



INTO THE CLEAR WATER

Love was more than a spoken word...

B. CELESTE

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Into the Clear Water

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CONTENTS

[Playlist](#)

[Other Books by B. Celeste](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Want to stay in touch?](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

About the Author

*Hey, Rebecca Shea –
Here's that dedication I owe you.
Hi.*

PLAYLIST

Playlist

“Bleeding Love” – Leona Lewis
“Demons” – Imagine Dragon
“Delicate” – Taylor Swift
“Get Stoned” – Hinder
“Slow Hands” – Niall Horan
“Say Something” – A Great Big World
“How You Remind Me” – Avril Lavigne
“Good For You” – Selena Gomez
“Bring Me To Life” – Evanescence
“Apologize” OneRepublic

OTHER BOOKS BY B. CELESTE

[The Truth about Heartbreak](#)

[The Truth about Tomorrow](#)

[The Truth about Us](#)

[Underneath the Sycamore Tree](#)

[Where the Little Birds Go](#)

[Where the Little Birds Are](#)

CHAPTER ONE

THE METAL SOUND OF A ZIPPER PULLING UP IS WHAT STIRS ME FROM A restless sleep where my body is molded into the right side of the mattress. A pointless need to turn around plagues my body, but I force myself still and listen to his silent routine—the ruffled cotton of a worn tee against sculpted inked flesh, the scraping plastic of a scratched phone case against an old nightstand, and the slightest creaking of floorboards under his weighted feet.

There's a pause, a minor hitch in breath, before the full lips my body has become well acquainted with press against the side of my temple. Not once do I open my eyes to meet the baby blues that I know are studying my naked body barely being covered by the thin sheet. Instead, I let him sneak out of the bedroom without a word.

No, *goodnight*.

No, *I love you*.

Just like we silently agreed.

The door clicks softly behind him shortly before the one directly across the hall opens. Loosening a shaky breath, I sit up and try to ignore the heavy absence of his body heat. All that ever remains when darkness bathes the room is his Armani cologne that sticks to the bedding.

Grasping the comforter that's fallen off the edge of the bed, I examine the faintest glow of moonlight creeping through the busted blinds. My eyes focus on the little flakes of snow falling gracefully from the sky, locking my mind in the memories of tan skin and a bright smile that winter took from me three years ago.

No longer do I hear the husky laugh that would poke fun of my many layers of clothing when the temperature dropped below fifty, or the gravelly voice that brought goosebumps to my arms despite his teasing when I cautioned him for driving when snow squalls hit. My heart no longer clenches over deep-set dimples or speckled brown eyes that made me blush whenever they paid me any attention.

The hammering heart in my tight ribcage is no longer caused by the love I pined for, but for the love I'd never have again.

Swinging my legs over the side of the bedframe, I absently stare at the wooden picture frame resting six inches away. Jaw tight, I slip out of bed with the comforter wrapped around my body and think better of doing the walk of shame to the hallway bathroom I share with my roommates.

There's a soft knock on my bedroom door, too quiet and abnormal to be his. Still, my body freezes when it cracks open and reveals tangled strawberry blonde hair and big brown eyes tilted upward at me. She reaches out, her freckled fair hand squeezing my porcelain one.

"Bad dream, Nugget?" I whisper, grabbing the oversized tee that had been stripped off me with careful precision hours before.

After quickly slipping it on, I turn to find her tiny palms rubbing her eyes. Kneeling to her level, I brush frizzy bedhead out of her face and peck a kiss to her forehead. "Let's both try getting some sleep, okay?"

I pick her up and put her in bed next to me, her little body emphasizing the vast difference of who occupied it before her.

Reaching for the picture frame on the nightstand, I place it facedown and crawl in beside her with no other choice but to brush off the suffocating feelings overwhelming my conscience.

"I love you, Ainsley."

Another hand squeeze.

THE BEDROOM IS FILTERED by a dull dawn light telling me it's too early when the tug on my shirt wakes me from a partial state of unconsciousness. I see the red flashing numbers on my alarm first, then the round brown eyes mere inches from my face filled with anticipation as she tugs on me again.

"Too early," I murmur, tempted to bury my squinted eyes in my pillow. She doesn't relent.

Blowing out a breath, I note the early morning numbers again on my clock before sitting up in bed.

Ainsley gestures toward the door.

“Okay, okay.”

Before I follow her out, I slip on a pair of pajama pants covered in candy canes from my floor and let her pull me into the hallway with strength nobody her age should have. I freeze when the door across the hall opens, and a shirtless lean figure appears in only a black pair of low-riding sweatpants.

Swallowing, I give him a small smile.

“Good morning,” I greet, voice raspy as it always is in the morning.

Ainsley tugs on my hand and points to the stairs, where the decorated tree peeks out from the open hallway loft. My shoulders lift as I follow her down, only hearing a murmured *Merry Christmas, Piper* from behind us as we descend the narrow staircase.

I flick on the lights just as Ainsley dives toward the multi-colored presents wrapped underneath the tree. Some of them I don’t recognize and wonder if Easton put them there after he left my room last night, making my face flush when footsteps sound from behind me.

Busying myself with moving the coffee table out of the way and plugging in the tree lights, I try to ignore the prickling awareness of the six-two tattooed man watching us from the landing of the stairs.

Clearing my throat, I brush my fingers through Ainsley’s hair to try controlling the way it sticks out everywhere. Eventually giving up, I press a kiss to the crown of her head and pass her the stocking full of candy and Barbie accessories to open first.

Finally turning to meet East’s eyes, I note his own untamed bedhead that normally rests in a purposely unkempt messy ‘do. The sides of his nearly black hair are shorter than the top, with slight waves that make me wonder if his hair curls when it’s longer. He’s only lived with me for seven months, and in that time I’ve never seen it grow past what it is now.

“Coffee?” I ask, not waiting for him to answer before walking past him. The downstairs of our three-bedroom townhome is all open space minus a half bath and coat closet off the entryway.

I don’t have to look behind me to sense he followed, so I look through the cupboard for the can of coffee only to find it missing. My eyes wander along the countertops, searching for salvation with tired eyes and coming

up short. Gripping the edge of the marble counter, I blow out a breath and drop my head.

“We’re out?” he asks behind me, his voice low as ever. He never speaks loud as if broody and broodier are his only volumes. It works for him. The tan lean twenty-eight-year-old standing in the modern kitchen just feet from me is every girl’s wet dream from his looks and laid back but mysterious personality, to the way he talks. His right arm is covered in an intricate black tattoo sleeve of words and images that goes all the way up to his collarbone and edge of his neck. The back of his hand has small letters on it that forms a thought-out design, and I know he has other tattoos on his back and left side of his ribcage.

Clicking my tongue, I brush hair behind my ears and nod, turning to face him. I’m grateful he slid a shirt on, or I’d be staring. My hip leans against the counter, but I don’t make eye contact with him. Our arrangement started just shy of two months ago after a little too much alcohol. One night turned into two, which turned into three, until I got used to chasing a high with his body that took me out of my head for a while.

He’d always come to my room.

And he’d always leave.

And it works.

“Need me to go get some?” are the next words from his mouth. He knows I need caffeine in order to function, especially this early. How he manages it is beyond me considering he’s usually out late at the tattoo parlor he co-owns with a friend in town. Yet every morning between five and six he’s up, in running gear, and ready to start his day on what I only assume is five hours or less of sleep. Usually less on the nights he comes to my room.

As much as I want to say yes, I shake my head and grab a clean glass from the drainer and fill it with water from the sink. “It’s Christmas. Nothing will be open.”

He simply makes a contemplative noise, as if he’s humming in agreement, before pushing off the wall he stands by and walking over to the refrigerator. We never speak about what goes on after dark and rarely make small talk about anything. The quiet between us is usually comfortable, not awkward, but he’s also never kissed me before leaving my room at night either.

Jabbing my thumb behind me with my free hand, I give him a tired smile. "I'm going in the other room. Ainsley will want to start opening the other presents. So..."

He just nods once.

Licking my lips, I turn on my heel and walk away before saying anything else. Taking a seat on the floor beside Ainsley and setting my water on the table behind me, I cross my legs and reach for one of the smaller presents signed by Santa.

Smiling as I watch her eyes brighten from the new dolls, dresses, and stuffed animals, I lean against the side of the armchair and listen to Easton take a seat behind me. "You've got some," he notes quietly.

Brows raising as I look where his chin gestures to in a single nod, I reach for a small silver square package. "I didn't get you anything," I admit regretfully, not knowing that we were exchanging gifts.

My fingers tear into the paper until a black box appears underneath. I glance at East, who's intently watching Ainsley play with one of her new toys, before looking back at the box and opening it. My lips part when I see a two-hundred-dollar gift card to an office supply store I like to go to.

"East..." My body turns to him, blinking at his casual stance in the raggedy chair I'd bought secondhand from Craigslist. "This is too much. I didn't get you anything."

His shoulders lift. "You said the school didn't have money in the budget for supplies, so I figured you could use that before the year starts back up. It's not a big deal, Piper."

He...? "You got me this for my class?"

Another incoherent noise sounds from his throat as he slides to the edge of the chair. "If I make cinnamon rolls will you two eat some? I even bought frosting the other day."

I blink.

Ainsley turns and nods enthusiastically at the sound of sugar, leaving me absentmindedly doing the same. His eyes go from my face to the card I'm holding before standing and walking away without another word.

My mouth goes dry.

Ainsley tugs on my shirt, showing me the Barbie that Santa got her. I just smile in praise and look down at the gift card again.

CHAPTER TWO

STUFFING THE LAST PLASTIC BAG IN THE BACKSEAT OF MY BEAT-UP GREEN Toyota Highlander that I bought dirt cheap from a family friend, I feel the vibration of my phone in the back pocket of my skinny jeans. Closing the door and pulling out the cell to see my best friend's name across the screen, I smile and climb into the front.

"Hey, Jenna."

There's loud music in the background that I know all too well from Ainsley's favorite Disney movie. She insists on listening to it when she doesn't feel well. "The kid blew chunks. Don't worry, she did it on the kitchen floor."

Wincing, I blow out a breath. At least it's on the hardwood and not the beige carpet that covers ninety percent of the house. "It's probably from all the candy she's been eating this past week. Is she okay now?"

"She's laying on the couch under her favorite blanket," my bestie explains, moving until the background noise fades slightly. "I gave her some ginger ale, which I can only assume is your roomie's since you hate soda. Tell him I'm sorry."

I doubt Easton would care. He may keep to himself, but I'm pretty sure he has a soft spot for Ainsley. Especially after seeing the additional Christmas presents he gave her consisting of new coloring books and a play food set she'd been eying whenever we went to the store together for groceries.

"I'll get him more," I say, just to be on the safe side. I wasn't planning on making another stop to the store, but it's close to Staples. "I was going to

stop by The Inked Lotus before I came back, but I'll drop by the store and then—"

"No." I blink at her firm words. "We're fine here, Piper. Ainsley looks like she's going to fall asleep any minute and I have a book to read on my Kindle. Go do your thing. And by thing, I mean—"

"Stop," I groan, dropping my head back onto the headrest. "I'm just going to thank him for the gift card. I got all my classroom supplies. I need to return the favor somehow."

Her chuckle makes me roll my eyes. "I can think of a few ways you can return the favor. You could let him *pierce* you if you know what I mean. Maybe let him mark your skin."

My cheeks heat over her innuendos. "I hate you sometimes."

"Lies!"

I start the car. "Whatever. If you're sure you're fine, I'll make a quick pitstop. Call me if you need anything."

After hanging up and finishing my errands, buying a new six pack of ginger ale like the ones Easton likes and keeps in the fridge, as well as some crackers for Ainsley to nibble on, I make the short twenty-minute drive back to the development community we live in.

The Inked Lotus is a small brick building right on the outskirts of the residences, surrounded by a few dining establishments and a tiny post office that all share a parking lot. I pull into a free parking space in front of the parlor, lucky since the rest of the parking lot is packed.

Slipping my purse over my shoulder and locking the car behind me, I walk toward the glass door with an *open* sign hanging just below the printed store hours. I know he's open later since it's a Saturday, which means he won't be home until close to two in the morning.

The bell on the door signals my arrival, making Jay, his friend and co-owner, look up from where he's working on some beefy guy's back. "Hey, Red."

I smile at him and his unoriginal name for my naturally auburn hair. It's better than when he called me Red Velvet all the time though. Since Jenna convinced me to add copper highlights, the color isn't as intense. It still doesn't stop the tall, skinny thirty-something-year-old from calling me whatever he wants.

My eyes travel to East where he's bandaging a platinum blonde girl's upper arm. He glances up as soon as Jay mentions my nickname, nodding

his chin at me in greeting. I give him a small wave and lean against the front counter where the register is.

Pulling out my water bottle from my purse and taking a sip, I all but spit it out when Jay says, “Finally going to let me pierce you?”

My face must turn bright red thinking about what Jenna said, because Jay looks over at me and busts out laughing.

“Uh ... no.” Sheepishly smiling, I cap my water off before setting it on the counter.

To my surprise, East speaks up. “She already has a piercing.”

Jay’s brows pinch at me. “You do?”

I nod, pointing to my belly button. “I got it done a few years ago.” These days, I rarely wear the many studs that I picked out.

Jay makes an interested noise in the back of his throat, his lips quirking up like he understands exactly how Easton knows I have a belly piercing. “Thought about getting any others?”

My shoulders lift. “I considered getting my nose done. When I was in high school I tried tricking my mom into signing a permission form since I was underage at the time. She freaked out. Needless to say, I didn’t get the form signed.”

Jay tilts his head. “What about today?”

My lips part. “Maybe another time, Jay. I’m actually here to see Easton.”

East stands up, gesturing for his customer to come to the register. I step out of their way, feeling the blonde’s eyes on me skeptically as she scopes me out before giving me her back.

“Everything okay?” Easton asks, glancing up at me after taking the money from the girl.

I nod quickly. “Yes. I was actually just here to say thanks again for the gift card. I went to grab my supplies today. Jenna’s watching Ainsley.”

He counts out the change and passes it back to the girl with wandering eyes. She has to be nineteen at best, nearly ten years younger than him. But I brush it off because it’s not like I have any claim on him for more than a few stolen hours every night.

“I told you it’s no big deal,” he murmurs, crossing his arms over his chest.

The girl intervenes, leaning forward to reveal her enviously impressive boobs. “I was wondering if you had plans tonight. My friends and I are

meeting at Club 21.”

He deadpans, face unimpressed. “You’re not twenty-one.”

I press my lips together to refrain from smiling, readjusting my purse strap and busying myself by looking around the shop. Magazines are scattered in front of the black arm chairs off to the side where people wait to get their work done.

“Don’t worry, we have fake IDs,” she insists, making me cringe. East makes a strangled noise in the back of his throat, a telltale sign that he’s not going to take her up on the offer.

