed with Ben. He hadn’t hesitated when it was made clear how much danger Carla was in. He listened, and then did as he was told, no complaints or questions asked. Apparently, he thrived on taking orders.

The rest of us—Cletus, Billy, and I—drove in Billy’s truck to the Maryville bus station. It was the closest to Green Valley and the only one she’d be able to make it to on foot, but it was unlikely she’d made it yet. If the Wraiths didn’t have Carla, Ben would meet us at the station. We would wait in Maryville until she showed up and they’d then drive us back to the old Oliver homestead. We’d sleep at the campsite and then leave first thing in the morning for Nashville, with Billy driving.

If the Wraiths did have her, then Ben would call the police. He was the only one who could call it in and not be pulled into a lot of trouble, so it had to be him.

Armed with our plan and our parts to play, we disbanded, leaving Hank Weller in charge of the party. For some reason I couldn't quite put my finger on, I had complete faith that the kid could handle it.

The first part of the ride to Maryville station was spent in silence. It wasn't a long drive, twenty minutes down the mountain, but Cletus zonked out almost immediately in the cab seat behind us, leaving Billy and I alone with each other in the front.

Strangely, given all the upheaval of the day, my thoughts turned to the day prior, to sitting under the winter sky and singing with Billy while he played his guitar. I caught myself smiling at the memory, remembering his laugh and thinking about how harmonizing and singing duets was a little bit like kissing. It kinda snuck up on you, how good it felt. You couldn't do either very well or effectively without two people. And, now that I'd done both, I couldn't stop thinking about doing them again.

With Billy.

He'd been distant at the party, and I guess I understood why. He wanted me to leave. Now, after talking to Cletus, I wasn't sure what to do, whether to stay or go. But I was convinced if Billy and I just talked things through calmly, the right decision would reveal itself.

Glancing behind me at Cletus, I saw he had his head tipped back against the window and his eyes closed like he was asleep.

To be sure, I whispered, "Cletus?"

He made no sign he'd heard me.

My heart lodged in my throat—as it had been since this afternoon—I turned to Billy in the driver's seat. His eyes were on the road, one hand on the steering wheel, the other at his bottom lip. He was tugging it lightly with his thumb and forefinger.

He was so beautiful, inside and out. I knew why he wanted me to leave, I understood. I wasn't mad anymore and I wasn't hurt about it. Talking

things through with Cletus had helped, especially putting myself in Billy's shoes.

What if he'd been the one whose daddy cut on him? What if he submitted to it willingly? What if there was a way to save him, but it meant he had to leave? Wouldn't I want the same thing Billy wanted? Wouldn't I give him up to keep him safe? I would. I absolutely would.

And yet. . . I still couldn't imagine leaving. Nothing would be the same. *What if it ruins things between us?*

I told myself we'd be separated by geography, not by forever. We could write, talk on the phone—just like Cletus said—if Billy wanted. This was not the end if he didn't want it to be, but I wouldn't know what he wanted until we talked.

And so, my heart beating double time, I whispered, "Billy."

He blinked, shifted in his seat, but he didn't look at me. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry I ran away, before your football game. That was silly and selfish of me and I'm sorry."

He took a deep breath. "It's fine. I understand."

"Billy, we should talk." I took off my seatbelt. I wanted to touch him, be near him.

But when I did, he glanced over, frowning at my lack of safety restraint. "What are you doing?"

I ignored his frown, determined to sit closer since this might be one of our last times together for a while. If I went on that bus with Carla tomorrow, who knows when I'd see him next?

"I understand why you want me to go." I pressed my leg to his, tugging his arm away from the steering wheel so I could tuck myself under it. I felt his body stiffen when I rested my head on his chest. "I don't want to go. I want to stay with you."

"Scarlet—"

“No, listen. I want to stay with you, but Cletus and I talked, and—” I worked to get my racing heart under control “—I don’t want anything to change between us. I want things to be exactly the same. If I leave, then things will change. But, like I said, I understand why you want me to go. If the roles were reversed, I’d want you to go too.”

His arm behind my back, which had been inflexible at first, relaxed. The hand on my shoulder pulled me close, giving me a side hug.

“You’re thinking about going?” he asked, his voice hoarse. “I’m relieved.”

“And you probably already figured this out, but just because I’m in California doesn’t mean we can’t still know each other. I’m sorry it took me a while to calm down and realize that.” I lifted my chin, laughing lightly and pressing a kiss to his neck.

He instantly stiffened again. And then he removed his arm and leaned away, angling away from me. I frowned at his arm, confused.

“Scarlet, I . . .” He breathed out. “There’s something you need to know. But first, you should put your seatbelt back on.”

Dazed by his actions, feeling like he’d pushed me off a balance beam, I stared at him for a second, and then I moved back to my seat, reaching for and clicking the seatbelt into place.

As soon as I did, Billy said, “Sam is pregnant. I’m the father. We’re getting married.”

The car was traveling straight ahead, but it was like my center of gravity shifted to one side, everything moving at odd angles. I don’t know how long we sat there in silence, but it was longer than a second and shorter than a minute.

“I found out tonight,” he continued, sounding to my ears like he was underwater.

Or maybe I was.

“She stopped me after the game, she told me she’d found out over Thanksgiving. Her parents know and they said they’ll do whatever makes her happy.”

“And marrying you makes her happy,” I said without thinking, not recognizing the sound of my voice, the raw spite in it. Turning in my seat, I faced Billy and all his beauty. “What about you? What makes you happy?”

Billy blinked, like my words were a blow and he needed a moment to absorb them.

But I wasn’t finished. “Cletus told me you broke up with her. You. Broke. Up. You don’t marry someone you broke up with.”

“She’s pregnant.”

“Not everyone who makes a baby together gets married.”

“But I do.”

I snapped my mouth shut, crossing my arms and lowering my chin to my chest because suddenly it hurt so bad. I didn’t have a name for anything I was feeling but I knew I was going to cry. Not right now, but soon. I was going to cry buckets.

Build a wall, build a wall.

He breathed out; it sounded pained. And then he hit the steering wheel with his palms, cursing under his breath.

“I can’t be my father.” He spoke to the windshield, his voice unsteady, shaking his head. “I won’t be him.”

I laughed bitterly, again speaking before thinking, “Well, you are. Because your father married your mother when she got pregnant with Jethro, and clearly he didn’t love her either.”

Billy recoiled and then glanced over at me, and the look in his eyes felt like a punch in the stomach. He looked at me like I was a stranger.

I turned to the passenger door, immediately ashamed of myself. But I couldn’t apologize. The chaotic emotions I had no name for had

concentrated into a single sentiment. I decided I was angry. *So. Angry.* Because if I wasn't angry, I was going to be devastated.

I'd grown comfortable. I'd relaxed. I'd started dreaming. I'd breathed easier. I'd taken for granted that any part of my life could be wonderful. I was wrong.

So I decided to hate him. I hated him for making himself matter to me, for teaching me to dream, for making me want him and then taking himself away so abruptly. In that moment, I hated him more than I wanted him, more than I wanted to breathe or live, and so I clung to it, I buried myself in it. I dug my nails into my selfish defense. I had to.

It was the only thing keeping me from crying like an idiot and begging him to change his mind.

"Scarlet—"

"Don't talk to me."

I heard him breathe. I heard his hands squeeze and twist the leather of the steering wheel. I heard him shift in his seat.

"So, you're leaving?" he asked, his voice that monotone, robotic one from the party.

I rolled my lips between my teeth, refusing to answer, building my wall, brick by brick. I would pretend he didn't exist.

But how does one pretend the world doesn't exist?

This was the end of my world. The end of knowing Billy, kissing Billy, making Billy laugh, singing with Billy. This was the end because he'd made himself the center of it. How long had it taken? Seven days? A little less? A little more? How had he done it? I'd been so careful. I'd never accepted pity. I'd never asked for charity. Never. And the worst part was, I knew better!

I'd thought Carla was a fool for relying on Cletus, for trusting him with her secret, for expecting him to protect her, have *feelings* for her. But I'd been the fool.

This is why you don't pet strays. You don't teach them to expect gentleness. Getting their hopes up just ends up being an unkindness instead, in the end.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BILLY

“How many young men fear that there is a monster inside them? People are supposed to fear others, not themselves. People are supposed to aspire to become their fathers, not shudder at the thought.”

— VERONICA ROTH, ALLEGIANT

We arrived at the Maryville bus station just after midnight, and I parked on the street rather than in the lot. If the Wraiths arrived, I didn’t want to be trapped. Cletus’s soft snores and Scarlet’s enraged silence provided the soundtrack to the end of this horrifically shitty day. Cutting the engine, I reminded myself to breathe in and out, told my heart to keep beating.

Things can only improve from here.

Scarlet wasn’t the only person who counted on me, it would do me well to remember that. Momma, Cletus, Ashley, Beau and Duane, Roscoe, and now Sam and our child. This instinct to make Scarlet the center of my universe was as bewildering as it was powerful, and I had to fight against it.

My eyes moved to the right, to look at her. I’d resisted for almost an hour but in the end, I was helpless to stop myself, even though doing so sent a shock of agony through my body. Her back was to me, the side of her

head resting against the bench seat. Her arms were crossed over her stomach, not her chest. She seemed curled forward.