“I’m busy,” is all he says.

Her shoulders drop. “Oh. Well...”

Don’t do it.

“I’ll give you my number and you can let me know when you’re free,” she says despite my silent warning. It’s not like I’m jealous. East can do whatever, and whoever, he wants. In fact, I respect her metaphorical lady balls for even taking the receipt and jotting down her number before passing it back to him.

But I know East. As soon as she leaves, he’ll wad up the paper and toss it into the recyclables under the counter. I never understood why he did it because he could get any girl he wanted. Even before our little arrangement he never kept the numbers he was passed. And from what Jay has said, there’s a lot of women who come back for the quiet man in front of me.

Speaking of which, his brows raise in inquiry at me. Snapping from the thought, I wait until the girl says goodbye and walks toward the door before I take my place in front of him. “I couldn’t figure out what to get you. You’re hard to shop for and I couldn’t just accept the card without at least trying, even if you think it’s not a big deal.”

“It’s not.”

I roll my eyes and watch him walk over to his station to clean it. He stays busy, so I’m sure his next appointment will be here soon. “I know, but still. What if I paid for your next tattoo? You said you wanted to add to your sleeve, right?”

Jay snickers as Easton turns to me, one of his brows quirked. “I own a tattoo parlor. I can get it done for free, Piper.”

Right. Heat prickles the back of my neck. In hindsight, I should have thought about that before letting it escape my mouth.

“Dinner?”

He stops what he's doing. "Where?"

What a lot of people don't know is that he's vegetarian, something I learned quickly after he moved in. I wanted to make us dinner and break the ice since we'd be living together, but I cooked Mom's famous lasagna which had ground beef and pork sausage in it. He opted to eat the salad I prepared, making me feel like a fatty as I ate the pasta dish by myself. Ainsley doesn't like it either, so I had it for lunch and dinner all week.

"I was thinking we could order in from that Thai place you like," I suggest, knowing the vegetable stir fry is his favorite. "Ainsley is sick, so I kind of want to stay in tonight. But if you want to go somewhere maybe we could tomorrow or whenever you're free."

He disregards the food offer completely, focusing on only one thing. "Is she okay?" Straightening to full height, he watches me with cautious eyes, making my heart squeeze in my chest before threatening to melt in a messy puddle right there on the cement floor.

"Stomach bug. I think it's the candy."

He purses his lips. "I can order the food and pick it up before I head home. My last appointment is at six-thirty."

Jay clears his throat. "Uh, East—"

"Jay will close up," East adds.

Jay looks between us before nodding, turning to finish the customer's tattoo.

"Okay." I smile. "Oh, and I bought you more ginger ale because Jenna had to give some to Ainsley to help her stomach."

His lips twitch before he mutters, "You didn't have to do that."

I shrug. "It's only fair. It's yours."

He doesn't say anything.

"I'll just have them deliver the food," I insist, grabbing my water bottle from the counter and backing toward the door, "that way you're not paying for it when you pick it up. Same as usual?"

He pauses, then nods once.

"See you later then." I wiggle my fingers at Jay, who tips his chin at me before retuning his focus to his work.

Once I'm in my car again, I shoot Jenna a text to let her know I'm on my way home before looking over at the parlor to see East watching me from the front window.

I wave.

He doesn't wave back.

CHAPTER THREE

I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN THE DAY WAS GOING TO GO DOWNHILL QUICKLY when I discovered there were no eggs left to make breakfast. Shortly after that I realized there were only a few swallows of almond milk left in the carton, not enough for the cereal I'd already poured into a bowl for Ainsley. Blowing out an irritated breath over the person most likely responsible, I leave the kitchen and walk upstairs.

The room directly next to mine is cracked open, revealing a strawberry blonde twisted like a pretzel under her purple comforter, the lavender quilted blanket her father gave to her before she was even born grasped in her clutches. His grandmother, Grandma Mable, made it for her using scraps of old fabric leftover from other projects from her sewing club.

"Ainsley," I whisper, walking in and gently nudging her shoulder. "It's time to get up and get breakfast." Breakfast that will probably be buttered toast and a banana at this point. I make a mental note to go to the store after I'm done with conferences this afternoon.

She wiggles but doesn't open her eyes. I've been here before with her and it never ends well. Last time, she all but scratched my face in a tantrum when I told her to get up.

"Ains," I repeat.

Burying her head in the pillow, I scrub a palm down my face. I've been up for over half an hour and still haven't gotten changed because I wanted to get her breakfast set. Now I'm regretting that because it means dressing quickly and skipping my own breakfast, which won't make for a good day.

I do what my parents always did when I acted like this. I yank the blankets off her and scoop her up. She wiggles and bats my chest until I set

her on her feet. “Sorry, kid. I’ve got to go to the school today which means Aunt Jenna is watching you.”

Normally she perks up over Jenna’s name, but I can tell her early morning battle is getting the best of her. She tries crawling back in bed, but I stop her. Fighting me all the way to the stairs, I all but growl in frustration.

“Ainsley!” I scold, trying not to be too loud since Easton isn’t up yet. He left my room after three this morning, later than he normally flees. I think he might have fallen asleep for a while before remembering he wasn’t in his room.

Ainsley drags her feet across the carpet, forcing me let go and sigh. She runs back to her room and closes the door. Eyes squeezing shut, I rub the lids and count to five before walking over and opening it.

“You have five minutes to get downstairs before I get angry,” I inform her in a tone I’ve only had to use once before. I hate sounding like a hard ass with her. We’ve always been on friendly terms, but it’s been different since she started living with me fulltime. “And that means no dessert ... for the next three days.”

Truthfully, I’ll probably cave. It’s like all the times I’d threaten not to give my childhood cat treats when he did something bad, then give him some anyway. All it took was one little look, a shin rub, and a loud purr to get me to fold.

Ainsley is no different.

As I walk down the stairs, I hear one door slam closed and another one open. Instead of looking up past the white railway that reveals the doors in question, I shake my head and walk back to the kitchen to prepare her toast.

It’s a few minutes later when I’m buttering the browned bread and grumbling to myself when I hear footsteps that are too heavy to belong to a five-year-old. A warm body comes up behind me and takes the butter knife away from me before his hip nudge me over.

“What’s wrong?”

My nostrils flare. “You drank all the milk again and didn’t bother telling me or getting more. And what happened to the eggs?”

He pauses what he’s doing to glance at me, lips pursed. “I’ll go to the store and grab some when they open. It’s not a big deal.”

Not a big— Of course he doesn’t think so. He doesn’t have to feed another person. All he has to worry about is himself, and half the time he

just grabs something after he leaves if he doesn't make one of his disgusting green protein shakes after his run.

"Ainsley needs breakfast," I state, walking to the refrigerator and shaking the carton of milk. "Do you just drink from this?"

He doesn't answer.

"We all use it, Easton."

He sets down the knife and turns to me, eyes hard. "What is the matter? Are you really pissed off over the milk? I said I'll go get some, okay? I'm sorry."

It's not about the milk, but my pride won't tell him that. Instead, I simmer in my foul mood and figure it has to do with my period that started first thing this morning. Pair that with a child who won't listen and will only get grumpier if she doesn't eat, it just worsens the irritation boiling in my blood.

"I need to get ready," is all I say before heading toward the doorway. He stops me by grabbing my wrist, pulling me toward him. "East, I'm not kidding. I told you last night that I have conferences with administration today. All the teachers and substitutes do."

"Breathe, Piper." His instruction comes in a calm, raspy tone that sends shivers down my spine despite my bitterness. "You're not going to get anywhere if you stay angry."

I'm half-tempted to make a Dr. Phil remark when his lips surprise me by brushing my cheek in a soft peck. His hands move strands of unbrushed hair away from my neck before his mouth moves down my jaw and peppers a trail of lush kisses over my pulse. I swallow as his breath teases my sensitive skin, my muscles loosening as I close my eyes.

"What are you doing," I whisper.

He draws back just enough to speak. "I'm helping you calm down." Before I can answer, his mouth continues working my neck, nipping, sucking, licking, then moves back up to meet my lips.

Hyperaware that I haven't even brushed my teeth, I move my head to the side causing him to kiss the corner of my mouth. "I really need to get ready and force Ainsley to get dressed and eat. I'm on a tight schedule because I need to drop her off at Jenna's house on my way in to work."

With that, I gently push him away and sidestep him. I freeze when he says, "I can watch her here."

Blinking, I slowly turn.

He shrugs. “The shop doesn’t open until five on Mondays. It’s not a big deal. Doesn’t make sense to take her somewhere else if I’m going to be here anyway.”

My throat thickens with a mixture of worry and gratefulness. He’s never watched Ainsley all day before—just if I had to run a last-minute errand that usually involved tampons because I somehow ran out.

He misinterprets my expression. “Unless you don’t trust me.” His gruff voice pulls me out of my thoughts, causing me to shake my head.

“It’s not that,” I promise lightly, offering him a smile in reassurance. “I just don’t want to burden you by watching her. I won’t be back until after two depending on how long the back to back conferences go. Then I need to run to the store.”

“I’ll go to the store.”

I wet my lips, knowing I don’t have time to contemplate this. If he watches her, it’s less stress on me. I won’t have to worry about being late or picking her up after the long day I’m sure to have where we go over new policies and expectations for faculty and staff.

“Okay.” I clear my throat. “I have a list started on the fridge of what we need. You should add milk and eggs to it, and probably bread because we’re almost out.”

He just nods.

“And Ainsley needs to get up and eat.”

Another nod.

“And she can’t watch TV all day.”

His lips twitch up. “Got it.”

I stare at him for a moment, knowing I should give him a basic rundown of everything. Like where he can reach me if he can’t get through on my cell, or what Ainsley should do since she doesn’t start Kindergarten again until Wednesday. Knowing her, she’ll rope him into watching movies or eating more candy. I took away her stash after her stomach bug on Saturday and she’s been bitter since.

But I don’t have time. Easton is smart and he’s good with Ainsley. I *do* trust him despite my hesitancy. “Okay. Well...” I jab my thumb toward the stairs. “I’m going to get ready and then tell Ainsley to come down here. Then I have to run or else I’ll be late.”

“Okay.”

He doesn't say much else before I go upstairs and do exactly what I say. I slip on a gray sweater dress and black leggings and then quickly run a brush through my frizzy red hair and clean my teeth. When I reach Ainsley's room, I see her lying in bed hugging her new teddy bear from Christmas.

"Easton is watching you today," I announce, walking in and sitting on the edge of her bed. "I really need you to help me out here, Ains. I'm tired and have a lot going on today. I need you to go downstairs and eat something for breakfast. Don't pull anything with him because I will find out. Understand?"

She blinks, pauses, but eventually nods.

I kiss her forehead. "Please?"

She hefts a sigh before climbing out of bed and walking hand-in-hand down the stairs beside me. I walk her into the kitchen and pass her a piece of toast, only partially aware of the blue eyes scanning down my body.

After kissing Ainsley goodbye and watch as she nibbles on her toast, I turn to him. "Thank you for watching her. I'll keep my cell on if you need me."

He follows me out to the door where I grab my coat that's hanging on a hook off to the side and slide into my winter boots. "We'll be fine. After she's done eating, we'll hit up the store before it gets busy."

Not having time to think about it, I nod and thank him again before heading out the door with my purse and keys in hand.

I'M two seconds away from harming my coworker but tell myself that jailtime isn't worth it. Not even if lunging across the table at the white-haired woman would be satisfying just to stop hearing her complain about everything. You'd think about three looks from the superintendent—aka *our boss*—she would have shut up.

Wrong.

"I'm just saying," Karen, because *of course* her name is Karen, says from across me. She picks up her Greek yogurt and spoons some in her mouth, "we don't need so many extra staff. If the budget is that limited, why cut it down by paying more people than necessary?"

More people being me.

My brow twitches. “You’re forgetting that there are people retiring soon, Karen.” *I hope to God you’re one of them.* “I’m personally grateful that the administration is letting me assist Diane until I finish my master’s degree.”

“Of course you are, dear,” she condescends. Patience wearing thin, I press my lips together and try brushing off her attitude.

If it weren’t for the school district hiring me to be a teacher’s aide to the high school history teacher and substitute in other grades when needed, I wouldn’t have the experience needed to complete my master’s without being too stressed. I would have been placed somewhere else instead of here in Aberdeen and then my schedule wouldn’t have worked in my favor.

Between the jobs I’m offered here, the tutoring I do at Linwood’s Student Center, and my remaining class credits that I take at the university, I have everything mapped out exactly how I need it. While I don’t like it, I sometimes have to tap into the fund that Danny left for Ainsley in order to assure we keep a roof over our heads and the bills paid, but it’s been easier to handle since I decided to get a roommate to split the costs.

Things work out even on the stressful days. Even with ungrateful shrews like Karen who only care about their own life. I’ve never seen her take part in the monthly birthday celebrations we do or donate to any fundraisers that go around when a coworker goes through a tough time. But she’s always around when she has an opinion to share.

“The budget is already approved,” Superintendent Miller informs her in a cool tone. His face went red about two comments ago, but it was the last one that made the muscles in his neck flex. “We have plenty of money for new staff as well as programs that a lot of other schools have defunded. That’s that.”

Karen, thankfully, says nothing the rest of the day. During the free time they give us to eat or take mini breaks, I check my phone obsessively. Normally I keep it off when I’m here, but I don’t want to risk there being a problem and missing it.

“How’s Ainsley?” Erin asks softly beside me in the hall. She’s holding a bowl of soup she just heated in the teacher’s lounge.

“Good.” My voice is hoarse, so I clear it and give her a timid smile. “My roommate is watching her for the first time so I’m just a little nervous.” Waving my phone, I loosen a sigh and power off the screen.

She walks into the office beside me, following me back into the large conference room with her food. “I get it. The first time we left Aiden behind with a new sitter I nearly had a meltdown. But it’s always fine.”

I hum out a noncoherent reply.

“And school?” she prompts, cooling the yellow liquid that smells like my favorite cream of broccoli. My stomach rumbles since the only thing I’ve had is an apple I swiped from the breakfast spread they had this morning.

“My last semester starts next week.”

She beams. “I bet you’re excited.”

“And nervous.”

Her head tilts, blonde locks narrowly missing the soup in front of her.

I explain. “I’m short a couple credits, so I have to take a random class to fill it on top of my Seminar and Student Teaching. Though, the school is letting my experience here count for that, so it should take some pressure off.”

A sympathetic frown appears on her otherwise flawless face. I’ve always liked Erin. She’s a new English teacher for the middle school, so I see her occasionally if our classes are in the library at the same time. Otherwise, we’re in different wings of the building. “What class do you have to take?”

“History of Mythology.”

Interest brightens her eyes. “That sounds interesting. Weren’t you telling me you’re into Greek Mythology?”