She was angry, and that was fine. It was good. I could bear her anger if it meant she'd leave Green Valley and never return. Or so I told myself.

It's not too late. Ask her to stay. Tell her you won't marry Sam, tell her you'll find another way.

I closed my eyes against the cowardly thought, breathing in slowly, or trying to. I couldn't seem to inhale deeply, there was something blocking and restricting my airflow.

"There's Ben," Cletus said, startling me out of my thoughts.

I turned and glanced at my brother behind us, finding his eyes on me and full of sympathy. *Shit.* He'd heard everything.

Facing out the windshield again, I watched Ben's truck approach, the only one on the road. Instead of parking on the street, he pulled into the parking lot. I heard Cletus mutter a curse, followed by, "George H. Croissantwich, what is wrong with that boy? Let me out and I'll tell him to move to the street."

"No. I'll do it," I said in a daze. "Cletus, come sit up here in the driver's seat, just in case we have company."

My movements sluggish, I opened my door and then the cab door behind it, not waiting for Cletus to switch seats before walking over to Ben. He'd also stepped out of his truck, but he hadn't turned off his engine.

"Billy," he called, making me wince.

I gave him a stern look, shaking my head, and then whispered as soon as I was close enough, "Did you find Jet?"

"Actually, he found me. And he had her." Ben motioned to his truck.

I leaned to the side, peering into the cab and spotting Carla curled up on the back seat.

I breathed out, relieved. "Good. That's good. Move your truck to the street so we can get her out and—"

“Let’s go,” Scarlet’s voice interrupted and a second later she walked past me, moving to the passenger side of Ben’s truck.

Ben glanced between me and her, his forehead wrinkling. “I thought—”

“You mind driving us to Knoxville, Ben? Tonight?” Scarlet’s eyes were on Ben. “I have money to pay for a hotel.”

I said, “No—”

While Ben said, “I don’t mind,” both of us speaking at the same time.

Still not looking at me, Scarlet opened the passenger door and hopped inside the truck. My feet were moving around the hood before I realized what I was doing, and I held the handle of her door, keeping her from closing it.

This can’t be it. This can’t be it. We have more time.

“You’re going tomorrow. Cletus and I will drive you.”

“I honestly don’t mind, Billy.” Ben had climbed back inside and shut his door, buckling his seatbelt like it was all decided. “I’ll take good care of them, I promise.”

Scarlet tugged on the door again, her eyes—no longer the color of stained glass or the sky, but now gray like sand and slate—staring unseeingly forward.

“Wait.” I gripped the handle tighter, unable to catch my breath, words tumbling out of me, “Please. Wait. Please.”

She looked at me then, her face stone, her gaze granite. “Let go.”

“Just wait a minute—”

“No.” Scarlet’s eyes turned glassy, and all I could think was that this couldn’t be it. This wasn’t how we ended. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be.

Before I could think of anything relevant to say or do—a bargain to strike, words that could force her to understand and not hate me—Scarlet gave her head a subtle shake, saying quietly, “Goodbye, Billy. Have a nice life.”

* * *

“You want to talk about anything, anything at all—” Cletus placed his hand on my shoulder, patting it “—I’m always here to listen to your woes.”

We were sitting in my truck outside our house. He’d driven us home. I didn’t remember any of it, only the anguish of watching Scarlet leave. I replayed it over and over in my mind. And then I’d hit rewind, reliving the entire day, looking for the moment I could learn from. There had to be a lesson here, something actionable . . .

Don’t have sex until you’re married.

I breathed out a humorless laugh, my eyes stinging. And then I laughed harder.

“Didn’t you use a condom?” Cletus asked, suddenly seeming agitated.

“I did. Every time.”

“Hmm,” he said, sounding even more agitated. “She wasn’t on the pill?”

I shook my head. “Her parents didn’t want her on the pill, told her they thought it encouraged premarital sex.” I paused, thinking about what I’d just said, and then started laughing again.

Cletus made a sound, like a grumble. “I think you’re in shock.”

“I’m in something,” I said, still shaking my head. *I’m in hell.*

Removing his hand from my shoulder, my brother pulled the keys from the ignition and opened his door. “Come on. Let’s go inside. I need to let Lea out. You ever been drunk before? Want to do that?”

Breathing in as deeply as my lungs would allow, I opened my door, stumbling out slowly while Cletus jogged up the front steps to the house. He held the screen ajar as he unlocked the front door, his dog bursting out of the house like a rocket.

As always, she came to me first, licking my hand, tail slowing to a subdued wag.

I looked at her, suddenly irritated. She thought I was the alpha? She was wrong. I wasn't shit.

"What the fuck?" Cletus strode to the end of the porch, his steps rapid-fire, the sound reaching through my self-recrimination and making me aware of a different noise.

Motorcycles.

Now alert, I spun just as four motorcycles pulled into our driveway, and behind them was a truck.

"What do we do?" Cletus asked, clearly spooked.

"Go inside," I commanded, closing my truck door and positioning myself between the motorcycles and the front steps. "Go inside, Cletus."

"No way. I'm not leaving you out here—"

"Well, well, well. Look who it is. The QB." Gears was the first to speak as he wore no helmet. "Great game you played tonight, son. I enjoyed it."

"I did too." Darrell slid out of the truck. He was grinning at me. "You're a hell of a ball player, son. It's a pleasure to watch."

"What do you want?" Cletus asked from his spot on the porch and it took everything inside me not to turn around and scream at my brother to go inside. It wouldn't do any good. He wouldn't listen, he was as stubborn as—

As Scarlet.

"Right to the point, huh?" Raymond King stepped off his bike, motioning with his head toward the house. "Good. Let's get this over with."

"No one else is here, it's just us," I said, my voice low and firm. I didn't want them trashing the house, my momma didn't need to come home to that.

"I believe you." Darrell strolled slowly forward as four of his brothers walked past me and to the stairs. "Get a hold of that one," our father said, lifting his chin toward Cletus. "He's going to be a problem, his temper is worse than mine."

I turned, a new spike of adrenaline pumping through me as I watched the four men surround and then restrain my brother—a boy—before he had time to react.

Facing Darrell again, I inhaled deeply without issue; fear must've cleared my lungs. "What's all this about?"

"You know what it's about." My father was still grinning, the other two men from the truck coming to stand at his shoulders. "But if you need me to spell it out, it's spelled, C-A-R-L-A and S-C-A-R-L-E-T. Ring any bells?"

"Billy, what does that spell?" Cletus asked, sounding as though he truly didn't know. He used to do this to our father often, pretend to be stupid just to piss him off.

Darrell ignored Cletus, his flinty eyes coming to me. "We know you were in Maryville, dropping them off to Ben McClure. We know he left with both of the girls in his truck. We know you helped them. And now they're going to pay, and so are you."

"You won't find her." I shook my head, denying his claims, because I had to. Fear like I'd never experienced tore at the seams of me, my brain, making it impossible to comprehend this reality.

He's lying. He doesn't know. He's bluffing. He doesn't have her.

"Oh yeah? Because we know where she is right now."

"You don't," I continued to deny, needing my version of the situation to be true.

"We do. She's still with Ben McClure at a little hotel in Knoxville." My father waited until my expression changed—and it did—because he was telling the truth. He knew where she was. "See, we all got cell phones now. You should look into it, they'd help keep everyone connected."

As though to prove the truth of his words, Darrell withdrew a black flip phone from his back pocket, showing it to me.

God. God. Please. Please.

“What do you want? What’ll it take to let her go?” I said and thought, reaching, hoping there was something.

“Now that’s a tricky question.” Darrell rubbed his chin, eyeing me. “Why don’t you tell me what you’re offering, and we’ll start from there.”

I looked between Darrell’s easy smile in front of me and Raymond King’s sinister one behind me before offering the entirety of my saving’s account. “How about five thousand dollars.”

Darrell’s grin grew, like I was funny. “Five thousand? That’s it? That’s all those girls mean to you? You’ve already gone through a lot of trouble for them.”

“It’s all I got,” I said honestly, refusing to feel ashamed of the offer.

My father chuckled, shaking his head. “Well, it’s something. We’ll take it, but we’re gunna need something else. Betrayal ain’t in our vocabulary and those girls betrayed us, they betrayed their kin. You know something about that, don’t you?”

I shook my head, wanting to raise my voice and scream at him, wanting to tell him that he’d been the one to betray *us*. But that’s what he wanted. He wanted me to lose my temper so I’d blame myself when they did take Scarlet, when they messed her up, he’d then say her pain was my fault because I couldn’t control my temper.

And I’d believe him.

So instead, I kept my voice carefully quiet. “You’ve always hated me.”

“No. Not always, son.” He shook his head, giving me a put-on sad look. “And I do love you, so much—the obedient part, if there’s any of that left. No son, I love you. You and me, we’ve been square for a while now. But Scarlet? Carla? They got a debt, and it’s a big one.” He whistled low, shaking his head and smiling again. “Unless, that is, someone else wants to take on the punishment in their stead, someone stronger.” His gaze flickered over me. “Someone who might survive it.”

Take on the punishment in their stead.

I swallowed, this time against the sick rising in my throat, because I knew what he wanted and what I had to do.

“Leave her be and do whatever you want to me. I won’t tell anyone and I won’t press charges. That’s what I’m offering.”

“And your five thousand dollars?” the man at my father’s right side asked. “Don’t forget about that.”

I nodded but didn’t trust myself to speak.

My father stared at me, his grin growing smaller, more thoughtful. And then he abruptly straightened, his eyes focusing in a new way, like he was seeing me for the first time. “You love Scarlet, son?”

I licked my dry lips, but I said nothing.

He gave me a small, sympathetic smile. “You shouldn’t. That girl’s got no loyalty, she’s got no fight unless it’s looking after herself. She ain’t worthy of you.”

“Do we have a deal?” I pushed, not wanting him to talk about her, not wanting him to ever say her name.

Darrell cocked his head to the side, continuing to study me. “What if she comes back here?”

“She won’t.”

“If she ever shows up back at the Dragon, she’s staying. She won’t be punished—if you’re taking on her atonement—but she ain’t leaving again either.”

“She won’t come back to Green Valley. She’s gone for good.” *She’ll never be back. I’ll never see her again.*

Darrell nodded thoughtfully, his expression introspective. “Whatever I want?”

“That goes for me too.” Cletus interrupted, crossing his arms.

Goddammit! “Shut it, Cletus,” I said between gritted teeth, and then to the Wraiths who were holding him, “Get him inside.”

“No way. You’re not doing this on your own.” Cletus took another half step forward, straining against the hold Gears and Raymond had on him. “Do whatever you want, take whatever you want. I’m making a deal for Carla, same as Billy’s.”

My father’s blue gaze slid to my brother and darkened. Even in my panicked state I saw a shift in his expression, an intensity of dislike he reserved for Cletus. Only for Cletus.

“You want to be a hero, Cletus? Just like Billy? He your role model?”

Cletus, looking thoughtful and not an ounce afraid, scratched his jaw as best he could given the fact his arms were being held. “No, Darrell. You are my role model, obviously. It has always been my sincerest desire to be an aging impotent biker with dysentery and the laughingstock of East Tennessee. Teach me your ways, Diseased-Wang Kenobi. You’re my only hope.”

I closed my eyes briefly, my lungs on fire with dread, unable to wrestle my frustration and despair. Cletus was so smart, *so fucking smart*, and yet so astonishingly stupid. This wasn’t poking a hornet’s nest, this was trying to have anal sex with a rabid raccoon.

When I opened my eyes, I sent my brother a warning look, pleading with him to say nothing else. He didn’t see me. He was too busy locking eyes with our father, a mild smile of satisfaction giving his mouth the slightest curve. I struggled to stay focused on the next minute, and the one after that, and the one after that. No matter what, I’d get through this, and Scarlet would be safe, and my family would be safe . . . *as long as Cletus keeps his mouth shut*.

Darrell’s eyes had narrowed, shone bright with malice, and his smile had worn thin. The way my father was looking at my brother, it was a good thing none of his men had laughed at Cletus’s words. If they had, I was pretty sure they would’ve never found Cletus’s body.

Taking a deep breath, Darrell shook his head. “No deal, Cletus.”

“What was that?” Cletus turned his head slightly, like he hadn’t heard our father.

“No deal. What I’m looking for is an even trade. And beating on a simpleton”—Darrell shrugged—“Well, where’s the sport in that?”

“Then what do you want, Darrell?” Grit entered my brother’s voice, frustration. “You always want something.”

Our father stroked his chin, his insidious stare moving over my brother and then stopping, seeming to snag on the animal at Cletus’s feet.

“Whose dog is that?” Darrell lifted a finger, pointing at Lea.

Cletus became very still, saying nothing.

Darrell turned to me. “Whose dog is that?”

Cletus’s gaze shifted to me, pleading, finally a spark of fear.

I said nothing.

“Billy, you tell me whose dog that is, or the deal is off, and I know Razor has been itching to make his mark on Scarlet’s pretty face, so—”

“Lea is Cletus’s dog,” I blurted, and immediately felt like a traitor and a coward, the force of my betrayal knocking the wind from my lungs.

A flash of confusion ignited behind Cletus’s eyes, like he couldn’t believe what I’d said or that I’d said it, but before he could speak, our father strolled forward. “Gears, give me that dog.”

“Wait, wait, what’re you doing?” Finally, real fear entered Cletus’s voice.

“Now, now, Cletus. You said whatever we want.” Darrell grinned at my brother, his eyes alight with sinister delight as he walked past me, leading Cletus’s dog to the truck. “Get in, girl. Come on now, Lea,” he said, coaxing the animal. “You’re gunna die today.”

I stared at my brother, willing him to look at me and not Darrell, not at Lea. He was breathing hard, his eyes crazy as I’d ever seen them, glazed over with something more than rage. Clearly lost to madness, he took a step forward but was held back by the Wraiths.

“Deals a deal, boy.” Raymond yanked him back. “You want that traitor Carla safe from what she deserves? We get the dog.”

Finally, *finally*, Cletus’s gaze found mine, pleading with me to help, to *do* something. But then, abruptly, it sobered, as though the full weight of what was happening *finally* registered.

“What are you going to do to Billy?” Cletus’s voice was choked, full of fear. *Finally*. “What are you going to do to my brother? You better not—”

“That’s none of your concern, boy.” Darrell laughed gleefully, placing his hand on my shoulder, his grip painful. I kept my jaw tight, determined to make no sound. I would make no sound. I would take it gladly, all of it, if it meant Scarlet was safe.

Think of Scarlet.

“Your deal’s been struck, sweet, stupid, simple Cletus,” Darrell mocked, his tone now menacing as he shoved me toward the truck. “And so has Billy’s.”

EPILOGUE

BILLY: *WEEKS LATER*

“Hide them all, then. Keep her – them – safe. Please.’

‘And what will you give me in return, Severus?’

‘In – in return? Anything.’”

— J.K. ROWLING, HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS

“**Y**ou want more to drink?” I felt my sister’s fingers lightly thread into my hair, brushing at it so very, very gently, a whisper of a touch. “Doctor said they’re moving you to a regular room today. So that’s good.”

I shook my head as much as I was able, my gaze lifting to hers. I wanted to give her a smile, but my jaw was wired shut.

They’d broken it first thing, but then Darrell had stopped the guy who’d done it, saying, “Not the face. I like his face. I like that it looks just like mine. Don’t touch it.”

“Sheriff James was here, when you were asleep.” My sister’s voice was carefully light. “I told him you still couldn’t answer any questions. He said they’d stop by once you get your jaw unwired or you can use your—” She cleared her throat, like there was something big and heavy in it. “Your hand again.”

I watched her face as she said this. Even with all the pain drugs they had me on, I didn't miss how watery her voice was or how her chin had wobbled.

But then she sniffed, quickly dabbed at her nose with a tissue, and cleared her throat again. "Anyway. Your coach also came by with a few of your teammates. They left you a card; I thought that was nice. Also, Dolly Payton." Ashley smiled at me, like she had some good news to share. "Turns out they were just about to promote you before . . . things. When you're all healed up, you're moving up to shift supervisor. She was just waiting until you turned seventeen. I thought you'd like that, youngest manager at the mill."

I tried to convey gratitude with my eyes. Ashley had been here with me every day. Seeing her had been the highlight of my day. She liked to ask the nurses questions, helped them whenever they'd let her with my care, and hadn't shied away from any of my breaks and bruises. I was impressed.

But then, I shouldn't have been. *Thank God for Ashley.*

"Ashley," a voice said from somewhere near the door, someone I couldn't see. "He's got a visitor. Says her name is Samantha Cooper."

Sam. She'd come by a few times. Or maybe just once. I couldn't quite remember. But she'd been soft-spoken, her eyes concerned, sweet. She'd been kind, reading messages to me from kids at our school who hoped I got better soon. She'd sat with me for a long time. I remember that.

"Oh! Sam is his girlfriend." Ashley turned to me, a question in her eyes. "Do you want me to . . .?"

I nodded—best as I could—and she smiled warmly. "I'll give y'all a half hour, okay? Don't let her wear you out."

Placing a gentle kiss on my forehead, one I didn't quite feel, Ashley left. I closed my eyes. Immediately, as soon as I did so, I was back in that room in the Dragon. I squeezed my eyes tighter.

Prince King's face in mine, smiling. He'd been one of the ones to hold me down when Razor carved into my shoulder with a big knife he'd kept in a cabinet full of blades. Prince kept saying, "You want to cry? You gunna cry?"

I didn't.

As far as I remember, I didn't make a single sound. I thought of Scarlet and all those lines on her back, the fresh slashes marring her spine. Scarlet had borne it and so could I.

Think of Scarlet.

The memories came and went, didn't matter if I was awake or asleep. I remember them killing Lea. I remember them beating me, breaking my legs, I remember Razor and his knife. I passed out, I think, after that. And then I was here.

I didn't fight against the memories or hide from them. I'd done what I had to do, and that was that. Maybe I'd feel differently once these meds wore off and I actually felt something. I hoped not, but if I did, I'd deal with it.

When I opened my eyes, Sam was there, looking down at me. But her eyes weren't soft and concerned like they'd been before. They were red, sad. She'd been crying.

"Billy," she said, biting her bottom lip. "I came as soon as I could."

She came as soon as she could? What day was it? Was this a memory? Something that already happened?