“Yeah,” I relent, shrugging. “I read the syllabus online and it’s only covered in the last half of the course. We barely go over it for a week which is disappointing. Plus, the teacher isn’t even listed.”

She cringes. “That’s never good.”

Another reason I’m nervous. If they cancel the class because there’s been a change in faculty, that means I have to attempt to squeeze into another one. Most of the ones I saw for the term are already full.

“It’ll work out,” she insists.

I know it will. It always has before.

“Hey,” I stare at the knotted wood table, tracing the blemish with my finger. “What did you do for Sarah’s sixth birthday? I’m having trouble planning anything for Ainsley because of...”

Erin is one of the few people who knows about Ainsley's select mutism. After Danny passed away from the car accident, she hasn't spoken. The doctors said to give her time, but not once in the three years I've had her has she said a word. It makes me worry that the school will tell me I need to find a different district to fit her needs. I've already been talked to by the Kindergarten teacher who expressed her worry for future grades, as if because she doesn't talk she's somehow unable to understand.

Finding it hard to swallow, I suck in a shaky breath and try playing it off. "She likes princesses so I thought I could do a theme. But she hasn't made any friends and I don't think having a lot of people over would be a good idea. Any thoughts?"

Erin reaches over and pats my hand. "I know this woman who makes amazing cakes. She could do one with Ainsley's favorite princess and you could do an intimate party with family. The stores always have themed plates, balloons, and other fun stuff for kids' parties."

I'm thankful she isn't the type of person to press for a therapist intervention. I tried it last year because I'd gotten pressured into it by a doctor that I'd switched Ainsley to, but it only made her worse. Talking to strangers wasn't going to happen when she wouldn't even talk to family.

"I'll do that," I say, smiling.

When the rest of the day passes with no phone calls or SOS texts, I find the drive home from work to be calm. The dull sound of a pop mix channel on the radio ensures I don't get trapped in my head.

Walking into the house, I stop in my tracks after locking the front door. My eyes focus on the sleeping Ainsley in a well-crafted pillow fort in the living room, her small body draped across couch cushions and tangled in blankets she took from all our rooms.

Next to her is a pair of long jean-clad legs stretched out, one inked arm draped across his stomach as it rises and falls to a calming rhythm.

They're both sleeping.

Biting back my smile, I pull out my phone and snap a picture. Sending it to Jenna, I quietly take off my boots and jacket before tip-toeing into the kitchen, careful of the odds and ends scattered on the carpet.

When I open the fridge, I see a gallon of almond milk, one carton of eggs, and a piece of my favorite triple chocolate cake in a plastic container on the top shelf. There's a yellow sticky note with a scratchy word sprawled on it.

Sorry.

CHAPTER FOUR

BLINKING MY EYES OPEN WHEN THE BED DIPS BESIDE ME AND THE AIR swirls with the faintest scent of alcohol, I focus on the dark head of hair staring at the picture on my nightstand. His profile is blank, his lips pressed in a tight line and his eyes unblinking.

I sit up. “What are you doing?” Rubbing my eyes, I note that it’s after one in the morning. Knowing I need to be on campus tomorrow makes me groan. “I have to be up in like five hours, Easton. Go to bed.”

I’m tempted to bury myself under the blankets and ignore him until he leaves, but there’s distance on his face that makes me heft out a sigh instead. There’s something on his mind. I just hope it’s worth being woken up in the middle of the night over.

“We got robbed,” he murmurs.

Fully awake now, I reach out and touch his arm. “Are you okay? Jay?”

He just nods.

Blowing out a relieved breath, I sit all the way up and let the comforter fall to reveal my worn tee that has one too many holes and stains from over the years. “Did you file a police report? Did they catch the person responsible?”

“Yes. And no.”

“East.” I squeeze his arm. “I’m sorry.”

One of his shoulders lifts.

I clear my throat. “Are you drunk?”

“Stressed.”

I’d be a lot of things too if I’d gotten robbed, but I’m not sure I’d go out and drink. Then again, there’s Jay. The short time I’ve known him, I’ve

figured out that Captain Morgan is one of his closest friends, next to Easton. I wouldn't say he's an alcoholic, but he's probably going to become one soon if he keeps relying on a buzz when things get rough.

Not sure what to say, I offer the only half-ass advice that crosses my mind. "You should get some water and go to bed. Maybe take an Aspirin before you fall asleep."

His jaw ticks, but he doesn't say anything. Instead, his eyes travel back to the picture frame of Danny smiling. To my surprise, he reaches over and picks it up. "Who's watching her tomorrow?"

Her. Ainsley. "She goes back to school tomorrow. I'm picking her up after my last class and then we have plans to visit Grandma Mable."

I'm about to explain who that is again because I doubt he remembers the short conversation we had about her not long after he moved in. We never really got to know each other from talking, just observing. Like how he has a set routine every day that he hates breaking or else he's in a bad mood. Or how he likes cooking and cleaning whenever he has a lot on his mind. In fact, I'm surprised he's not downstairs right now making another creation. A few months ago, I woke up to the smell of something sweet coming from the kitchen at three-thirty in the morning. He and Jay got into a fight about something at the shop and he came home and made peanut butter cookies.

"His grandmother," he notes, gesturing toward the picture still grasped in his hands.

"Yeah."

The only thing he knows from our old conversation about her is that his grandmother is the only family Danny had left. His father died from lung cancer caused by years of smoking, his mother from childbirth, and he was an only child. Grandma Mable was always doting on her son and granddaughter, spoiling them with baked goods, toys, and homemade crafts. Sitting on a shelf in Ainsley's room is a raggedy teddy bear patched up hundreds of times over that Mable made for Danny when he was a kid.

"Why doesn't she take care of Ainsley?"

It's a question I saw coming from a mile away. East always gets more talkative when his defenses are down. Based on the harsh scent of bourbon radiating off him, I'd say his defenses are nonexistent right now.

Playing with the edge of the comforter to avoid his curious gaze, I inhale slowly. "Mable was put into a nursing home right before the

accident. She has early onset dementia, so she's not fit to care for her."

Once again, he remains silent.

"Plus," I add audibly quiet, "Danny made me her guardian in his will. I try making sure Ainsley still sees her great grandma as much as possible. It makes Mable happy."

He hums while nodding slowly.

"East?" He looks at me. "You should go."

His lips part, then close.

Nibbling my bottom lip, I ask, "Want me to go get you some water and medicine? I think you'll need it to survive tomorrow. I'm sure you and Jay have a lot to go over at the shop."

I can tell I'm right by the way his light eyes darken. So, I slide out of bed and pat his shoulder before walking to the bathroom and digging some medicine from the cabinet next to the sink. When I come back with a glass of water and two pills in my hand, he's passed out on my side of the bed.

My shoulders drop at the sight. Setting the stuff down on my nightstand, I debate on waking him up. The way his breath comes out heavily makes me think that may not be the best idea. Clicking my tongue, I take off his typical black boots that look like they're falling apart and pull the blanket over him.

Glancing at the empty space next to him, I weigh my options. Truth is, I'm tired and have no interest falling asleep on the lumpy couch downstairs or wedged into Ainsley's twin bed in her room. And sleeping in Easton's room, somewhere I've never been before, makes the decision to crawl in behind him easier.

He lets out soft snore.

I fall asleep quickly to the sound.

A SMALL FINGER pokes my cheek, rousing me from a deep slumber I haven't had in ages. When my eyes crack open, I see big round brown ones staring back at me. Groggily, I sit up and yawn, stretching my limbs and glancing at the alarm clock.

Except there's no alarm clock on the nightstand, or picture frame I'm accustomed to seeing every morning when I wake up. Suddenly, last night's events came crashing back. Eyes widening as I look over my shoulder at something that captured Ainsley's eyes, my heart all but stops at the sight of

a passed-out Easton beside me. One of his legs hangs out from under the covers I tucked around him, while one of his arms is bent over his face.

In this moment, I'm glad that Ainsley doesn't speak enough to question why our roommate is currently sleeping in my bed. But as soon as the thought crosses my mind, guilt takes over for even thinking something so horrible. I'd rather Ainsley ask me what he's doing here than stare at him, blink at me, and say nothing. I don't even remember what her voice sounds like.

Throat clogging with oncoming emotion that I'll beat myself up with all day, I climb out of bed and pick her up before making our way quietly out of the room. When my eyes catch the time on the clock, a gasp escapes my lips.

"Oh my God." Rushing into her room, I quickly pull out a pair of black leggings and long sleeve pink shirt from her closet and then pass her a pair of underwear and socks from her dresser. It's past seven-thirty. School starts in fifteen minutes and there's no way I'm getting her there on time for it.

I know I set an alarm last night and even triple checked it. Between Ainsley's first day back to school *and* mine, I knew our schedule would be tight. I couldn't afford either of us to be late, which was a nightmare coming true. I could only assume that my drunken bed buddy turned the alarm off when it sounded because I never heard it.

Cursing to myself as I help Ainsley dress, I pass her the hairbrush from the bathroom and instruct her to get her long strands untangled while I change into the first outfit I can get my hands on in my room. In my hurry, not once does Easton move. I want to throw something at him and yell, but I don't even have time for that.

Shaking my head at the loose pair of jeans and sweatshirt I'm in, I slide on a pair of mismatched socks and grab Ainsley's hand to go downstairs. From the kitchen, I grab a banana for her, an apple and yogurt for me, and the lunchbox with peanut butter and jelly, a small bag of chips, and a cheese stick I'm glad I prepared for her last night. Holding my keys in my mouth while I get her into her jacket and boots, I pass her the bright pink lunch pail and nudge her out the door.

It isn't until I drop her off, get reprimanded by the elementary principal who barely knows me, and get to campus thirty minutes late when I realize I forgot my backpack full of all my class materials and am wearing two

different shoes. It's my third class in when somebody notices the unfortunate fashion choice on my feet, giving me a judging brow.

"Fuck my life," I groan, sinking into the back seat of the lecture hall that my History of Mythology class is being held in. Thankfully, nobody else pays me any attention as they talk amongst themselves waiting for class to begin.

At least I got to my second and third classes early. There's nothing worse than walking into a class late and having everyone stare at you as the professor gives you a dirty look. Worse than that is when they lock the doors so everyone who's tardy can't get in. Been there, done that.

I start pulling out a scrap piece of paper I scrounge from the bottom of my purse along with a pen when quiet murmurs from the front of the room dull down. My eyes cast upward to see a tall man with dark hair walking in from the side door at the front of the classroom over to the table and podium in the center of the room. The brown leather messenger bag over his shoulder is peeled off and set on the table with his back to us.

There's no question that the quiet is from every straight woman and gay man busying themselves with a close analysis of muscles clearly showcased in the tight blue button down wrapped around the mountainous man. Granted, most men are taller than my short five-two stature. He just has the added bonus of being well built on top of his impressive height.

Shaking my head, I begin writing the date in the top righthand corner of my paper when a husky voice cuts through my concentration. "I would like anyone sitting in the back to move forward so the seats in the front are filled first. Thank you."

There aren't many of us in the last few rows, but I notice a few girls move from where they are in middle up to the second row for a closer look at the professor.

Stifling my laugh, I collect my things and move. When a boy cuts me off by shouldering past me to take the last seat in the row I was clearly moving to, I hold back the death glare I want to give him and straighten my spine to examine the next available spot.

"There's one right here in the front," the same gravelly voice calls out. Looking around, I realize I'm the only one standing. Ignoring the faint heat that's settled into the back of my neck, I walk down the wide steps until I'm in the seat directly across from the podium.

Papers get patted against the wood table in front of me before a stack appears in my line of vision. Sitting back, I look up to see the professor holding out the syllabus. When we lock eyes, I notice a familiarity in the sharp, aged features staring back at me.

Is that...?

“Take one, pass it down,” he instructs, moving the papers closer like I’m a moron for not knowing what he expects.

Clearly he isn’t who I think, even though the dark espresso tone of his almond shaped eyes is one I swear I’ve seen in the past. This man looks like the fine wine Mom always talks about with her favorite actors from the 80’s.

Some men get better with age, Piper.

If this man is who I think, then I can’t argue with her. Though I wouldn’t call him a silver fox, he certainly will be in another few years or so. Tall, built, yet lean in all the ways that count, he’s dressed professionally with a plain button down tucked into the tapered waist of his pressed black slacks. His muscles are on display which I’m sure he hadn’t meant to extenuate by wearing what he is, and I’m certainly not the only one who’s noticed his long legs and stocky figure.

It isn’t like I haven’t seen plenty of men like him, just not so closely. Not to mention the fair skin wrapped around a square jaw, envious cheekbones, and full lips make him look wholesome in a way that’s familiar to me. Familiar in an eerie *I know you but don’t want to say I know you* sort of way.

The blast from the past I’m thinking of would be at least thirty-nine, maybe forty by now. I haven’t seen him in a long time. If it’s really him, I have a lot of reasons to be weary. Like the fact that he didn’t show up to Danny’s funeral despite them being friends. When was the last time I would have seen Carter Ford? He grew up a few houses down from both Danny and me and was also good friends with my older half-brother Jesse. The three of them constantly got into trouble together but you couldn’t control them even if you tried.

This man ... he couldn’t be Carter. Even if their ages and features match, that would mean that he’s been around this whole time. It’d give him no excuse as to why he missed saying goodbye to his friend, other than being insensitive. Even Jesse showed up despite his hatred for funerals, something he had to deal with too many times between his biological

mother's overdose that sent him to live with us and his younger sister's suicide some years later. Still, he came.

It isn't until papers are distributed and he focuses on something laid out on the podium in front of him that I drift off in thought. My mind conjures up memories of hot summers helping Dad paint the house red, or Mom replant Hosta that Jesse backed over trying to get out of the driveway. Along with those memories are ones of a smiling face and deep-set dimples that always made me blush when they were directed at me in a friendly manner. I'd get so angry when Carter ruffled my hair like I was a little kid.

He's older than Jesse by six years and older than Danny by ten. In a strange alternate universe, he could even be one of Dad's kids from a previous marriage like Jesse and Hanna, my late half-sister. That'd been the running joke growing up, since Carter found his way to our house more times than not since his own father worked a lot. He got along with my entire family and treated me like an annoying little sister. I was the youngest as it was, and Jesse reminded me of that when I got away with things they never could. *Daddy's Princess* was snarked at me countless times until I'd snap.

The sudden sound of my name being called pulls me away from the thoughts lingering from my youth. It's not the typical monotone drone of a bored professor dreading another intro-level class. There's surprise webbed into the rasp of each syllable as he repeats my name again, letting it roll off his lips like he's testing it's out after years of never speaking it.

"Piper Montgomery?"

When my face tilts upward to see the professor searching the room with narrowed eyes, I squirm and clear my throat. "Here."

His eyes instantly snap to mine, a noticeable shift in posture straightening his spine as one of his dark brows arch a fraction.

In that moment I know for sure that this is the same man I've told myself I secretly hated when he didn't show up to the funeral home. The same person I housed a crush on for a long time when I was younger, and the very same individual who I hoped I wouldn't have to see again because I wouldn't know what to say.

Carter Ford.

Professor Carter Ford.

When the hell had that happened?

I could tell he wanted to say something, but he'd already spent more time on me than he did on the others still waiting to be called on. The wheels are turning in his head as his eyes linger on my auburn locks that look different straightened and recolored compared to their normal curls and tone. I used to have freckles all over my cheeks which somehow faded as I got older. I'm leaner, curvier—I don't look like I did back then. I'm older. More mature.

Giving him a slight shrug, I go back to jotting down some assignment due dates in my planner based on the syllabus schedule. He goes about finishing roll call before transitioning right to the basics of the course. I'm thankful, and not surprised, that he skips boring introductions. Nobody wants to know a fun fact about their peers, they just want to get through the class period so they can leave.

What would I say anyway? There's nothing about my life that I deem fun enough for anybody to care about. I could tell them about Ainsley, but that would only raise questions about why a twenty-six-year-old is sitting in on a master's class when I have a kid at home waiting for me. I've learned over the years that people are judgmental and I don't have time for pricks.

Plus, there's Carter. Carter who, to my knowledge, knows nothing about Ainsley. Danny admitted once that he fell out of touch with Carter for a while but had reached out before his death. I don't know what they talked about or what they didn't. Danny loved Ainsley with all his heart and loved his wife Willow just as much. I'm sure he would have brought them up because he was proud of his family. And I, in my infamous jealousy, always told him how happy I was when I wasn't. Not at all.

Because he never truly knew how I felt.

Not even after Willow passed away giving birth to Ainsley, a fear he'd had since his mother passed the same way. I was just there for him, a shoulder to cry on like always. He and I were closer in age than he was with Jesse and Carter, another reason why they probably fell out of touch. Still, I want to believe that bringing up Ainsley wouldn't strike any surprise in Carter's features.

But I don't know.

The period goes by quickly. I could tell everyone expected Carter to end the hour and fifteen-minute course early like most people do the first week of school. However, I know him better than that even if I pretend not to.

He's always been right to the point, which means beginning the lesson despite the gargled protests coming from people around me.

When he dismisses us, I notice the slightest burn on the top of my head as I bend down to stuff my makeshift notepad into my purse. His shined black shoes are visible from the corner of my eyes, standing still between me and the podium where he taught most of the class.

Glancing up, I give him a small reluctant smile before standing and draping the bag strap across my shoulder. "Hi."

He blinks before his lips curve upward in the tiniest smile. I recognize the way his dimples pop even from the barely-there curve, keeping his expression professional but not. There's a familiarity between us that wasn't there when I walked in.

His eyes travel down me, but not in an uncomfortable manner. There's no sexual nature to the shine of his eyes, just an old acquaintance who can't believe the circumstances. "I'm surprised to see you here."

"Honestly? Me too." Huffing out a quiet laugh, I shake my head. "I just moved to Aberdeen about a year ago. There was a house open in the development off I-87. I'm thankful I was able to enroll here before last semester started."

His brows pinch. "Is your family still in Newport?"

I nod. "It's just me here. Sometimes Mom and Dad come and visit. I've got a friend nearby that suggested looking into a few places that were available for purchase."

His arms cross over his chest. "So, you're studying History?"

Another head bob.

"And you're a...?"

Sighing, I note the time on my phone. "I have to get going, but I'm finishing my master's. I started college right after high school but got a little ... sidetracked, so I graduated with my bachelor's later than expected." Shrugging, I give him a half-ass wave. "Anyway, it was nice seeing you again, Professor Ford. See you Thursday?"

He visibly winces at the name. "It's strange hearing you call me that, Piper. But yes. I'll see you Thursday."

Departing from the man who was my very first crush, I haul butt across campus to meet with my adviser. But I don't listen to a single word the gray-haired woman says because my mind can't brush off Carter-frigging-Ford.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SOUND OF MY NAME BEING CALLED FROM A DISTANCE HAS MY STEPS faltering on my way to the commuter lot. Stopping and searching the open quad coated with a thin layer of snow that the sun is quickly melting, I lock eyes on a familiar tall figure walking toward me from one of the new academic buildings.

“Piper,” Carter repeats, stopping a few feet away from me. The same messenger bag rests on his shoulder, wrinkling his otherwise perfect shirt.

“Where’s your jacket?”

“It’s fifty,” is all he says.

I just blink.

“How’s ... everything?” The question catches me off guard, making my brows pinch. Small talk feels forced between us, and the awkward tension is thick in the air.

“Good.” I’m glad it doesn’t come out a skeptical question like it is in my mind. He never used to go out of his way when I was younger because we didn’t exactly hang around each other a lot.

It used to hurt my feelings, which made Danny feel bad too. Then he’d bribe me with cookies that Mable made and everything would seem better. Until the next time they said I wasn’t allowed to hang out with them.

Carter rubs the side of his jaw. “I spoke to Jesse a while ago. He sounds like he’s doing good. Settled.”

Jesse married a woman named Ren who’s a spitfire. She’s grounded him in ways he desperately needed. I think all of us were worried he’d end up dead or in jail if he didn’t stop making stupid decisions.

“Yep.” I shift from one foot to another. “I should actually get going. I have plans. So...”

“Oh.” He nods slowly, stepping back as if there isn’t enough space between us already. “Of course. It’s good seeing you, Piper. Have a nice rest of your day.”

Not knowing what to say, I just wave and finish the trek back to my car. When I’m in, I text Jenna to tell her I need to talk to her about my weird day when I get home tonight. Until then, I make the drive to Ainsley’s school and pick her up.

Once she’s in her car seat, I give her a bright smile. “Good day back?”

Her shoulders lift.

“Excited to see Grandma Mable?”

Her eyes brighten as she nods her head quickly, pieces of her hair flying into her face. It makes me laugh as I buckle myself in and pull out onto the road.

“I know she’s looking forward to seeing you too, Nugget.” My eyes go to the rearview to see her looking out the window. “Maybe we can stop along the way and pick her up some flowers. Want to do that?”

Her eyes meet mine before she nods again, making me smile at her. Mable always had a vase full of flowers in the middle of her table growing up. She used to have a large flower garden in her backyard that she’d make Danny help keep up. Rose, tulips, lilac bushes, and everything in between was showcased on the prettiest lawn I ever saw.

I’ve always wanted a garden like hers.

I let Ainsley pick out an assortment of flowers at the florist we stop at occasionally before going to the nursing home. Ainsley’s hand holds mine tightly as she watches the woman in a green apron tie a bright purple ribbon around the plastic that she also helped pick out.

Unfortunately, our trip isn’t as long as we’d like. When we arrive, one of Mable’s attending nurses tells me that she’s been in an episode all day. She thinks seeing us will help, but we’re only permitted to stay an hour.

And an hour ... it’s not long enough, but when Mable throws a fit and asks for her husband, who’s been dead for almost twenty years, I know I need to take Ainsley home. She doesn’t recognize us and fights with the nurses who try calming her down.

It breaks my heart to see the once carefree woman with a heart of gold so lost in herself. I want to hug her, to tell her I love her, but I know it won’t

do any good. And when Ainsley starts crying after Mable knocks down the vase of flowers and shatters the glass, we're all but shoved out the door before either of us can say goodbye.

When we get home, I have to carry an inconsolable little girl into the house who clings to me like she's only done once before after she was discharged from the hospital following the accident. Flicking on the lights to lighten the house, I know we'll be alone until sometime after midnight and it's for the best.

There's something written on the whiteboard attached to the fridge door that I notice immediately as Easton's handwriting. After setting Ainsley on the counter, I open the refrigerator to confirm the casserole he says he made is there for us to heat up.

Another apology.

Jaw ticking, I close the door and turn back to Ains. She's wiping at her face with the back of her shirt sleeve, causing me to grab a tissue from my purse and dab her damp cheeks. "I'm sorry, Nugget. Grandma Mable will be okay, she just wasn't feeling well today."

Like always, she's silent.

I think of the casserole behind me and know I should put it in the oven. But I'm tired, hungry, and admittedly a little petty, so I opt to ignore his apology dish altogether. "Want some pizza? We can eat until our stomachs hurt and watch a movie."

I manage to get a tiny nod and sniffle from her, which eases some of the tight muscles in my neck and shoulders. After her face is dry, I set her down and tell her to go pick a movie out for us to watch while I order our favorite. Half cheese for her, and half barbecue chicken for me. I tell myself not to bother ordering anything else, but I know it'd be rude to order us something and not Easton for when he's home. So, I order his favorite veggie lover and hang up.

When I walk into the living room, Ainsley is wrapped in her lavender quilt like a little burrito, and I know she's hurting. "Nugget? I know it may not feel like it, but everything will be okay. We'll visit Mable again soon."

Maybe after I call first next time just to be on the safe side.

She glances up at me and points to a DVD case on the coffee table. I smile and pick up our favorite movie to watch together. We know every song in *The Wizard of Oz*. I sing while she bobs her head, entranced by the colors, wardrobe, and talking animals.

And when she falls asleep hours later after her stomach is full and the movie ends, I know she'll be all right. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but eventually.

MY BEDROOM DOOR cracks open a little after eleven-thirty, and I know instantly from the large shadow and wafting scent of Armani that it's Easton. He slips his head in and sees me leaning against the headboard with my phone in my hand. Sleep evades me tonight after seeing Mable, so I opted to pull up a book to read.

"You're still awake," he notes, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Mhmm."

He leans against the back of the door, his hands shoved into the pockets of his dark jeans. I wait for him to say something, but he just watches me until I sigh and turn on the bedside lamp.

"You can't buy me off with food, East."

His Adam's apple bobs. "I know."

Does he? "There's pizza downstairs on the counter if you didn't see it. Veggie lovers. I promise I didn't spit on it or hide bacon anywhere."

His lips quirk up as he pushes off the door and saunters over. I know the look in his eyes. It's probably the same one in mine—the one wanting to let go of every emotion building up just for a night.

"The casserole is chicken," is what he replies with, making my brows arch. He sits down on the edge of the bed like he did last night, his hands not moving from his pockets. "I'm sorry for last night and this morning."

I'm not going to back down. "Good. You should be."

His chin dips. "How was your day?"

My nostrils flare as the heaviness settles further into my chest cavity. "Bad," I whisper, powering off my phone and setting it on my stand. "Mable wasn't doing well, and Ainsley had a breakdown. It was..." I shrug, letting my words fade into oblivion.

"I'm sorry," he repeats gruffly.

I know he is.

Sorry doesn't change anything though.

Shifting, I brush hair behind my head. "Is everything at the shop okay? Did you and Jay figure it out?"

"The cops found the guys who did it."

Relief floods me. “Good.”

“They already spent the money.”

My eyes widen. “What? It happened less than twenty-four hours ago. How is that even possible?”

“Drugs.” One word. One word that stops my breathing as I stare at him. He says it so casually, so surely, that I can only assume the cops gave him more details than he’s willing to share with me.

“East...” My voice cracks as he meets my eyes, the blue tone of his softening. He searches my face for a moment before his gaze locks on my parted lips.

We both need this tonight.

He makes the first move, leaning forward and brushing his lips against mine softly. I angle my head to deepen the kiss, rising on my knees as he adjusts his body to sweep his tongue across my bottom lip until I open up for him and taste the usual peppermint from the gum he keeps in his pocket all the time. My arms wrap around his neck as his pull away the comforter and work their way under my thin sleep shirt until it’s up over my head and disposed of on the floor.

My bare breasts cause a noise to rise from the back of his throat right before he dips down and latches onto the pebbled nipples with his mouth, causing my chest to arch forward. Before I know it, I’m straddling his lap, stripping off his shirt while he works me until I moan and writhe and pant his name.

His jeans come off.

My pajama shorts.

His black boxer briefs.

My panties.

When we’re bare, it doesn’t take long for him to work me until I need more than just his mouth and fingers. After sheathing him with a condom, I grab his hard length and guide it to my slick entrance, sinking onto him until he curses and groans. He grips my hips as I set a steady rhythm. His fingertips dig into me as his teeth tease my breasts, nipping, licking, and tugging at my beaded nipples until I ride him faster to chase an orgasm that quickly heats my core.

He holds me closer as he thrusts upward to meet my hips every time, and it’s everything I need. Silence. Lust. Want. It’s impersonal and sweaty but it works for us. The only thing that fills the room is our quickened

breaths and subtle noises as we get closer and closer to the cliff we both want to jump off.

I kiss him hard and push him down flat on his back, using his chest as a way to hold myself upright as I circle my hips over him. He lets me use him, his head tipping back when I grind my hips against him and find the perfect position for his pubic bone to rub against my clit until I'm clenching around his length.

Digging my fingertips into his chest as I come, I feel him twitch and drive into me twice more before he finds release too.

I use his body as a pillow only long enough for the sated feeling to wear off. Once I climb off him and grab my clothes from the floor, I look over my shoulder to see his eyes on the ceiling as he catches his breath.

I say, "Thanks for the casserole."

CHAPTER SIX

THE WARM AIR FROM THE HEATER I SIT NEXT TO WARMS MY COOL SKIN AS I sift through paperwork for students I'm tutoring this semester. Despite the wool jacket, thick sweater, and jeans I'm wearing, my cheeks and nose still feel numb from the bitter air outside. It's the only reason people don't side-eye me for sitting on the floor where it's warm rather than one of the tables assigned for tutoring sessions.

When the front door opens behind me, a rush of cold air blows my hair and causes shivers to race down my spine. The door clicking shut has me looking over my shoulder, wondering if my first student arrived early. Doubtful, but there's always at least one person who takes their grades seriously. The first week is always rough though because it just consists of meeting the people you're working with for the next fifteen weeks and going over paperwork and expectations.

Expectations like actually showing up.

But it's not a student that's searching the room. Carter Ford is sporting a long black coat that's buttoned to fit his bulky body and charcoal pants that are looser than the ones he wore Tuesday. He looks professional as his eyes scan the room for ... what?

I clear my throat and stand, catching his attention. His brows draw up as I approach him, setting down papers on the table. "What can I help you with, Professor Ford?"

"It's Carter."

Not here, it's not.

I simply wait for him to reply.

He senses as much. “I was told I could find Maggie Fields here. I’m supposed to speak with her about setting up accommodations for a student in one of my courses.”

I nod and gesture for him to follow me to Ms. Fields’s office in the back. Typically students are encouraged to seek their own help from the Student Center Services, but some cases are different. When I see the light off as we approach the locked room, I frown.