A sound of a chair scraping against the floor had my eyes focusing. Sam was still there, and she looked so sad.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Billy. The reason I haven't been here is because I lost the baby." Her head dropped to her hands. She held a tissue in them, or a few tissues, and she cried openly. "I wanted you to know as soon as possible. I just—I just wish you were well. I hate so much what

happened to you, I think I made myself sick. I shouldn't have let that happen. It's my fault."

I tried to shake my head, a spike of frustration cutting through the fog. I remembered this from the last time my father sent me to the hospital, the frustration of helplessness, how my body failed me. *The baby . . .*

My momma had made a similar bargain when I'd been twelve: you and your Wraiths stay away from my kids, and I won't press charges. He'd kept his promise for years. Until just now. *The baby.*

Suddenly, it was night and my first thoughts were of Sam and the baby, her sad eyes. I looked for her, she wasn't there, but my mother was. She was asleep in the hospital cot.

My mother.

She was terrified. Furious and frantic, and she slept here every night as far as I could tell. I swallowed, or tried to, and my eyes drifted shut.

I had a dream Ben McClure came, stood over me with sympathetic eyes. "I misjudged you, Billy," he said. "I'm sorry. I've been blind, about a lot of things. You'll be in our prayers."

What about Scarlet? I wanted to ask. *Where is she?*

"He'll feel better, recuperate faster once we unwire his jaw. Folks really start to improve when they can eat. You'll be surprised by the difference," a woman said.

I was asleep again. Or, I had been asleep. *Was Ben here?*

The woman's voice was one I didn't recognize but that sounded familiar.

"And you're doing that tomorrow?" This question was my sister, I recognized her voice, so steady. "What do we need to do to prepare? Will he be sore? Should we make him eat anyway if he's sore?"

The baby. Sam lost the baby, I reminded myself. I found I was still drifting, so I thought of Scarlet shutting that truck door in my face and driving away, of never seeing her again, and I used that hurt to stay awake.

It was the only thing that made me feel anything but fuzzy. I focused on it, a wave of mournfulness rising up, helping me open my eyes.

The other woman was speaking. She said something about me being stable, out of the woods, I'd be in a lot of pain when they decreased my meds. I couldn't keep my eyes open. I fell asleep again, not hearing it all.

And then, I was awake and in pain. Everywhere.

My eyes shot open and I looked around. God, it hurt. It hurt. I clamped my jaw against it and that was a mistake. A crippling bolt of pain shot up both sides of my face, almost making me pass out.

"No. No. Relax. Check his heart." A nurse was over me, his big brown eyes staring into mine. "Billy? Hey there. Don't bite down, relax if you can. Okay, okay. We'll increase your meds, okay? We wanted to see how much you needed. It'll all be fine. You've been on a lot and it's not good for you. But it's okay now, we found your threshold. Go back to sleep."

Go back to sleep? Was he fucking kidding me? Short of passing out from the agony—seemingly everywhere in my body—there was no way I was going to be sleeping anytime soon.

I did the only thing I could to communicate the extreme nature of my frustration. I glared.

He flinched back, saying, "Yikes," under his breath.

A woman took his place and she placed her cool palm on my cheek, her gaze steady. "Billy, I'm Dr. Williams. I'm in charge of your case now that you're out of the ICU. We have to decrease your pain meds. *Someone* did it too fast, and now here we are. You've been on a large dose for a long time. They shouldn't have been stopped, but we can only taper them so slowly from here on out. We're still going to give you some, but you're probably going to feel like shit for a few days. It's going to hurt really bad for another twenty minutes. Do you think you can handle twenty minutes?"

I nodded, best I could, appreciating her straightforward approach.

I closed my eyes. I breathed in. I breathed out.

I could do this.

Think of Scarlet.

I thought of Scarlet and her smile and my heart slowed.

I thought of Scarlet and her voice and I let the pain go.

I thought of Scarlet and her jokes and her laughter and her spirit.

I thought of Scarlet.

* * *

Months Later

“Billy.”

I blinked, pulling my eyes from the parking lot beyond the window and to the door of my room. I blinked again.

“Jet,” I said, my voice monotone, not really surprised by the absence of response within me.

The shrink they had me seeing told me I was in shock, even now, all these months after. Cletus also saw the same doctor, just a few times; my brother said the shrink had told him the same thing; apparently, we were both in shock.

Whatever.

I didn’t care about the why or the reason for this perpetual calm, I was grateful for it.

Jethro seemed surprised by—or maybe distrustful of—my lack of emotion. He also seemed reluctant to say anything, so we just looked at each other. He wasn’t wearing his MC jacket and his hair was combed. He wore a long-sleeved button-down shirt tucked into jeans. And a belt.

Half in, half out of my rehab room, he finally spoke. “I was in the area.”

I turned back to the window. He must’ve been warm. The weather had been hot this week.

“Ash and Beau say you’re making good progress, healing up fine.”

My fingers twitched at the mention of my siblings. I didn’t like the idea of Jethro thinking he could talk to Ashley or Beau. A burr of discomfort settled between my shoulder blades.

“When did you talk to Ash and Beau?”

“You’re leaving soon?” he asked, ignoring my question.

Taking a deep breath, I flexed my fingers. I was going home today, as a matter of fact, but it wasn’t something I wished to discuss with Jethro. I couldn’t think of a single thing I wanted to discuss with Jethro. Ever.

I heard the door click shut followed by footsteps on the linoleum floor. He’d decided to cross the threshold. My hand curled into a fist. They hadn’t broken all the fingers in my hands, just a few. Those were the bones that healed first, all the others had taken longer.

“Billy, what happened? No one is talking at the club. Why were you there? Why’d they beat you up?”

Licking my lips, because they were dry, I felt something. A little something. I shied away from it.

Think of Scarlet.

I’d known all along she wasn’t mine to keep. There was no way she could’ve stayed in Green Valley, in the short or the long term. She had to leave, otherwise she would’ve been within Razor’s reach and he would’ve ruined everything that made her beautiful. He would’ve broken her spirit.

Once they discharged me, and as soon as I got home today, I knew exactly what I was going to do. I would put Scarlet’s haikus in Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*, the book Dolly Payton had bought me, where I kept that little flower she’d placed on the plate last winter. A primrose. I’d pressed it between the pages.

I wanted to keep it all safe, my mementos of her, somewhere no one would ever look.

The other thing I wanted to do was find her music notebook. And then I'd find Ben McClure. I'd question him and discover where she was so I could send it to her. Not knowing where she was, or if she was for sure safe, had been a daily strain on my mind. Cletus had informed me while I'd been in the hospital that she hadn't gone with Carla to California. My brother had also said that he'd tried to talk to Ben about Scarlet, but Ben wouldn't tell him anything.

She should have her notebook. I'd write her a letter and I'd tell her . . . *I have no idea what to tell her.*

Would I tell her Sam lost the baby last winter? That Sam and I weren't getting married? Would it matter? Did it matter that I mourned the loss of my child even as I rejoiced at being free, not having to marry the baby's mother? And how was that possible? To mourn and rejoice?

But I'm not free. I was a tangle of too many things. I couldn't find the beginning or the end.

"Are you going to say anything?"

I worked to unclench my fists and found I couldn't. "What do you want, Jet?"

He laughed, like I frustrated him. "I want to know what happened."

"Why?"

"Are you serious? You almost died. I'd like to know why they—"

"Why?" I turned to my brother, facing him, looking for some clue because I was honestly curious what the hell difference it made to him. "Is there ever a good reason to almost kill someone? Revenge maybe? You people deal in revenge, right? If I told you *your brothers* almost killed me to get revenge, would that make a difference? Would that set your mind at ease?"

I watched him gulp, frown, saying nothing.

"You know how it is, Jet. You're one of them. They're your family now."

Jethro cringed, his gaze dropping like mine was too heavy to hold. “I just want to know what happened.”

“I betrayed them,” I said, unable to look away from his face, enjoying his tortured reaction for some bizarre reason, deriving an unhealthy amount of satisfaction from the streaks of anguish painting his cheeks pale. “So I guess I deserved it, right?”

My older brother closed his eyes, his hands coming to his hips. “If I’d been there, I would’ve stopped it.”

I snorted. “No, you wouldn’t.”

His glare cut to mine. “You *know* I would’ve. I wouldn’t have let them touch you.”

I laughed. And then I laughed harder, pushing myself up from my chair even though the action still hurt something fierce. I could walk, but my bones and my muscles felt rickety, unsteady, like they wanted to pull apart from each other instead of work together. I laughed through the pain.

“Billy—”

“I know no such thing.” I wiped at my eyes, still chuckling, walking over to the table where a pitcher of water had been set. My clothes were all too big for me, hanging on my shoulders, belted at my hips. I was skin and newly mended bones, someone else, someone both old and new.

“You are my *brother*,” he said, his voice full of gravel, but also a noteworthy amount of passion. I almost believed he meant it. And yet, I didn’t care what he believed.

“No. I haven’t been your brother for a very long time.”

“Would you—”

“You’ve chosen who’s important to you through your actions, Jet. It’s on your face, it’s the words you speak, to me and to . . .” I scratched my forehead, the words catching. “Forget it. It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.”

“You’ve chosen your side.” Shaking my head, I poured myself a glass of water, watching my body complete the action. It had taken me four months before I could hold a full pitcher of water and longer still before I’d been able to hold it steady enough to pour.