“Did you have an appointment?” It doesn’t matter if he does, she’s usually here and oftentimes not busy. But once in a while she’ll come in late, and I wouldn’t be surprised if today is one of those mornings.

“Yes.”

“Do you have her email?”

He nods.

“Well...” I’m not sure what I can do to help besides tell him to email her and just leave a note on her door about him coming over.

“It’s no big deal,” he says, pulling me away from my lingering thoughts. He shifts slightly and looks at me with distant eyes. “You wouldn’t happen to be free right now, would you?”

Warning bells go off in my mind, telling me to put distance between us. I’m not ready to forgive him yet. “I can’t help you with scheduling students. That’s protocol Ms. Fields has to take care of.”

“To talk,” he insists. “That’s it.”

Hesitating, I shake my head, brushing hair behind my ear and backtracking to what I was doing before. “I have a student coming in soon. Plus, there’s nothing to talk about.”

Collecting the papers where I left them, I organize them based on appointment times. There’s one first thing this morning, and one before my last class. I note his presence behind me as I saddle up next to the heater attached to the wall, which makes weird noises I should probably call maintenance about.

“Piper.”

I still don’t turn.

He sighs. “I know you’re mad, but—”

“Why would I be mad?” I spin around, pinning him with my eyes while lifting a brow in inquiry. Realistically, I should let it go. I never even thought about him since the funeral. But seeing him brings up memories I wish I could easily forget.

Memories of Danny and him laughing, of Jesse and him teasing me about embarrassing stuff I said or did, and the three of them being friends without me. I'd always been jealous. Bitter that they found friendship with each other when I only had Danny if he wasn't busy. Sure, that changed with time. My crush on Carter shifted to Danny the more time we spent together, but once more it was in vain.

That hurts to think about.

His head dips. "You know what."

I play dumb, knowing I should stop baiting him to admit it. "Listen, I'm kind of busy right now and I'm sure you have plenty of things to do before class. So..."

My eyes go to the door, but his stay on me. The color darkens in exasperation and I know he's being reminded of how annoying I used to be growing up. The little sister nobody wanted.

He plants his feet and crosses his arms over his chest. "No. You're upset about the Danny thing and we need to talk about it."

Something inside me snaps, like a tetherball free flying in the open air just waiting to smash into some innocent victim's face. "*The Danny thing?* Wow. You're right, Professor. I am upset about 'the Danny thing'. You know, the fact that he's *dead* and *not coming back*."

His features change, paling. "Pip—"

"How could you?" I accuse, voice breaking as I drop the papers again and match his stance. While his expression is tight and regretful, mine is full of rage. "He looked up to you and Jesse and you two always acted like he was beneath you because he was younger. I thought you were all friends, and you didn't even show up to his frigging funeral." I want nothing more than to swear, to curse at him, but the habit of refraining from dropping f-bombs these days is too strong thanks to Ainsley.

His lips press into a straight line.

I shake my head. "So, yeah. I'm upset. But, no. There's nothing we need to talk about because you can't change what's already been done. You..." My nostrils flare as I battle unshed tears from falling. "I know you weren't the driver that took his life, but you could have at least been there to show your support."

His jaw moves a moment before his head does, slowly nodding in agreement. "I know. I should have been there, but I couldn't. Danny and I had our share of issues that had a lot to do with our age gap, okay? But he

was a good guy, a good friend, and you're right. I could have gone and checked on Mable, Jesse ... you."

You. I don't want that to get to my head, but I do. I let his words soak in and simmer until I'm a little less angry. He could just be saying I'm right, but I know he's not. His father always taught him not to be prideful, so when he's wrong he admits it.

But I'm also wrong too.

Blowing out a breath, I lean against the edge of the heater. "I'm sorry. He meant a lot to me and sometimes I wondered if you and Jesse even liked him or just put up with him because he wanted to be your friend so bad."

"We liked him," he says quickly.

"It didn't seem like that."

He doesn't say anything right away. One of his palms scrapes against his slightly scruffy jaw in contemplation. "I can see why you thought that. Jess and I were closer in age and could do more than we could with Danny. But don't mistake that, Piper. Losing Danny, no matter how much distance was between us after we went our separate ways, didn't hurt any less."

This time, I say nothing.

My throat dries as I force myself to nod, knowing he's being sincere. When I meet his eyes, his are searching mine to see if I accepted his unspoken apology. I can tell he's sorry, that he's sad about Danny's passing, but there's still a part of me that wonders what kept him from coming that day.

"Why?" I don't need to clarify.

"It was too hard."

My brows raise.

The door opens again before he can answer, and a student walks in. The blond-haired boy looks between us, cheeks pinkening, before jabbing his thumb toward the door. "I can come back. I'm, uh, here to see Piper Montgomery."

Carter speaks up. "She's all yours."

He tips his head at me once before walking out the door, hands in his coat pockets as he exits. My eyes don't linger long before locking on my nine o'clock appointment.

"I'm ready when you are."

He grumbles something and sits down at the table with me. While he pulls his agenda out of his bag to set up our meeting days, I sneak a peek

out the side window to see Carter walking toward a different academic building.

I MAKE it to all my classes early to make up for the scramble my life consisted of the first day. By the time I arrive to my last one, History of Mythology, I'm startled to see Carter already in the front of the room writing something on the whiteboard.

When the door closes behind me with a loud *click*, he turns around. He caps the marker in his hands and sets it down, walking over to the table and opening his messenger bag.

"Piper," he greets, tipping his head.

Clearing my throat, I try not to make things weirder than they already are between us. My eyes go to the middle section where I want to sit since it's open. The sound of his raspy voice makes me sigh and walk toward the same seat I occupied before.

Dropping my bag into the chair next to me, I pull my notebook and pen out before putting my hair into a ponytail. "Professor Ford. How's your day been?"

He gives me a half smile. "Up until spilling my coffee down the front of my shirt, it was going well. Considering that happened right before my first class..."

Cringing, I click my tongue. "Been there, done that. Coffee is my lifeline but the amount of times I've worn it, ran out of it, or didn't have time to get it tests me more than my sanity likes."

He chuckles. "The older I get, the more dependent on caffeine I become to get through the day." He pulls out a folder from his bag and sets it on the podium. "You mentioned your friend told you to move here?"

I nod, tapping the end of my pen against the cover of my notebook over the change of topic direction.

"Has he lived here long?"

Choking out a laugh, I fight off a smile over the assumption. In hindsight, I *am* living with a guy ... and sleeping with him. But we're no more than roommates with benefits, not even really friends, and that's all because Jenna told me about the house when it went up for foreclosure. "She moved here a little while ago. I met her at the first university I attended. I had to take time off, but she graduated and came here to work at

a boutique using her degree. We've kept in touch over the years, so she made sure to help me after I finally got my bachelor's and decided to find somewhere else to finish my master's degree."

He scrubs his palm across his jaw. "I didn't mean to assume anything. Sometimes I speak to Jesse or your father, but they haven't mentioned anything about you."

Clicking my tongue, I nod slowly. "Yeah, well..."

He cusses softly under his breath. "That didn't come out right. They'll mention you—"

"It's okay," I assure, waving my hand in dismissal. Jesse is thirty-three, seven years older than me. The age difference made it difficult for us to get along, something I can relate to when Carter made the point with Danny earlier.

Jesse and I grew up differently. He lived with his biological mother for a while before moving in with Mom and Dad after her passing, same with Hanna, who's two years younger than him. By the time I came around, they were living their own lives and visiting their other family up until Hanna's suicide. Like their mother, she struggled with depression and drug addiction, and the combination was fatal. It's rare Jesse and I talk these days other than a few holiday texts when the season comes around. I'm not sad about it, maybe just disappointed. I think I remind him of Hanna, so I can't really blame him for keeping his distance.

"I don't speak much to Jesse."

He simply nods, leaning against the podium. "So, you're graduating this semester?"

"Yep." My lips pop with the *p*.

I'm tempted to ask about his life now—if he has a wife, a family, maybe a kid or two. I never heard him talk about that sort of stuff much when I was younger, but they were probably too young to care about those kinds of futures then anyway. Still, thinking of little Carters running around makes me curious.

But before I can open my mouth to say anything, the back doors open signaling other classmates arriving. Pressing my lips together, I sink into my seat and focus on the random doodles outlining my notebook paper. He greets everyone as they trickle in, not looking at me again the rest of the period.

WHEN I GET HOME SOMETIME LATER with Ainsley in tow, she runs over to her toys and ignores the backpack, coat, and boots she drops on the floor along the way. Too tired to scold her, I just shake my head and tidy up before heading into the kitchen.

I freeze when I see Easton sitting at the counter with a piece of pizza in one hand and the newspaper in his other. It's always strange seeing him so content reading the news or doing the crossword puzzle on the weekends.

"You're home early," I say slowly, setting Ainsley's backpack and lunch pail down on the counter across from him.

He puts the paper down, finishing off the last of his cold pizza before brushing crumbs from his fingers. "We changed store hours around. We're closed on Thursdays now."

I make a face as I grab a bottle of water from the fridge. "Why not just take Mondays off like most businesses? Aren't Thursdays usually busier?" Pulling out the only other stool opposite of him, I take a seat.

"That's why we're open," he remarks, eyebrow arching as if I'm stupid for even mentioning it. "No competition."

My lips part, then close. He's got me there. I'm the type to like two days off in a row, though right now my weekends are full of homework and homework grading on top of tending to Ainsley. Thankfully, she doesn't make it too hard for me. Most days.

"Classes okay?" he asks, folding the paper up and leaning back.

Lately, his inquiries have taken me by surprise. It's not like he's never cared about my life, he's just rarely asked more than he's had to. Then again, I've never offered up anything I wasn't willing to. Even though I have Jenna to rant to on bad days, sometimes it's nice to have someone else who isn't bias.

When I told Jenna about Carter, she told me she knew a guy who knew a guy—as if putting a hit on him solved anything. It made me laugh at least, especially when she said the guy she knew was her eighth grade Earth Science teacher.

"Okay ... enough."

His brows just raise.

My shoulders lower as I lean forward and rest my elbows on the edge of the countertop. "I ran into someone I knew from a long time ago. It was rough."

His features darken. "Ex?"

My eyes widen. I manage to laugh. “Uh, no. Definitely not. I mean, I had a huge crush on him for a long time, but he was my brother’s friend. And...” *And Danny’s*. “He was friends with Ainsley’s father. With Danny. We all grew up together and he did something I’ve had trouble forgiving.”

He studies me for a long moment before pushing off the stool and walking over to the fridge. “What did he do that’s so bad?” Pulling out the casserole, he grabs two plates from the side cabinet and begins putting a healthy serving on each. Knowing he doesn’t eat meat, I watch him carefully as he puts one in the microwave.

I bite down on the inside of my cheek. “It doesn’t matter.”

Turning, his lower back leans on the counter as the microwave counts down. “If you’re that upset about it, it obviously does.”

“He didn’t go to the funeral.”

Easton remains silent.

“They were friends,” I point out. “If your friend died, wouldn’t you go to the funeral? It was rude of him not to when he spent so much time with Danny and Jesse, my brother. Danny’s grandma Mable considered him another son and he never said he was sorry or sent her food or flowers or anything.”

When the first plate is warmed, he switches it out for the second one before even saying a word. “Can you really fault him for that, Piper? People take death in different ways.”

Is he really taking Carter’s side? “You’re not wrong, but it’s still messed up. He could have done something, sent anything, to know he was thinking of Mable.”

“Mable or you?”

I blink.

Easton puts the plate of warm food on the counter in front of me. “Has Mable ever brought it up? Said she was upset with this guy?”

“Well...” No, she hasn’t. But Mable was never good at any type of confrontation. Sometimes I worried about people walking all over her because she was too nice. Then again, she never let people get away with too much if it meant enough to her.

He grabs me a fork. “Seems like you’re being hard on him for no reason. I’m sure it sucked for you, but did he really do anything warranting a grudge?”

I play with my food. “Maybe.”

He makes a noise but says nothing else. Instead, he grabs the second plate from the microwave and moves the stool over to where mine is.

“Ainsley,” I call, giving him a grateful smile. He just tips his head and puts the rest of the casserole away. “Come get some dinner.”

She comes in and looks at East before seeing the food next to me. Climbing onto the stool, she plops down and picks up the fork.

Before East can walk out, I stop him. “I know you’re right about everything. But Danny meant a lot to me and he deserved better.”

His jaw ticks, but he nods before walking out of the room. I listen to his footsteps creaking up the stairs, then his door open and close.

Turning to Ainsley, I nudge her arm. “Eat up, please. I want to go over the alphabet and spelling words with you after dinner and then you can play more.”

She makes a face.

I roll my eyes. “Don’t pout. Your teacher said you’re doing well with your alphabet, so it’s just getting used to using them in words. She said one of the projects involves coloring.”

Ainsley pierces a piece of chicken, bringing it to her lips. Sometimes it’s hard to hold back my frown when she shuts down. I want to know how she likes school, what she’s learning, instead of hearing about her performance from her teacher.

But I know I can’t force her to talk.

“Hey, Ains?”

She looks up at me through her thick lashes—the same ones she got from her father. I always envied those.

“I love you. You know that, right?”

Her lips tilt up as she nods.

“Good.”

Her hand reaches out and taps mine.

It’s her way of saying *I love you, too*.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER SIGNING IN AT THE REGISTRATION DESK AND BEING GREETED BY THE same speckled-haired nurses who usually works when I stop by Sunny Acres Nursing Home, I turn and note the empty waiting room. My lips twitch as I take a seat close to the doors leading back to the patient's rooms, wondering where everyone else's families are. Do they not get visitors?

When my name is called by Glenda, a sweet dark-skinned woman who typically fills me in on everything Mable related, I stand and give her a light hug. "No Ainsley today?"

I shrug loosely. "I wasn't sure if Mable would be up for it. It was kind of a spontaneous decision to pop in, and when I called on my way here..."

She nods in understanding, a strand of black hair falling from the updo it's in. "She's been okay this week—lucid. In fact, she was just asking about you two this morning."

That puts a smile on my face. We walk back, past familiar rooms full of other elderly residents until I make it to Mable's in the far corner. Sometimes we hang out in the common room, but most times we just chat in hers where it's quieter.

As soon as we walk in, Mable's eyes brighten. "Piper, my dear!" My heart squeezes when she stands and wraps me in her thin arms. I want to hug her tightly but I'm always afraid this woman, the one who's always known how I felt about her grandson, would break. "I missed you. Where's our favorite little one?"

Pulling back, I give her a sad smile. "I didn't tell her I was stopping in. I just wanted to see you. Jenna is picking her up from school and probably feeding her way too much sugar."

That makes Mable laugh.

Glenda brushes my arm and looks between Mable and me. “I’ll be out in the common room if you need anything.”

We both nod, Mable gesturing for me to sit at the small table housed by the large window that bathes the room in warm sunlight. As soon as my butt hits the red cushion, I sigh and stare at the people walking the gardens. They’re beautiful in the springtime when the flowers bloom, and even prettier when some of the residents—like Mable—go out and plant more in the summer.

“What’s wrong, dear?”

Sweet, sweet Mable. I love her like she’s my own grandma. And, in a way, she is. My grandparents passed away long before I was born, and I never got to know what it was like to be spoiled by them. Mable filled that hole, even being my temporary grandparent during the allotted days in elementary school when I had nobody who came to eat lunch with me like the other kids whose grandpas and grandmas sat with them.

Swiping the tip of my tongue across my bottom lip, I turn my eyes on her. “Carter Ford is one of my professors this semester at Linwood University. You remember him, right?”

She doesn’t take pause as she reaches for her teacup and brings it to her mouth. After a short sip, she nods. “Of course. Fine young man, that one. Danny was very fond of him and your brother.”

Right. Which leads to my next question, one I probably shouldn’t ask. But Mable has never shied away from talking about Danny like it hurts her. So, I go for it. “Did you ever hear from him after...?” I wave my hand in the air. “I was just wondering. I didn’t see him that day and wondered if maybe he and Danny had stopped talking altogether.”

Mable sets her cup down and rests her hands on the table. “Those boys had their own lives. I didn’t take offense to them not checking in on a little old lady they had no obligation to.”

“But...” Maybe Easton is right to tell me to let it go. Mable doesn’t seem bothered by the situation, so why should I be? “Yeah, I guess so.”

“He’s doing well then?”

I smile. “He seems to be.” Truthfully, I have no clue. It isn’t like he and I have a lot of time to catch up, and I doubt he’d want to. “I think he’s doing what he loves. You should see him teach, Mable. He’s good.”

Her smile is light on her face as she reaches out and pats my hand. “You always had the cutest crush on him. To be honest, I would have thought you’d end up with one of those two. Jesse probably would have had a fit, but the idea of you and Danny always made me happy.”

My cheeks burn over this unexpected turn of events. Not wanting to dive into old feelings, some not so old, I change the topic. “Ainsley’s birthday is in a couple weeks. I was thinking of asking Glenda or one of the other nurses if it’d be okay if I could sign you out for the day to come to our house. I’m doing a small theme party. Cake, presents, the works.”

“I’d love that, Piper.”

I sink into my seat. “Mable?”

“Hmm.”

I pause, looking out the window again and staring at the elderly couple walking hand-in-hand. I smile absently at them as they laugh at something the other says. “Do you think about Danny a lot? Get angry over what happened?”

“I think about him all the time,” she admits, moving her cup out of the way. The sound of glass against wood causes me to focus back on her. “But I’ve learned a long time ago that anger gets us nowhere in life.”

I let that soak in. She’s always handled loss so well. Sometimes I envied her. Then I realized how sad that is, to envy someone who’s lost so much—her husband, her daughter, her grandson. It makes me sick to my stomach that something so horrible can happen to people like her. People undeserving of tragedy.

Her hands shake slightly as she lifts her cup and examines the contents. “Oh, my. When did I finish that?”

My brows pinch slightly. “Want me to get you more?” I know how much she loves her green tea in the afternoons, and lavender tea just before bed.

She brushes it off. “Of course not.” Perking up, she holds up a wrinkled finger at me and reaches for her pocketbook. “I want to give you money for my present since I can’t go out shopping on my own.”

“Mable, you don’t have to—”

“Oh, hush, Darlene.” My lips part as a crack splinters a little further down my heart. *Darlene*. Danny’s mom—her daughter. She passes me a twenty-dollar bill with a big smile on her face, unaware of what she even

said. "I want the birthday boy to have everything he wants. He loves G.I Joe still, right?"

Mouth dry, I force a nod. "Right." Voice cracking, I clear it and accept the money. Danny used to have a huge G.I Joe collection growing up. Mable always spoiled him with a new one any chance she got. I'll give the money to Glenda to sneak back in her purse later. "I'll go get you some more tea, okay?"

She waves me off and busies herself with tidying the table of her crossword puzzles. A stack of romance novels sits by the window seat, some I recognize from what I've given her, others that the nurses may have gifted her.

When I take her cup and walk out of the room, I find Glenda speaking with another patient's visiting family. She stands when she sees me and knows by the look on my defeated face that Mable is slipping again. I just nod once and go to get her tea refilled.

Glenda and Mable are chatting when I return to her room, passing her the tea that's lukewarm because I'm afraid she'll spill it on herself if she doesn't recognize me.

"Thank you, dear."

I press a kiss to her cheek. "I need to get going so Ainsley isn't bugging Jenna for too long. I'll come see you again soon, okay?"

Her smile gives me hope as Glenda waves at me, knowing that I can find my way out. I slip her the money and gesture toward Mable's purse. We've been here before. She knows the drill by now.

As soon as I close my car door, I let a single tear slip down my cheek. Then I brush it away, take a deep breath, and drive to Ainsley.

AINSLEY'S HEAD bobs beside me on the couch, causing me to hide a smile. When her cheek meets my thigh, I brush strands of her hair behind her ear like Mom used to do with me.

Her forehead is warm, confirming what her teacher warned me about earlier in the day when she found me at lunch to say Ainsley wasn't feeling well. When I saw her during my free period, she'd been flushed. I brought her home an hour early and we've been tucked in on the couch watching movies ever since.

I don't want to wake her when she drifts off to sleep on my leg. Instead, I pull her blanket around her and drape an arm over her body to tuck her closer to me. It's sometime later when I feel something heavy get placed on my lap, and my eyes flutter open.

East's face glows in the flickering light of the television. "Didn't mean to wake you up."

I shake my head and try not rouse the little girl who's settled tight against me. "What time is it?" I have no idea how long we've been asleep, but it's pitch-black out based on the front windows.

"Twelve-thirty."

Blinking until my eyes adjust, I glance down at Ainsley to make sure she's okay. "She has a fever. You know she's sick when she drinks water and soup without a fight."

He chuckles, knowing the breakdown she had once over me telling her she had to drink more water instead of stealing his ginger ale from the refrigerator. It wasn't just a few tears and a foot stomp, but full blown, snotty tears. And still, no words. Part of me wished she'd scream at me for wanting to hydrate her, but nothing.

"Want me to take her upstairs?" His question surprises me, but I find myself shaking my head.

"I think we'll sleep here."

He nods once, turning to head toward the stairs like he's heading for bed. "East?" Pressing his lips together, he raises his brows in wait. "I think there may be a movie on here that isn't Disney princess related."

Half his lips quirk up. The truth is, I know this man would watch anything. For Ainsley. Tattoos, muscles, and all, he sits and watches whatever she chooses whether it's bathed in pink, full of music, or anything in between.

"Let me grab something to drink," he says walking into the kitchen. I hear him open and close the fridge before grabbing something that rustles loudly before coming back into the living room. He sits in the armchair and passes me the opened bag of popcorn.

I grab a handful. "Thanks." He picks up the remote and offers it to me, but I shake my head. "You pick. We've tortured you enough with our choices."

I almost miss the way the corners of his lips curve upward. Almost.

When he chooses a comedy, I settle in and nibble on the popcorn. Ainsley stirs but never wakes, cuddling into my warmth and snoring softly.

“Will she be okay?”

I snap my gaze over to him. He watches Ainsley with drawn brows, concern lingering. “It isn’t a big deal, just a little cold. Between the weather and school starting back up, it was bound to happen.”

He scrubs a palm down his jaw and nods, leaning back in the chair to make himself comfortable. He seems content with the answer, going back to the popcorn and movie. We finish the first one and start another despite it being after two. I should be tired but I’m not.

Shortly after it begins Ainsley makes a small moaning noise and wiggles under the blanket until her feet kick it off her. I frown as she swipes at her eyes and face. “Ains? You okay, Nugget?”

Another noise comes out of her throat.

The chair next to me creaks. “Piper...”

“She’s okay,” I whisper. “Can you get her a glass of water and some of the children’s Tylenol from upstairs? It’s in the cabinet by—”

“I know.” My lips part as I watch him go grab it without a question, leaving me speechless.

Ainsley climbs onto my lap, latching onto me like a little koala. I hold her tight, resting my chin on the top of her head. It doesn’t take long for Easton to come back down, a glass of water in one hand, and a bottle of pills and thermometer in the other.

Swallowing, I thank him and take her temperature, wincing when I see the 102.3 on the screen. I tell Ainsley to take the medicine despite the face she makes. I praise her with a kiss on the forehead when she obeys.

East shifts. “Is she...?”

“We’ll see if the medicine helps.”

He wets his lips.

Ainsley wiggles in my lap again, so I stroke her hair with my fingers. She eases into me, resting her warm face in the crevice of my neck. I shush her and settle back onto the couch, swinging my legs onto the cushions.

“Sleeping down here still?” he guesses.

I nod, giving him a small smile. With Ainsley draped across my body like a weighted blanket, I brush her hair and wait to say goodnight to East.

But he sits back down in the chair.

“What are you doing?”

He shrugs, picking up the remote and turning the television volume down. “Just go to sleep. I’m not tired anyway.”

I blink.

He continues watching the movie like I’m not staring at him with a sick kid laying on me. A kid that’s not his, but he has a soft spot for anyway. It makes my heart feel funny, but I don’t analyze it. I refuse to.

It’s long after Ainsley’s asleep again that I decide to speak up. “I saw Mable last week. You know, Danny’s grandma that I was telling you about? Anyway, I guess I needed to hear from her that I was being stupid.”

There’s humor in his tone. “And did she tell you how stupid you’re being?”

My smile grows. I refrain from laughing because I don’t want to disturb Ainsley. “No. But she said what I needed to hear.”

His silence makes me feel the need to explain even though I know he doesn’t expect anything from me. “I don’t want to be angry over something I can’t change. That seems...”

“Pointless,” he murmurs.

“Pointless,” I agree, realizing he says it out of personal experience. I wonder what makes him get it, but I don’t ask. Not now at least.

Neither one of us says anything else.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A WEEK LATER AINSLEY IS BACK TO HERSELF JUST IN TIME FOR HER birthday. Though I think she was afraid she wouldn't get her ice cream cake otherwise.

The morning after we'd fallen asleep on the couch, I woke to see the chair beside us empty. I'm glad Easton hadn't stayed. There was no point in both of us being sleep deprived and worried when it was just a little cold. Based on how he asked every night following that one if she was okay, he isn't accustomed to sick kids.

I'm grading the last few practice essays for the high school regent exam in the small office at the school when a knock at the door has me picking my head up from the scratchy handwriting scribbled in front of me. I glance at the clock when I see Ainsley's teacher. "Hi, Evie. Is everything okay? My friend was supposed to pick Ainsley up."

She smiles. "Jenna already picked her up. I wanted to talk to you though, and Diana said I could find you here. May I come in?"

I gesture toward the little green chair in front of the makeshift desk. Nerves bubble in my stomach as I cap off my red pen and sit back as she takes a seat. Her friendly smile doesn't fool me into thinking this is just her wanting to catch up or check in.

"Evie?"

Her hands go to her lap. "There's been some talk about Ainsley's education. Principal Harris has asked me to update her on Ainsley's progress and I'm afraid she's not satisfied enough with the results."

I gape at her. "But Ainsley's smart. She knows her alphabet and is learning to read—"

“We can’t test that for certain,” she replies apologetically. I know what she means, but that doesn’t stop me from fighting.

“She knows her words.”

“I know that, but Harris...”

“Is bitter,” I state against my better judgement. I sigh heavily and palm my face. “I can’t take her out of this school because Harris doesn’t think she should be here. I watch the way Ainsley goes through books at home. When we go over spelling words she knows them.”

“Does she *voice* them? Read aloud?”

My jaw locks.

She nods once. “Listen, I’ll fight for Ainsley because I know she’s a smart little girl. But you know how Harris can be. She doesn’t like putting the effort into students with certain learning disabilities.”

“Then she should get fired.”

Evie winces, but doesn’t argue.

Grinding my teeth, I push my ill feelings down and try to take a calming breath. “Isn’t this discrimination or something? There are plenty of students who don’t talk for one reason or another. Would she deny their right to an education?”

Evie’s face morphs with pity, a look I hate with all my being. “She brought up some schools that she feels Ainsley could flourish in.”

Now I’m mad. “She spoke to you about this without me? *Me* ... Ainsley’s guardian. I can’t believe that woman. I’m going to—”

We both stand, me out of rage and Evie out of necessity. “Piper, I know this isn’t fair, but you can’t go to her office and make a scene. That won’t help either you or Ainsley.”

I close my eyes. “You’re right.” The words don’t ease any tension building in my body despite the truth in them.

It’s what she says next that has me cracking my eyes open. “Have you considered other options to keep her here? I think she should stay, and there are ways to get her to.”

My brows raise.

“What about learning sign language?”

Sign... “Oh my God.” I shake my head and slowly sit, blinking up at her. “How come I’ve never thought of that? None of the doctors even mentioned that as an option to explore.”

“Piper—”

“Does that make me terrible?”

“Piper—”

“Seriously, Evie. There’s no reason I shouldn’t have thought of something to get her to communicate.” I blow out a harsh breath and plant my face in my palms. “The doctors told me she’d talk when she was ready. I just took them for their word.”

“Piper,” she says softly, walking around the desk and brushing my shoulder. “You are doing the best you can. I only thought about this because I have a friend with a deaf son who she’s going to teach sign language.”

I wet my lips and look at her. “Did your friend teach herself?”

“She took classes.”

I perk up. “Would Ainsley and I be able to sign up for something like that? I want her to stay here. I don’t want to send her off because Harris is a ... mean person.” There are plenty of other names I have for the elementary principal, but none of them are smart to voice here.

Her eyes brighten. “I can ask her and see if she knows of any open classes. If memory serves, she went to the Rec Center in the next town over to take them. I’ll get some details before getting your hopes up.”

Too late, I want to tell her.

Instead, I say, “Thank you.”

She squeezes my arm. “I’ll make sure Ainsley stays here. If she tries encouraging a transfer, you can definitely speak up against the idea. As a parent, that’s your right to call her out and fight the matter. Depending on how that goes, it’s a risk. Speaking up as a parent is one thing, but...”

As a faculty member... “I could lose my placement if administration thinks there’s a conflict of interest,” I conclude, with a tight bob of the head.

She doesn’t say anything to confirm.

“Ainsley means more than this position,” I tell her quietly, knowing the risk is more than just a paycheck. If I don’t get my student teaching hours in, I won’t be able to graduate.

“It’ll work out, Piper.”