This is what his brothers had done, these were the people he’d chosen. *Fuck that. Fuck him. Fuck them all.*

“What can I do?” Jethro pleaded. “If I’d been there, I would’ve stopped them. I would have.”

“Just like you stopped Darrell? When we were kids?” I set down the pitcher, my hands balling into fists again. I was certainly feeling something now, a crack had formed in my calm, a deep slash, much deeper than the cuts Razor had carved into my left shoulder. I blurted and felt in tandem, “You disgust me.”

Jethro huffed, and though my back was to him, I knew he was rolling his eyes. “Here we go.”

“You want to be just like our father?” I faced him, my legs protesting. “Guess what, you’re just the same. Don’t they call you Romeo Jr. at the club?”

Jethro’s jaw clamped shut, he spoke through gritted teeth. “I never raised a hand to a woman, and I never would.”

“Yeah, you say that, but you didn’t raise a hand to defend our mother, did you?”

“There were other ways of getting Darrell to stop, Billy!” he shouted, words I’d heard many times growing up. “There’s other ways, not just fighting.”

“You mean distracting.” I snorted again, and my disgust bloomed, thrived, flourished, breaking through my calm so completely, the intensity of it stole my breath.

I hate him. I hate him so much.

"Yes, I mean distracting him." Jet took a half step forward, his frown severe. "It worked growing up and it would still be working now if you didn't—"

"If I didn't get in the way of Darrell's fist? But someone had to do it. You being charming didn't always work, Jet. Yeah, sometimes you could get in his way with words, but you know as well as I do, it didn't always work."

"But it worked most of the time, and it kept y'all safe, didn't it?" His voice rose again, and his frustration was a varnish, coating his words. "Darrell didn't put a hand on you or Cletus or Duane until you decided to provoke him."

"You know how fucked up you sound right now? Someone had to protect our mother!"

"You were *twelve*, Billy. That someone wasn't you!"

"Well, it obviously wasn't you either."

"Don't you get it?" He charged forward, his eyes frantic, seeming desperate. "She asked me to protect you! To keep y'all safe. And I did. I kept you safe. I was the one keeping him out of the house, I was the one standing between you and him, Cletus and him, Duane and him, all the time. I used to stay up late at night and make sure—when he got home—he was either sober and in a good mood, or too drunk to beat on anyone. I was so *careful*. And you go and ruin everything."

I shook my head, grinding my teeth, causing a shooting pain to travel up the side of my face. I'd heard all this before. Nothing had changed. He didn't see, he would never see.

"Why do you think he's stayed gone all these years?" Jethro asked. It sounded like an accusation. "You think he would've stayed gone if I hadn't been there with him?"

I grew very still, simmering fury pushing disgust to the side. "We both know why Darrell hasn't come back. Momma would've had him arrested."

Now Jet laughed. “Yeah. Maybe your stunt is why he left originally. But do you really think he would’ve left you and Momma and everyone else in peace if I hadn’t been a recruit?”

“Bullshit.”

“No. Not bullshit.”

“Leave.” I was tired of him and his visit and the stories he told himself so he could sleep at night and his guilt, if he was capable of feeling any.

“You need to listen—”

“Why? What the fuck do you want from me?” I worked to control my rage and cursed my weak body, promising myself that I’d never be weak again. Promising myself I’d never be at the mercy of anyone ever again, least of all Jethro and our father.

He breathed out, his eyes moving between mine, his eyebrows pulled tightly together. “I want us to be brothers again,” he said, his voice raw with hope. “I want to come home. I want to know Roscoe. He barely knows who I am.”

Like. Hell.

Roscoe was the baby. He was my little buddy. He’d grown up in a house mostly free of Jethro and Darrell and neither of them would have influence over him. *Over my dead body or theirs.*

I said nothing because I couldn’t, I was so angry. I just stared at my brother while he searched my face. If he was looking for something to give him a glimmer of hope, he’d be disappointed.

“Billy. Please.”

“Never,” I said, shaking my head, using the pain in my legs and back and arms to fuel my wrath and my determination. “It’s never going to happen. You are *never* welcome. Never.”

“What if—”

“No, Jet. It doesn’t work like this. You don’t get to change your mind whenever the fuck you want. You don’t get to choose your *friend* and MC

brothers over your own family, time and time again. No.” I shook my head, whispering now so he’d really listen. “You’re dead to me. You are not my brother. And you need to leave. Now.”

* * *

More Months Later

“Do you think you’ll play football this year?” Roscoe’s eyes moved over my body. “You’re smaller than you were last year, but that just means you’ll be faster too. Maybe you could be a receiver instead of a quarterback.”

I lifted an eyebrow at my little brother. “I think my football days are behind me.”

“Then why’re you working out so much? And can I eat that?” Roscoe pointed to a piece of bacon on my plate. “I’m so hungry.”

“Sure. Go for it.” I pushed my plate over. He snatched it off and stuffed the whole thing in his mouth.

“Hey. Can I have the other piece?” This question came from Duane, who was sitting at the far end of the kitchen table, frowning at me and Roscoe.

I scowled. “No, you may not. You already had seven.”

Duane also scowled, moving to stand.

“And clear your plate. We’re not your maids,” I added, squinting at his bad attitude. Something had to be done about that. Things were getting worse with him.

“I was going to, sheesh.” The surly twin rolled his eyes, grabbing his empty (and scraped clean) plate and walking it to the sink.

“I have to go,” Roscoe said around a mouthful of bacon, checking his watch before picking up his plate and taking it to the sink.

“Meeting Simone?” I picked up my toast to butter it.

“Yeah. With school starting next week, I think she’s trying to get through her summer list.” Roscoe walked back to me, placing his arm along my shoulders and giving my cheek a kiss. “I’ll take my bike. Is that okay?”

I nodded. “If you hear a motorcycle, pull into the woods.”

“I know.” He smiled, his teeth too big for his face. This kid was the cutest.

“Summer list?” Duane asked, walking over to stand nearby.

“Mr. Payton was supposed to pick us up some owl pellets to dissect.” Roscoe’s arm slid from my back and he sighed, like he felt the burden of his nine years and it was a heavy one. “But now she’s saying she wants to cut open a frog too. I’m basically going over there to save Simone from her murderous impulses.”

Duane’s mouth hooked up, and he tracked our youngest brother as he ran from the room. I also watched Roscoe go, wondering if I’d ever been so young. Had I ever run everywhere like my littlest brother? Like I couldn’t wait to see what would happen next?

I didn’t think so.

“Billy.”

I glanced at Duane and found the entirety of his surly attention pointed at my face.

“Yeah?”

He chewed on his bottom lip, his eyes narrowing. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure. Take a seat.”

He did, and I shifted my plate closer to me, just in case he still had designs on my bacon.

“It’s about, uh . . .” Duane scratched his neck. “It’s about this girl.” My brother’s voice cracked on the word *girl* just as I was lifting the buttered toast to my mouth. It was a good thing I hadn’t taken a bite, otherwise I would’ve choked.

“Oh?” I said when I’d recovered, careful to sound as disinterested as possible. Once you showed interest in Duane or curiosity beyond his level of comfort, he closed up tighter than a safety deposit box. *Sorta like Scarlet.*

My eyes dropped to my plate. Months ago, as soon as I could, I’d sought out Ben McClure and asked about Scarlet. We’d both been at church the week after I was released from the rehab facility. Surprisingly, he’d been more receptive to me than Cletus, giving me a genuine smile, which I hadn’t expected.

He’d said, “I’ll tell you the same thing I told your brother. Scarlet came with me to Nashville. Carla got on the bus for California, Scarlet did not. Scarlet is gone. But I know for a fact she’s safe. I haven’t talked to *Scarlet* in months. But don’t worry, she is safe. I saw to that.” But then he added, “If Cletus cared about Scarlet, he’d let her go. He’d let her move on to something better, to be a better version of herself.”

Before I could question him further or suss out his words—which sounded like a riddle—we were surrounded by well-meaning well-wishers. Everybody was wanting either his attention or mine. Since then, I hadn’t seen Ben at church. When I asked after him, his parents said he’d joined the Army and wouldn’t be back for months.

“How do you talk to girls?” Duane sounded frustrated.

“Well, your sister is a girl. Maybe you should ask her.”

He huffed. “You know what I mean. Ash is *Ash*. She’s a big softy. Even when we torture her, she always forgives us. But this girl . . .” He frowned so hard, two lines appeared between his eyebrows. “I can’t stand her.”

“Then don’t talk to her.”

“No, I mean, she makes me crazy. I think about her all the time. She doesn’t take any of my shit. You know?”

Do not smile, do not smile. “I reckon I have some idea.”

He huffed again, gripping the edge of the table, his knuckles turning white. “She hates my guts and won’t even talk to me. I want to stop

thinking about her. What can I do?”

Looking at my brother’s young but tormented features, I stalled by taking that bite of toast. I chewed. I swallowed. Then I washed it down with juice.

He stared at me the whole time, his eyes big and watchful, like he expected the next words out of my mouth to hold the key to his salvation. But I didn’t know what to say. I had no clue.

“Maybe—” I took a deep breath, trying to come up with something I would’ve wanted to hear back in January when I’d woken up, and the torment of my heart had numbed the pain in my body. “Maybe you could say sorry.”

“I tried that. She won’t listen to me.”

“You said she hates your guts? Are you sure?”

“One hundred percent,” he said, slumping forward a little. “And every time I try to talk to her, I mess it up. Say something stupid and mean. Why do I do that?”

“Hmm.” I knew what that was like. “It’s an inconvenient truth not frequently acknowledged, Duane. Boys, men, don’t generally like feeling out of control. They don’t embrace it the same way girls and women do—generally. That’s why you’re saying the mean things. She makes you feel crazy, uncertain, and it’s scary.”

“I’m not scared.” He glared at me. “I’m just—”

“Scared,” I supplied, taking another bite of my toast.

“I’m not scared of anything,” he said again, but this time mostly to himself. His eyes fell to the table and he picked at a dried piece of candle wax, scraping at it with his thumb. “I just wish I didn’t think about her so much.”

He has no idea.

My days and nights had been spent absorbed in thoughts of Scarlet since . . . well, since I first heard her sing, I reckoned. Granted, the direction

of my thoughts had taken a winding road, but looking back, it seemed inevitable that I'd end up here, loving her.

I loved her and she was gone.

Keeping busy helped distract me, working on my health, getting stronger, catching up with schoolwork. I'd been able to complete a lot of small projects around the house, read a lot of books.

But at night, when it was dark and quiet, I'd find myself staring at the bed where she'd slept. Her pajamas sat in the same spot she left them at the foot of the mattress, and I ached.

I glanced at my little brother. "Hey, Duane."

"Yeah?"

"You want to build a cabin with me?"

"What?"

"A cabin."

"Is this your way of trying to get me to help you fix up the carriage house?" He narrowed his eyes, turning his head slightly, like he found my answer suspect. *Scarlet did that too, that look.*

I needed to look away briefly. "No. This would be something new."

Now he looked confused. "Then why don't we fix up the carriage house? Building something new when we already have one on the property seems wasteful."

"Because I want to build it in the woods."

She wasn't coming back. I needed to move on, but I couldn't, not with the ghost of Scarlet everywhere I looked. The need to contain my longing for her had been nagging at me, and I'd already made up my mind to switch rooms with my brothers. But I also thought perhaps, if I built a space where I could remember her, a place I could go when I needed to feel close to her, I'd be able to exorcise the worst of it. I'd find some peace.

"You want to build it in the woods?" Duane's usual surly expression fell from his face, replaced with surprise.

“Yeah.”

“But you hate the woods.”

I took a breath, a deep one, held it in my lungs as I studied my little brother. “Not in the winter,” I said.

“That makes no sense.” He glowered, looking so much like her.

Now that I knew the truth, the resemblance was obvious, and not just the way Duane looked. They shared mannerisms, traits. How he widened his eyes, how he turned his head and squinted when I did or said something he thought was suspicious. Beau had traits that resembled her as well: his optimism, his delight in telling jokes, making folks laugh, his quickness to smile, to help, to be grateful.

They were a lot alike, those two. *A lot* alike.

It was strange, how knowing the truth of something brought reality clearer into focus. I saw my twin brothers every day, but now they were new, shadows of their sister in every look and word. Unless they discovered the truth, I was probably seeing them and would understand them in a way they would never see or understand themselves.

It's for the best.

I'd promised my mother never to breathe a word of the truth and I intended to keep my promise. Having Christine St. Claire and Darrell as parents would've been cumbersome for anyone, and I was convinced never knowing was the best thing for my brothers. They thought Bethany was their momma, and so she was. They reflected her, they saw pieces of her sweetness and kindness in themselves.

As Marcus Aurelius had said, “The soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts.” Their souls were the color of Bethany, and that was good.

But it did make me wonder, what did Scarlet see when she looked in the mirror? Who did she try to reflect?

“Are you okay?” Duane asked, interrupting my train of thought, which—as usual—was about Scarlet.

Frowning, I shook my head to clear it. “Yeah. Sorry. Just thinking about something.”

“You’ve been staring off into space a lot, ever since you got back, just like Cletus. And neither of you smile or laugh anymore.”

“So, what do you say?” I ignored his last statements, picking up our previous conversation. “You want to build a cabin with me in the woods? It would help keep you busy, keep your mind off other things.”

Duane stared at me for a stretch, his stained-glass irises considering, calculating. “Are you going to pay me?”

I blinked at him, his question also reminding me of Scarlet and her bartering. “Only in my time, if you want it. It would be something just for you and me to do together. No one else.”

A rare earnestness claimed his features. “Not even Cletus? What if he finds out?”

If I could get Cletus interested in helping us build—heck, if I could get Cletus interested in anything at all—I would absolutely include him.

He’d been withdrawn since the events of last year, sticking mostly to himself, never talking about what happened. He’d become much more somber and serious, distrustful of folks and their motivations, and I didn’t blame him. I wasn’t going to push Cletus to be more sociable, but if he wanted to help, I would welcome his participation.

“How about it’ll be just you and me *until* Cletus catches on,” I suggested to Duane. “Nothing we can do to stop him from helping, if he wants. But until then . . .” I lifted my eyebrows meaningfully.

Duane nodded. “Yeah. I think I’d like that.”

“Good.”

“When do we start?”

“How about today? This afternoon?”

He grinned, looking so much like his sister the ache in my heart clawed at the air in my lungs.

God. I miss her.

“Fine. If you give me a list of things you need, I’ll start getting the stuff together. Then we can plan. We’ll plan it all out.” Duane hit the table lightly with his palm. He liked making plans, having things settled.

“Sounds good. I’ll get a pen and paper.” I motioned to my plate. “Right after I finish my breakfast.”

“Duane! Where are you?” Beau’s hollering sounded from someplace in the house. “Hank and I are going fishing. Do you want to come or what?”

Duane frowned, looking torn for a split second. But then he turned over his shoulder and yelled back, “No thanks! I’m busy!”

“Doing what?” came Beau’s response, still hollering from somewhere.

Duane opened his mouth, like he was going to keep yelling instead of standing and finding his twin so they could talk like normal people. So I touched his hand, bringing his attention back to me.

“Would you please go find Beau instead of screaming?”

Giving me a sheepish smile, he ducked his head and stood, saying to me, “I’ll be right back, don’t move.” And then yelling to Beau, “Where are you, dummy? Billy doesn’t want you hollering in the house!”

I shook my head, thinking before I could stop myself, *I should tell Scarlet about this.*

Suddenly, I wasn’t hungry anymore, so I pushed my plate away. Leaning my elbows on the table, my forehead fell to my hands and I closed my eyes.

Maybe I’d done it to myself a little, using her name, thoughts, and memories of her as a way to cope when they’d beat me, when I woke up in pain, when I struggled during those first months of rehab. If I hadn’t loved her when she left, I loved her now. Her name an incantation and a prayer, she’d become something other than just a person I’d known, and wanted, and loved. She’d become my angel in hope and despair.

Perhaps I'd be able to contain thoughts of her by building the cabin on her campsite and switching rooms with my brothers, perhaps not. But I'd never be able to forget her, not as long as Duane and Beau were so close. Not after everything we'd been through, even though most of it had happened after she left.

But that was fine. *I don't want to forget her.*

If the soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts, then my soul was Scarlet.

-The End-

Read on for a Sneak Peek of what's coming up next for Billy and Scarlet!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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SNEAK PEEK: BEARD NECESSITIES, WINSTON
BROTHERS BOOK #7

PART 1: 2007, MAY: OTHERWISE ENGAGED, SCENE 1

“For my entire life I longed for love. I knew it was not right for me — as a girl and later as a woman — to want or expect it, but I did, and this unjustified desire has been at the root of every problem I have experienced in my life.”

— LISA SEE, SNOW FLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN

Claire (aka Scarlet)

I’d known about the engagement party for months.

I’d been consulted on the guest list (I’d been too nervous to have an opinion).

I’d gone shopping with Ben’s momma and his Aunt Mary for a suitable dress—which I was currently wearing.

And yet, I couldn’t quite wrap my mind about the simple fact that I was, right this minute, *back* in Green Valley. On purpose. Except, *I* wasn’t back. Scarlet St. Claire wasn’t back. Claire McClure was. And Claire McClure hadn’t ever been to Green Valley before because she hadn’t existed until three years ago. Well, more precisely, three years and one day ago.

Presently, I stood in the corner of Mrs. McClure’s big, fancy dining room. It was bright. So bright, my eyes hurt. Mid-May sunshine beamed

through a wall of windows and their sheer, white lace curtains, aggressive in its cheerfulness. The rays bounced off white walls, white carpet, and the white tablecloth covering a long, solid wood table. On the table were zealously adorable finger foods on clear glass—sorry, not glass, *crystal*—serving pieces.

Then there were the people. So many fancy people. Even Judge Payton was here, dressed in a suit. He'd brought Mrs. Annabelle Cooper, who everyone knew had more money than the Pope on account of being widowed seven times (all of her husbands had been wealthy).

The Leffersbees, the Macintyres—two sets of them—the Mitchells, the Buchanans, the Smiths, the Sylvesters, the Lees (but not the Hills, there were just too many Hills; if you invited one you had to invite them all and Mrs. McClure didn't think her garden could handle it), the Sheriff and his wife, the Boones, the Bevertons, the Simmonses (was the plural of Simons 'Simonses' or 'Simonsi'?) plus loads more. Even Scotia and Karl Simmons's daughter Darlene had come. In high school she used to call me Sweaty Scarlet. And now she was here, and she'd congratulated me, and she'd told me she liked my dress.