Evie has always been an optimist. Me? Not so much. But I try pretending like she’s right even though doubt cements itself in my stomach. What I know for sure is that I don’t want Ainsley to leave the district. Too much change has already happened in her life. She needs stability, consistency. And if Harris or the administration has a problem with that,

then I'll make the point heard before telling them what they can shove up their hypocritical asses.

I'm in a bitter mood all day. I want nothing more than to complain to the school about the poor communication skills between faculty and parents, but I know Evie is right. If I say anything now, it puts Ainsley and me in a bad place. I don't want her getting punished for my big mouth.

After cooking our favorite comfort food, spaghetti and garlic bread, I help Ains with homework and study the way she absorbs the information. I've always known she's a talented kid, smarter than most her age. When my parents visit or babysit, they note the same thing.

"Nugget." The pencil in her hand stops as she looks up at me from the workbook in front of her with dotted lines she's practicing her penmanship in. "How would you feel about taking classes with me. It would be for American Sign Language, which is a way to communicate with our hands."

Her brown eyes widen, then blink.

Not really a response. I clear my throat and sit back at the table, bringing my elbow to rest on the edge of it. "I never want to force you to do something you're uncomfortable with, so I'd never tell you that you *have* to speak. And nobody else should either, okay?" It takes a moment before her head moves up and down slowly, giving me confirmation that she understands me. "So, a friend of mine mentioned this method as a way to communicate. If I could get us into a class, would you be willing to take it?"

Please say yes. Nod. Smile. Something.

I hold my breath as she looks at me, her pencil held tight in her hand. It took her two tries to hold the writing utensil right. When I did teaching observations early on in my degree, I'd been placed in an elementary school where I watched kids struggle to do that for a lot longer. I've been told that Ainsley is a special kid, and I've never needed to hear it twice to agree.

"You don't have to decide now," I relent when she doesn't make any type of movement that gives me an answer. "But I want you to choose soon, okay? I want ... I want to give you a chance to have a voice in your own way."

She blinks again, her lips parting. My heart races at the tiny movement, then shatters slowly when it closes again. But she reaches out with her free

hand and squeezes my wrist before nodding her head.

I blink back tears. “Yeah?”

Another head nod and squeeze.

Blowing out a small breath, I smile. “I’ll look into classes then. It’ll be fun. Something for you, me, and maybe my parents if they’re interested in learning.”

When she goes back to her homework, I pull out my phone and text Evie saying I want to do classes no matter what—cost, time, it won’t stop me. Ainsley and I need this. Maybe me more than her, at least that’s what I tell myself. It isn’t often I text Evie since we’re not really friends outside of school, but it seems necessary. This, what she’s offering, could be the start of something life changing.

After an hour of homework, I tell Ainsley to go upstairs and grab her pajamas so I can give her a bath. She doesn’t even argue as we make our way to the bathroom, her favorite pajamas in her hand, and waits for the bathtub to fill.

“Bubbles?”

She gives me a look that says, *Duh*.

Once she’s in, I give her time to play around in the suds while taking a towel and putting it on the sink beside me. When my phone rings, I glance down to see Jenna’s name across the screen.

“You actually answered,” she greets before I can even say hello. “I swear trying to get ahold of you is impossible lately. What if I was dying and you were my last call?”

My face screws. “Why would you call me and not 911 if you were dying? That makes no logical sense.”

“Maybe because I love you, you bitch.” I snicker at her attitude. “Anyway, I was just calling to see if the party this weekend was still on. Our girl isn’t sick anymore, is she? She seemed fine earlier, but that girl has an impressive poker face.”

I watch Ainsley. “Nope, she’s doing fine. A few days of medicine, orange juice, and rest was all she needed. The party is still on.”

Ains looks up at me, a smile twitching on the corners of her lips. I wink at her and pick up the washcloth next to me, wetting it with soap before beginning to wash her back as she plays.

“I got her the perfect gift,” Jenna exclaims, way too excited. That means she spent a lot of money—more than I did.

“Jen—”

“Don’t you dare ruin this,” she cuts me off, making me roll my eyes. “I spent way too much time putting this doll house together for you to tell me not to bother. There was a lot of cursing and my cat almost choked on one of the pieces. It was a serious situation.”

I try not to snort over that. Poor Oscar, the black cat she took in as a stray, can’t win. Then again, I wouldn’t want to live with Jenna either. I love her, but she’s a handful.

“I’ll bring it by Friday.”

“The party isn’t until Saturday.”

“But it’s at the nursing home,” she reminds me as if I’ve forgotten. “I don’t want to lug the thing there then all the way to your house. It’s huge.”

My eyes narrow. “How huge?”

“You can’t measure love, Piper.”

I wash Ainsley’s arms and stomach. “I don’t have a lot of room here is all. At this rate I’ll need to tell Easton to move out or sleep on the couch so I can store all her toys in it.”

I should have known the amused chuckle from her was leading to no good. “What’s it matter? It sounds like he spends a lot of time in your room anyway.”

Heat blossoms over my cheeks and travels down the back of my neck. “Cut it out. It isn’t like he stays there.” We haven’t had sex in weeks. Neither one of us has initiated anything. He doesn’t even come to my room. “I think that’s over anyway. It was just a little fling to pass time.”

“A fling?”

“Mhmm.” I pass the washcloth to Ainsley and tell her to finish cleaning herself. I set the phone down and put her on speaker so I can wash Ainsley’s hair. “Look, it’s fine. Easton and I are just roommates who have an agreement. It was never a forever thing. He’s got plenty of girls hanging around him at the shop anyway.”

“That doesn’t upset you?”

“It’s not like he brings them home.”

“But is he...?” She lets the question fade.

“What? No!” Easton isn’t the kind of guy to screw multiple women at once. Then again, we never talked about it. I’m not seeing anybody else on the side and just assume he isn’t either.

“All I’m saying,” she says in a muffled tone, with undoubtedly a spoonful of hazelnut butter in her mouth, “is that it’s okay to hook up with someone else. I’ve seen guys walking around town, P. Some of those freshmen come from good genes. If you and your hot ass roomie aren’t having—”

“You’re on speaker phone,” I cut her off.

“—meetings about how to properly make the bed, then it’s okay to find other methods,” she saves, making me chortle. “Some people like to tuck the comforter in, others don’t bother making it at all.”

I rinse Ainsley’s hair out. “Your analogy is confusing me, but I know where you’re going with it. Listen, if he wants to ... try other methods of bed making, I’m not going to stop him. He’s a grown man. I just don’t have time.”

“To make the bed?”

I pause. “Wouldn’t I be un-making it?”

There’s hesitation. “You’re right, this analogy is stupid. Whatever. I just don’t want you to grow cobwebs where the sun doesn’t shine.”

Rolling my eyes, I tell Ainsley she can play for a few more minutes before she needs to get out. “Don’t worry, my sheets will be perfectly fine unruffled.”

She bursts out laughing. “You’re so weird.”

I scoff. “You’re the one who made the analogy! I’m just trying to go along with it.”

I unfold the towel and gesture for Ainsley to stand up. When she does, I make quick to dry her off before wrapping it around her and picking her up. Once her feet hit the bathmat in front of the tub, I finish drying her off before passing her, her pajamas to change into.

Reaching out my hand for her, I grab my phone and walk toward Ainsley’s room. “I need to help Ains finish getting ready for bed. Can I call you back when I’m done?”

Jenna sighs lightly. “As much as I’d love to complain about my day at work, I should probably be productive. I need to ride the exercise bike for like two hours to burn off the amount of Nutella I just ate.”

I grin. “Tell me tomorrow?”

“If I don’t murder my boss first.”

“I don’t have bail money,” I warn.

“Then give me an alibi.”

She hangs up before I can answer, causing me to laugh and slide my phone into my back pocket. I help Ainsley into bed, passing her the teddy bear I know she loves sleeping with and pulling her comforter over her. “Your Aunt Jenna is crazy, you know that?”

Ainsley smiles.

I pass her the lavender quilt next, watching her cuddle up into it. “I love you so much, Nugget. Want me to read to you?”

She points to a book next to her bed, the same one she always wants me to read. The black and white checkered hardback book is falling apart from the amount of times it’s been read. But she loves the nursery rhymes in it, so I crack it open and accept I’ll have to find some sort of glue to hold the spine and pages together before it completely disintegrates.

It doesn’t take long before she falls asleep, leaving me kissing her forehead and creeping out to clean up downstairs before shutting off the lights and heading to my room. It’s early but I’m tired and moody from the day’s events, leaving me curled up in bed with my phone and searching classes at the Rec Center.

Sometime later I hear footsteps outside my bedroom door that wakes me. The doorknob handle turns slowly, but the door never opens. I watch and wait, holding my breath, before the footsteps walk away and a different door across the hall opens and closes.

I swallow.

And tell myself it doesn’t matter.

CHAPTER NINE

CARRYING A SIX-YEAR-OLD INTO THE HOUSE AFTER SHE PASSED OUT FROM A cake coma shouldn't feel any different than carrying a five-year-old, but it is. It's not just the physical weight of her body in my arms that keeps a somber feeling in my chest but knowing that we spent another year together. I never thought about having kids until I got the call from Danny's lawyer saying I was appointed legal guardianship.

Laying her on her mattress, I stare down at the crusted frosting on the corner of her lips and the glitter in her hair that I'll find ten years from now and manage to smile. It's a shaky gesture, but a sincere one as I recall the busy day of bright eyes and hand squeezes as Mable and a few others doted on Ainsley and showered her with gifts, sugar, and praise. She loved every second of attention.

Jenna appears in the doorway, her head cocked as she studies Ainsley. "She kinda looks like I did after our first party freshman year. You know, after you held my hair back when I threw up the tequila shots I took?"

I shiver, practically smelling the horrors of that night—alcohol and poor decisions. Not a good combination. "I've never been able to go near that stuff."

She grins. "I have. Many times."

Oh, I know it. I've held her hair back more times than I could count. "She looks way more peaceful. You were groaning and ranting on and on about how you'd never make that mistake again. Wasn't it like a week later that you dragged me back out?"

Her teeth bite into her bottom lip. "At least my next mistake was in form of a very dirty Russian."

“You had margaritas all night,” I recall, knowing it’s her favorite go-to drink.

“You obviously don’t remember the guy I went home with,” she says with a wink. I shake my head and pull the blankets over Ainsley, not worrying about getting anything more than her slip-on shoes off.

Leaving the door cracked open, I follow Jenna downstairs where she set the bag of presents Ainsley got. She picks up a doll and examines its gaudy pink outfit. “I noticed your roommate didn’t make an appearance today. Are old ladies and princess cake too good for him?”

I drop onto the couch, crossing my legs under me as she unpacks the presents. “I mentioned we were having a party there, but he never said if he’d come.”

“Did you specifically invite him?” Her brows arch in inquiry as she places the dolls in compromising positions in the house she bought Ainsley.

“Why is that Barbie on top of two other Barbies? You know what. Forget I asked. And, no. I just kind of hinted that there would be a party to celebrate. It doesn’t matter anyway. He works today.”

“Would he have come if he didn’t?”

How am I supposed to know? I shrug. “I don’t know what he would or wouldn’t do. He probably wouldn’t have had fun with a bunch of senior citizens anyway.”

Jenna turns to me slowly. “Why does it sound like you’re trying to convince yourself of that? Did you *want* him to come?”

My lips part, then close.

She perks up. “Oh my God! You did.”

“Shut up. No, I didn’t. It’d be weird.”

“Weird because *you like him*.”

“Weird because he has no obligation to Ainsley or me,” I correct, getting up and walking into the kitchen. Pulling out a bottle of tomato juice, I hop onto the counter and let my legs dangle off the edge. “It’d make no sense for him to come celebrate some little girl’s birthday with people he doesn’t know.”

“But ... you wanted him to,” she presses.

I glare. “No. I. Didn’t.”

She steals my juice and takes a sip. “You can deny it all you want, but you got the hots for your sex-on-a-stick roomie. All those inked muscles have gone to your head.”

Refusing to answer, I steal the juice back and focus on anything but the narrowed look my self-appointed best friend gives me. Sometimes I wonder how we've made it this long without trying to kill each other. We're opposites in every way that counts, yet we work. If I didn't have her, even when she annoys me, I'd be lost. She knows it, too.

"Whatever, Ms. Denial," she sighs, leaning against the counter behind her. "So, what are you going to do about the school situation? You wouldn't share when we talked on the phone the other night and I didn't want to bring it up in front of Ainsley."

Wetting my lips, I feel the anxiety of reality crash into me. I've avoided the topic for as long as I can, but Principal Harris pulled me aside and insisted we needed to discuss Ainsley's wellbeing on Friday. Needless to say, the conversation was tense. My facial expression was anything but professional despite her talking to me during working hours. I've already been told to see her first thing Monday morning, and I have a feeling the little control I have left will be long gone come that conversation.

"I want her to stay there."

She nods once. "Understandable."

"Harris would barely listen to me when I told her about the sign language classes. It was like all she heard was how she'd have to hire an interpreter. I swear, the woman is—"

"A total bitch?" my bestie finishes.

"I was going to say unfit to work with school children, but yeah. She is. Everyone is tense because of the budget, and she sees Ainsley as an added expense. Isn't she supposed to do what's best for the kids?"

Jenna gives me a sympathetic look. "I can play the bad cop. Go in fists swinging on Monday that way you don't get the blame."

"And how would I explain that?"

Her lips pull upward slowly. "We can say I'm your crazy ex-lover. I can play the part of a concerned parent."

"Crazy ex-lover?" I repeat, blinking.

"I'd rock the role."

I have no doubt. "Something tells me that won't end well. It's best if I speak with her and get it over with. I'll just voice my concerns and explain what I want, as a parent, to Ainsley. If she has a problem with that..."

"What if she does though?"

I really hate thinking about what-if situations. They get us nowhere. I'll start having a panic attack until I'm convinced my heart is giving out, then wind up with a two-hundred- and fifty-dollar copay for an emergency room visit that was never needed. I may have been there before after finding out about Danny... And then again after finding out about Ainsley.

"I'll figure it out." My voice is no more than an uncertain whisper that I force out. There's nothing I can do but wait and see. Harris hearing me out is unlikely, but I'm always going to choose Ainsley before anything else. And if I have to file a formal complaint against her, then I'll happily kiss my job, and placement, goodbye if it means her getting reprimanded. Nobody should have to fight for their kid to have a right to an education of their choosing just because somebody like Harris doesn't want to deal with the extra steps.

The more I think about it, the angrier I get. But anger won't get me anywhere either, so I tell myself to calm down and sip my juice. I still have one more day before facing the wench, which means one more day to formulate a backup plan. I quickly learn that night before bed that I don't have one.

JENNA LEFT in the early hours of the morning after falling asleep for a few hours on the couch watching some horrible reality dating show. I stayed up when one became two and two became three, feeling prickles of anxiety when I saw snow sticking to the roads and knowing Easton hadn't gotten home. It'd rained earlier in the day and froze over when the temperatures dropped, leaving black ice everywhere.