It was like an episode of the Twilight Zone. My life suddenly looked like a picture from a Martha Stewart magazine. I couldn't stop staring at my surroundings like a spectator. Everything shimmered. Even my palms. Because they were so sweaty.

"You want some punch?" Tammy McClure, Ben's momma, appeared at my elbow all of the sudden and I yelped, nearly upending the crystal cup of red raspberry punch she held.

"Goodness gracious!" Mrs. McClure twisted, protecting the crystal serving vessel, her eyes wide and worried. "Are you okay? Did I sneak up on you?"

"Oh my God, I am so sorry." Closing my eyes, just in case my outburst invited attention, I pressed my hand against my chest where my heart

galloped and imagined an alternative ending to my clumsiness. One where the raspberry punch splattered the white carpet and curtains and walls, a murder scene with no victim other than the end of perfection. *Just scarlet, everywhere.*

I laughed at the thought and at my nerves. *Yeah. That'd be just like "Scarlet," for sure.*

But I wasn't Scarlet. Not anymore.

Mrs. McClure placed her hand on my arm and gave it a squeeze. "Oh, you poor dear. You're shaking. I know you told me not to hover and to enjoy myself, so I won't hover, and I'll enjoy myself. But please let me do something to help."

Opening my eyes, I gathered a deep breath. Peering around and realizing that no one was paying us any mind, I smiled at the woman who was technically my mother-in-law. Though—as far as most folks were concerned—I was newly engaged to her son, not already married to him.

"I am so sorry, Mrs. Mc—"

She squinted at me, her pink-painted lips pressing into a line that looked more like a smile than a frown. "Claire. What have I told you about calling me Mrs. McClure?"

I took another breath, my smile more natural. "Sorry. *Mom*. Sorry." She'd insisted I call her mom, and so had her sister. I felt more comfortable with Ben's Aunt Mary than I did with Tammy McClure, partly because I'd been living with Mary and her husband Pete since I'd left town, and partly because I suspected I'd always think of Tammy McClure as my former high school's chorus teacher.

"Stop apologizing. Goodness, you're all wound up. Here, drink your punch." She lifted the glass toward me in slow motion, like she was afraid of making any sudden movements.

"Oh, no. That's okay. I'm so nervous and I don't want to spill it on my dress. I just—I just—"

“Drink the punch, baby.” Tammy McClure reached for my fingers, gently lifted them to accept the cup, and lowered her voice to a whisper, “Don’t tell anyone, but Mary and I put something special in all of ours, to help with the nerves. We’ve already had two cups each.” Then, she winked. “Go on. It’ll help. Trust me.”

I was stunned. I’d never seen either woman drink even a glass of wine. Ever. Not once!

Just because you didn’t see something doesn’t mean it didn’t happen, Scarlet.

I glanced between her and the cup. “Uh. . .”

Tammy McClure leaned closer, lowering her voice. “It’s vodka. The good stuff.”

My mouth dropped open as she retreated, and I noticed the pink hue in her typically pale white cheeks, nose, and forehead. And then I took another look at her lips. *That’s not lipstick.*

She winked at me again, and then blinked several times, a little giggle escaping the older woman. “Oh my goodness, did I just wink again? I gotta stop doing that, otherwise Ben’s daddy will notice.”

Giving my hand one more pat, but clearly fighting against the urge to wink a third time, Tammy McClure turned and left me to my corner and my vodka laced punch. Staring at it, I debated my options, but then a voice I recognized rose over my contemplations, carrying from the sunroom behind me, and I stiffened.

“ . . . just swept me off my feet and that was that. We’re so happy, and I love living in Austin.”

Samantha Cooper. Or, I guess Samantha Winston now.

Dun, dun, DUN!

Without thinking, I downed the entire cup of punch, which I discovered must’ve been more than half alcohol. But that was fine. In fact, it was good. Good. Good. Good. Better alcohol than feelings.

Dear Lord in heaven, if Billy Winston is here with his wife, please let me not see him. Or if I do see him, please . . .

Shit.

I darted out of my corner just long enough to grab a napkin from the table. The truth was, despite yesterday being my birthday, I'd had a rough and confusing twenty-four hours. My emotions had been in a state of entropy since last night.

Therefore, if Billy Winston was here, I didn't wish to see him. And I definitely didn't wish to see him with a red vodka-punch mustache above my upper lip—not that I cared one whit what *he* thought.

Lies.

Okay, so a part of me did care. Truthfully, I didn't know what to think about Billy Winston, so I tried not to think of him at all. Irritated that he still occupied my thoughts after so many years, I decided I was angry. Anger was tidier than any of the other alternatives.

Ben's Aunt Mary told me praying for folks you're mad at helps you be less angry with them, so I'd been praying for Billy Winston constantly since leaving Green Valley.

At first it was, *Dear Lord, please help Billy realize his GIGANTIC ERROR IN JUDGEMENT and come to me.* Then, *Dear Lord, please help Billy to know he should write me a letter or call or something. I miss him so much.* Then, *Dear Lord, please help me not hate Billy for abandoning me and making me believe he cared about me.* Then, *Dear Lord, Wherever Billy is, please don't let him feel how much I hate him right now. But if you do, that's fine too.* Then, *Dear Lord, please help me stop thinking about Billy all the time.*

And yet, no matter how much I prayed, I was still . . . angry. *Yeah. Angry. I'm angry. That's all. Angry.* I'd never thought of myself as the grudge holding type. But apparently, I was.

The room behind me—the sunroom—exploded in feminine laughter and I cringed, wishing I had more vodka-punch. I needed to move from my corner, but I didn't know where to go. Everyone had been so nice, but everywhere I went I felt eyes follow, like they recognized me, but couldn't quite place where they'd seen me before.

It had been Ben's idea to change my name, a suggestion he'd made shortly after I'd left town. "Just to keep you safe," he said. "So your daddy can't find you and take you away."

I trusted him. Completely. Ben had protected me, first by taking me away from Green Valley and to his aunt's house in Nashville; then by getting a court order for our marriage from Judge Payton six months later; and then in so many other ways. He and his family had taken care of me, made me feel safe and cherished and important.

"It's doesn't have to be a real marriage, if you don't want it to be," he'd said on the day he suggested we marry—my fifteenth birthday—showing me the court order, the marriage license, and the application to legally change my name. All the documents needed were my signature. "We could get married for your birthday, you change your name, it's all arranged. And you'll get military benefits as my wife, health care, spousal support." And again, he'd added, "It's just to keep you safe. So your daddy can't find you or take you away."

Since then, he'd often remarked that it was my double birthday: once as Scarlet, and now a new birthday as Claire McClure, his wife. Except, no one knew but his family and Judge Payton knew we were married, hence the dog and pony show, fake engagement party today.

And then, last night . . . Technically, as of last night, I shouldn't wear white to my future fake wedding. FYI.

I fought against a wave of nausea, eventually winning as I accepted the cool embrace of numbness. I wasn't going to think about last night, about Ben's "18th birthday present" to me. There was no changing it, no going

back in time, no point. Last night was nothing important. *Don't be a dummy, Scarlet. If it made Ben happy, it was worth it. He's done so much for you.*

"It's true." Samantha's comically loud whisper met my ears again, setting my teeth on edge and a million fire ants racing over my skin. I prepared to leave my cozy alcove.

Maybe I'd go find Jethro and see where he was hiding. I *knew* of most of the folks present, but Jethro was only person other than Ben and his family that *knew* me. Jet made a point to visit us in Nashville whenever Ben was home from the Army, and sometimes he'd visit even when Ben was deployed, just to take me out to dinner or a movie. I guess I owed Jethro too.

I'd taken two steps from the alcove when Samantha's voice continued, "If you want to orgasm, then you better learn how to pretend your partner is the one you want. For example, before I met my husband, I usually imagined Billy Winston instead of whoever I was with."

I gasped.

And, from the sound of it, so did several other ladies.

"Samantha!" someone said, clearly scandalized, but then the voice continued on a laugh, "I can't believe you said that out loud. I mean, I don't blame you, but I can't believe you said it!"

Unconsciously, I strained my ears for Samantha's response, but I couldn't hear anything because my brain and heart were pitching a riot.

WHAT?

WHAT????!!?

HER HUSBAND?

ISN'T BILLY HER HUSBAND?

WHO IS HER HUSBAND?!?!?

I shook my head, telling my brain not to shout, and stumbled dumbly out of my corner. I couldn't have been more stunned if someone had hit me

with a taser. On autopilot, I drifted closer to the door of the sunroom for some reason (. . . It was so I could hear better, okay??)

But I must've stumbled too far, because in the next moment Annabelle Cooper appeared in the doorway, gave me a surprised yet assessing once over, and then pulled me inside the room, saying, "We're shutting this door, darling. Sensitive topics, you know. Please, do come in and take the seat by Alison Beverton."

The woman Annabelle identified as Alison Beverton was not the senior Mrs. Beverton—lead cantor at the First Baptist Church—but someone who looked like her younger, and tanner, twin. Alison Beverton grinned at me, lifting a conspiratorial eyebrow and patting the bench seat next to her.

Meanwhile, none of the other women gathered seemed to notice me or pay me any mind. They were all either leaning forward, their eyes on Samantha in the center of the room—even more insanely gorgeous than she was in high school—or they were tracking the progress of Annabelle Cooper as she shut the door.

"Okay, Sam. Spill," a brunette woman said, someone I didn't recognize. Smiling from behind a rosebud teacup, the woman looked like that actress Courteney Cox, except with dark eyes. "I'd love to get the scoop on him."

"Are we really going to talk about this?" A blonde woman moaned from across the room. I was pretty sure she was one of the Lees. Debbie Lee, maybe?

"Shh," Annabelle Cooper hushed as she turned away from the closed door, taking the seat closest to Samantha. Tangentially, I realized they were related somehow. Samantha's dad was Annabelle's nephew, or great nephew, or something like that. "Go on, Samantha. We are all ears."

"Well, ladies, let's just say, Billy's got it where it counts," Samantha said, twisting her lips into a smirking, self-satisfied smile.

The room waited. I held my breath, on the edge of my seat. But also, I was confused as to how I'd suddenly arrived at this moment, in this room,

staring at the woman I thought Billy had married over three years ago.

Before I could sort myself—or escort myself—out, Annabelle grumbled, “That’s all you’re gunna say?”

“Hell no!” Samantha tossed her head back and laughed, shaking her head at the older woman’s disappointed expression. “Give me a minute to get explicit, will ya? I need to build the tension. Here’s the deal . . .” Samantha glanced over her shoulder, making a show of it, and then leaned forward and whispered loudly, “He was *so good*, a natural. I was his first and it was like he already knew what to do. Or, it took him no time at all to pick it up. And he loves to go downstairs. I mean, he *loves it*. And when he fucks—oh, it makes my toes curl just thinking about it—he likes to—”

“I don’t think we should be talking about this—”

“Shut up, Debbie,” Annabelle Cooper shushed the same blonde woman as before, and then nudged Samantha’s knee with her fingertips. “What’s he like? You know, his *thing*.”

I stared at Mrs. Cooper. Aghast. The woman must’ve been seventy-five years old if she was a day and I just could not believe what I was hearing.

She didn’t seem to notice my shock.

“It’s so beautiful. Big. Long. Curves up a little, exactly like it should. But not scary big, like Isaac Sylvester’s.” Samantha shivered a little, like it was a bad thing. But then she shivered again, like it was good thing. “I’ll tell you about him too, if you want.”

The woman next to me shifted in her seat before saying, “Tells us more about Billy. How does he like it? Missionary or . . .?”

“Taking notes, Alison?” Annabelle Cooper laughed.

The brunette shrugged. “What if I am?”

Annabelle Cooper guffawed. Meanwhile, I had the sudden urge to dump Alison Beverton’s tea over her head.

Before I could unpack these feelings, Samantha answered, “He likes everything. He’ll do whatever you want. I mean it. And he’s equally good at

all positions. I always orgasmed before he did. Always. Usually twice. One time, I talked him into—”

“Okay, okay. That’s enough.” Debbie Lee lifted her hands and shook them around her face. She then reached for her napkin and waved it frantically at her neck. “I’m sorry. But, I don’t think I can hear another word. I’m burning up.”

Samantha winked at Annabelle Cooper. “This Billy talk too hot for you?”

“I still don’t think we should be—”

Debbie Lee was cut off again. This time by Karen Smith (who Tammy McClure said was the town gossip). “The thing about Billy Winston is that he’s the whole package. He’s definitely husband material.” She said these words pragmatically, as though they were an acknowledged fact.

I grit my teeth to keep from snarking back, *As opposed to what? Handkerchief material?*

The other ladies, however, didn’t seem to have a problem with Karen’s statement, all responding in a chorus,

“That’s for damn sure.”

“I wish he’d notice my Karrie.”

“Yeah, but those brothers.”

“True. True.”

I spoke up without thinking, riding a wave of indignance. “What’s wrong with his brothers?”

“I agree with her. His brothers are cute little things. Give them time. They might surprise you once they’re men,” Annabelle said, smiling knowingly.

Karen Smith picked up her teacup. “They might improve, *with time*. But you marry Billy, then you got the rest of his family to deal with. He is very devoted to his family.”

“That just means he’ll be devoted to his own children and wife as well,” Alison argued, leaning to one side to address Karen Smith.

“I don’t know.” Karen made a thoughtful face. “He’s sacrificed a lot for his momma, his brothers. Seems like you marry him, you’re marrying them, too. And they’ll always come first over your own family.”

That didn’t sound bad to me. In fact, an instant family sounded like a bonus, especially the Win—*ABORT, ABORT!! YOU SHOULDN’T BE HAVING THESE THOUGHTS, CLAIRE! ABORT!*

“Anyway, y’all want to hear something funny?” Samantha sat forward again. “Y’all remember that guy I dated from New York? The Wallstreet one? Before I met my Charles? Well, I used to pretend he was Billy *all the time*.” She laughed, seemingly thinking this was hilarious. “No lie. But don’t worry, the fantasy didn’t last too long. He couldn’t *keep up* the ruse, if you know what I mean. It’s like, I’d really have to be in possession of a good imagination. That’s honestly why we broke up.”

Debbie Lee made a sound of distress. “Can we talk about something else? That poor man.”

“Who? Wallstreet guy? Don’t feel sorry for him. I know his current girlfriend and she gives him three blowjobs a week. He’s happy.”

“Not your ex, *Samantha*. Billy Winston. I feel sorry for Billy.” Debbie sighed, folding and refolding her napkin, her hands unsteady.

“What? Why?” Samantha looked nonplussed, tossing her long, shiny dark hair over one shoulder.

“You keep objectifying him and he is such a nice guy,” Debbie Lee fretted, looking around to the others in the room as though to appeal to their decency. But no one was looking at her, finding their teacups more interesting.

“I’m not saying he’s not a nice guy, Debbie. I’m saying he’s fantastic in bed.” Samantha huffed. “Plus, how does one live in a town with a Billy Winston and not objectify the Billy Winston?”

“That’s why his sister is leaving,” Karen Smith announced.

“What? Ashley? She’s leaving?” Annabelle Cooper frowned at the town gossip.

“Yep.” Karen Smith nodded. “I overheard her telling Daisy Payton that she’s planning to go away to college. Far away. Have you seen how those high school boys carry on around her? Jackson James is the worst, and his daddy got so mad. Sheriff James is the good sort. Anyway, she’s tired of it, you can tell. Daisy is here somewhere, talking to Janet James over by the punch I think. You can ask her.”

Samantha nodded. “I can see that. Ashley is just so crazy beautiful.”

Again, the ladies all agreed in a chorus,

“She is stunning.”

“I wish I had her eyebrows.”

“She won that Miss. Tennessee pageant for good reason. So gorgeous. And smart, too.”

“Well, there you go.” Debbie Lee gave Samantha a hard look over her teacup, and then took a dainty sip.

“There I go, what?” Samantha snapped, her blue eyes narrowing.

“There you go. Ashley Winston is leaving ‘cause of how those boys at school keep talking and carrying on.” Debbie Lee set her teacup down on her saucer with a loud clink. “You shouldn’t be talking about Billy either.”

“Now you see here, Debbie Lee. I like sex a lot and I will not be shamed for it. We are a sex positive household.”

“I’m not shaming you for liking sex, Samantha. I am shaming you for objectifying Billy Winston. I mean the poor man isn’t here to defend himself!”

“Defend himself from what? From me saying he’s a great lover?” Samantha scoffed, her nose wrinkling in a way that made her beautiful face look adorable. “I’m sure he would thank me. We *are* still friends, you know.”

“It’s just not appropriate to talk about someone else in that way,” Debbie stood, picking up her teacup and lifting her chin.

“Well, why the hell not?” Samantha also stood, picking up her teacup too, like it was sword and they were about to duel. “I’m singing his praises, ain’t I? I mean, we all sit here and talk about how that Sylvester girl shouldn’t be in beauty pageants at her age and her momma is a dragon lady. I can’t say something nice about Billy Winston’s magnificent rooster without being henpecked? Gawd!”

“Ladies, ladies. Please settle down.” Annabelle Cooper’s hands lift, fingers covered in diamonds sending sparkles and rainbows all over the room, her voice rising by the barest of degrees. “No use getting your feathers ruffled, Debbie. If you don’t like the talk, no one is forcing you to listen.”

“Fine. Then I won’t.” Debbie strolled toward the door, her head held high, and I had the sudden notion that I should follow her.

You shouldn’t be here!

“I think I will go find Daisy Payton,” Debbie said, having finally reached the door.

I told my legs to work, I told myself to stand up, I told myself to leave. *Billy Winston is none of your business. LEAVE!*

“At least I can count on her for *decent* conversation,” Debbie Lee quipped. And with that, she opened the door and strolled out.

Get up, Scarlet. Get up. Get up. Go. . . go. I didn’t go. The warning voice in my head was weaker than the curiosity devils on my shoulders.

“Will someone else get that?” Annabelle Cooper asked the room, waited until the Courteney Cox look-alike shut the door, and then—grinning—turned to face Samantha again. “Now, what can you tell us about Isaac Sylvester?”

****END SNEAK PEEK****

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