When seven a.m. rolls around and Ainsley has a plate full of eggs in front of her, the sound of keys rattling outside has all the worry rippling through my body draining in a heartbeat. As soon as the door closes behind my roommate, I blow out a tiny breath and finish buttering Ains's toast and putting it beside her plate.

East walks into the kitchen, probably hearing the commotion, and looks at me with tired eyes and messy hair. Bedhead. He has bedhead but wasn't sleeping here.

Swallowing past the stupid lump in my throat, I offer him a small wave and turn back to the stove to prepare myself eggs. "I'm making breakfast if

you want some,” I say in my best even voice, telling myself not to wonder where he was all night.

It’s none of my business.

“I’m good.”

He’s good. I nod with my back to him, not asking or offering anything else. No drink, no inquiry if his night was good. Something tells me it was, and I don’t need to know why, how, or because of whom. I just scramble another two eggs, put two more slices of toast into the toaster, and busy myself with the sizzle of the hot skillet.

He turns after a few moments, greeting Ainsley before making his way upstairs. I let my shoulders droop but refuse to let disappoint linger for long. We had no expectations when we started sleeping together, so I couldn’t get angry at him for spending the night at another woman’s house. It’s a waste of time to be bitter.

Long after Ainsley and I are finished eating and the kitchen is cleared, East comes back down in a pair of his signature black sweatpants and a black tee that hugs his body. His hair is wet, his eyes are brighter, and he walks past where Ainsley and I sit on the floor playing to plop down in the chair.

“How was the birthday party?” he asks after a while of silence.

“Good.”

“Cool.”

Good. Cool. Awesome. “Yep.”

My eyes cast upward when I feel him staring and I wish I hadn’t looked. He’s watching me carefully, his eyes slightly narrowed. It doesn’t last long thankfully. We break the contact, his eyes going to the TV where a cartoon plays, and mine to the doll clothes scattered in front of me as we change all of Ainsley’s Barbie’s wardrobes for what I presume is a fashion show.

I notice the snow picking up outside, blowing haphazardly in the strong wind that howls loudly. Staring at the large flakes hitting the windows, I ask, “Were the roads bad coming home?”

“They were cleared off.”

“Oh. Good.” I cringe at the choppy response but brush it off. I am glad the roads are clear. I know what can happen when they’re not this time of year. “We got in before they could get bad, but I...” *I was worried about you.* “I was hoping they’d be okay when you had to travel.”

Shaking my head at myself, I focus all my attention on my playdate with Ainsley. Every Sunday we do this—dolls, house, pretend bake, tea party, anything just to blow off steam and have fun. Later we'll watch a movie and eat junk food and just enjoy each other's company until bedtime.

East scoots forward. "Want anything from the kitchen? I'm going to grab a water."

I force a smile as I look up at him, shaking my head. "I'm okay. Thanks." He nods once and walks away, not seeing the twitch of my lips as they fall into a frown.

"I was worried about you," I whisper audibly, brushing hair behind my ear. I roll my shoulders back and pick up the Barbie closest to me and hold her up. "What do you think, Nugget? Leopard print mini-skirt, or floral maxi dress?"

Ainsley points to a pair of denim jeans.

"Or that."

I get to work dressing the doll.

The day is spent in silence.

CHAPTER TEN

I SPEND MONDAY'S LUNCH PERIOD CRYING IN MY CAR. THREE TISSUES stained with off brand foundation and cheap mascara later, and an incoherent phone call to Jenna, I'm no better off. My eyes are red, my cheeks are flushed, and I can barely catch my breath. All I can think is, *what am I going to do now?*

Thinking back to the first half of my day, I consider all the ways I could have done it different. Like not going off on Harris and saying the administration shouldn't have hired her. Or telling her that she had no right to judge my choices in Ainsley's education because she wasn't part of the decision-making process. Does she even have kids? She doesn't know what's best for them. If her daughter were in Ainsley's shoes, she'd be sure to use her authority for good rather than self-righteous evil.

Bitch. She's a total bitch just like Jenna said. And I had to bite my tongue hard to refrain from calling her as much when she said I had no right to speak to her the way I did. As an employee, I could agree. As a parent, not so much. But she didn't care.

I have two options now. Go back inside and finish my day or go home and say screw it. Harris all but told me I was done. "*Perhaps it's best you found somewhere else to finish your student teaching.*"

And that was it.

She smiled and walked out.

I know I should have walked out too, gotten in my car and gone home with a pint of edible cookie dough, but I didn't want her to see me break. So, I went back to the class I was assigned to and pushed through until lunch. *Then* I broke down.

Hands shaking, I open the car door and take a deep breath. Tonight, I'll speak to my adviser and figure out what can be done so I can graduate on time. If I have to wait another semester, I may pull out all of my hair. I'm already behind on my degree since taking time off to care for Ainsley, and now I need to finish it for her. For *us*—to get a steady job and finances.

The rest of the day goes as good as it can. I say what I need to in class, grade what I'm told to, and don't interact more than necessary. I put a smile on my face when I pass by students and coworkers and try not to shove my afternoon yogurt in Karen's face when she smirks at my blotchy expression.

When the last bell rings and the halls empty of students, I breathe easier from the façade suffocating me. Evie makes sure I'm okay after hearing what happened, and Diane brushes my arm when I tell her I won't be back.

As soon as I bring Ainsley home, I order Chinese for dinner despite the probable shitty paycheck I'm bound to receive soon. Right now, all I care about is sweet and sour chicken, fried dumplings, and stir fry.

I'm surprised when the door opens as I clean up the kitchen, and I hear Easton talk to Ainsley in the living room. As I begin putting the leftover boxes of food into the fridge, he walks in with arched brows. I don't blame him—a permanent scowl rests on my face since I got home that not even two plates of food could deter. Not to mention there are way too many boxes on the island. Normally I'd be embarrassed, but I could be doing worse things than eating my feelings.

I keep busy as he walks up to me, looking into one of the cartons closest to him. "There's veggie stir fry labeled in the fridge. I got rice and cheese wantons too. Figured you'd eat some."

"Piper."

I close up the last box. "Sorry I didn't get more. They didn't have a lot of options and I haven't seen you eat Chinese food before. Wasn't sure if you ate it."

"Piper," he says quietly, coming up behind me and leaning in. "What's wrong?"

My teeth grind. "Nothing."

I go to bring the last of the food to the fridge, but he wraps his palm around my upper arm to stop me. "Piper. Stop. Talk to me."

Wiggling from his grasp, I yank my arm from his hold and face him. "Why do you care, Easton? I had a bad day. Shouldn't you be at work or ... somewhere?"

One of his brows goes up. “Somewhere being where? I go to work and here. Stop changing the subject. What’s wrong?”

This is the most we’ve talked in a while. Usually our conversations are a few sentences here and there, more often a word or two and that’s it. But the way his blue eyes survey my face, my pinched brows and thinned lips, has concern carved into his flawless features.

“Like I said, I had a bad day.”

“So, tell me about it.”

I close my eyes for a millisecond and let out a heavy sigh. “No offense, East, but I don’t want to. There’s a lot on my plate right now that I need to take care of.”

Finishing my task, I wait for him to walk away and leave me be. He doesn’t. When the counter is clear and plates are washed, he just stands there expectantly.

When I go to leave, he stops me again, pulling me into him and caging me between his body and the counter behind me. His body heat is too warm, too consuming, and the faint smell of peppermint on his breath has me swallowing from the taste I’ve become familiar to.

“East,” I plead softly. “Please stop.”

“Talk. To. Me.”

My jaw locks over his persistence. He shouldn’t care and I’m not sure why he does. Or maybe he feels obligated to since we live together—have slept together. Either way, my feelings are none of his concern.

He spins me around, a breath catching in my throat as his fingers go to my hips. He squeezes and then moves my hair away from my neck, peppering soft kisses against the back of it. “Talk to me, Piper. Just tell me what happened. You’ll feel better.”

Feel better. I’m sure I’ll feel a lot of things if he keeps going. The way his lips trail to the crook of my neck and teeth nip my skin has me arching backward, my butt brushing his hardening length. I bite my bottom lip as his hands move to the front of my pants, lingering on the button.

“I…” I try finding my words as he pops the button and slowly pulls down the zipper. “I don’t know why we’re even talking right now to be honest.”

His chuckle blows warm air against where his mouth caresses me. “You’re like me. It’s hard to talk about your problems face to face. But if

you don't, it'll bottle up until it slowly kills you. Then you'll lose your shit on the wrong people, at the wrong time."

Again, he speaks from experience. His thumb brushes against the skin just above my panty line, not moving lower toward the ache that's settled between my thighs. He's right though. I always play off my feelings and pretend like it's fine, when really it eats me up inside.

"I was fired," I whisper, barely able to hear myself. It's the last thing I want to admit aloud, knowing it makes things real. "Sort of."

His finger dips below my panties, brushing my pubic bone. "How does somebody get sort of fired?"

I lick my lips and give him more access to my neck, letting him lick, nip, and kiss every inch of skin he can. His mouth lingers over my pulse for a moment as his free hand pulls at my pants to lower them enough to dip his hand into.

My lips tremble as he brushes my wet slit, the pad of his thumb pressing against my sensitive bundle of nerves. "There was a problem with ... the principal about Ainsley. She doesn't want Ainsley there because of her ... p-problems. Oh, God." Dropping my head back against his chest, I open my legs further as his fingers dip into my arousal. "That feels so good, East."

He bites down further into my neck, then swipes his tongue against the same spot to sooth it gently. "The principal sounds like an asshole."

Eyes fluttering closed, I nod. "She is. I wasn't going to let her take Ainsley away when s-she's smart enough to be there." I talk quietly so Ainsley doesn't hear, holding back the moan that creeps up my throat as he works me with his fingers. When he adds a second digit and begins entering me and hooking until he hits the perfect spot, I lean forward and bury my mouth in my arm to refrain from making noise.

"She fired you for being a parent?"

My lips part. "Yes."

His kisses become lighter. "I'm sorry."

Don't be. I meet his fingers every time, grinding into him until his cock grows harder with every brush of my ass against the front of his jeans. "What are we doing?" I ask, feeling my orgasm building.

"Whatever the fuck we want."

I bite my arm again as he quickens his movement, his fingers thrusting into me as his thumb rubs against my clit. "But I thought..." *Just shut up, Piper,* I scold myself. If I open a can of worms, it'll be awkward.

I'm so close to coming when he asks, "You thought what?"

My breathing becomes heavier as I choke my whimpers down. Sweat dotting my brow, I grind down into his hand and make a gargled noise as I come hard. He lets me ride out the sensation, kissing my neck, jaw, and cheek until my body stills against him.

"You thought what?" he repeats, pulling his hand away and letting me zip and button my pants again.

I swallow. "Never mind."

"Pip—"

"I have to get Ainsley ready for bed."

Before he can answer, I walk around him and into the living room where Ainsley is intently watching another cartoon. She doesn't even look at me when I sit down beside her, just keeps watching her show without a care in the world.

I envy her.

Her innocence.

But I know, deep down, her innocence was lost when her parents died. And we only have each other to get through the tough times.

"I love you so much, Nugget."

Her eyes travel over to mine.

And she smiles.

I'M WOKEN up to an unfamiliar sound that puts me on edge. It's nearing five in the morning, too early to be up, but too late for East to just be getting home. I push the comforter off me and grab the baseball bat I keep next to my bed.

Tiptoeing out of the bedroom in my bare feet and oversized tee covering my body, I focus on the noise. I pause when I realize it's coming from Ainsley's room, and rush to open her door when I hear the muffled sound of crying. Resting the bat against the wall when I see her damp face buried in her pillow as she restlessly moves, I walk into the room and sit on the edge of the bed.

Something comes from her that cracks my heart in two as I move hair away from her sleeping face. Her cheeks are red, her lips pinched, and I can tell she's in pain.

“Daddy,” she whimpers in a brokenly melodic tone I haven’t heard in so long. My lips part as she cries for Danny, and it’s only seconds before tears stream down my cheeks too.

“Baby girl,” I whisper, voice cracking as I brush my fingers through her hair. “Wake up, sweetie. It’s just a nightmare.”

But it’s not. She knows it was this day three years ago that her father passed away. I was hoping she’d be like any other kid with no sense of time. Of course, she isn’t. She’s aware—too aware. I can’t help her stop feeling the loss, the pain. I can only be there for her as she experiences it.

Ainsley doesn’t wake until I gently shake her arm, lip quivering at the way she bolts up. Her tear-stained face shatters me into tiny pieces, her arms wrapping around my neck and clinging to me. We both need this.

“I know, Nugget.” And I do. I know what it’s like to miss Danny. I loved him more than I should have, even when he couldn’t love me the same. Not before Ainsley’s mother, and not after her. Danny and I were never meant to be more than friends, and I...

Throat closing, I struggle to take a breath. My chest hurts when I think about the night he died. I’ve blamed myself every single day for causing his death. I may not have been behind the wheel of the car that lost control and hit his, but I was the reason he was even out in the weather he shouldn’t have tried battling.

“Danny, wait—”

“We shouldn’t have done that, Piper.” The anguish on his face makes the hope on mine disappear. Any thought of us finally becoming something more than best friends extinguishes like a fire being doused by ice water.

“Danny...” My voice breaks, head shaking as he slides on his boots and grabs his jacket from the hook by my apartment door. “I thought...” What did I think? That we’d sleep together, and everything would change? We both made the choice.

But I realize his was out of pain. Not love. Not like my choice was driven by. I wanted every part of him—his heart, his thoughts, his body. And he wanted something different. An escape. An escape he regrets.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, zipping his coat and grabbing his keys from the end table.

I look outside at the blizzard they warned us about. “You can’t drive right now. You could get into an accident. Just stay here.”

"I can't!" he yells, turning to me with red-rimmed eyes and an unreadable expression. His lips are drawn downward, and his brows are furrowed in like what we've done is burying him alive slowly.

And it kills me.

"Please. I'll stay on the couch," I beg, anything to keep him here. The visibility is poor through the window and I doubt it's any better on the roads. "Think about Ainsley."

The pain in his brown eyes intensifies. "I am, Piper. That's why I have to go. My little girl needs me."

I want to scream at him. Beg. Plead. What about me? What about how much I need him? But he doesn't give me the chance before he opens the door, spares me one last look, before shaking his head and walking away.

I squeeze Ainsley closer to my body, letting us cry together until we're drained of tears. Nothing about Danny's loss will ever be easier. She'll always be without a father, and I'll always be without my best friend.

"I'm sorry, Ainsley. I'm so..." I suck in a breath and try to calm my breathing. What she needs from me is strength. If I can't be strong for her, I've failed. I fail myself, and I fail Danny.

But there's something in the back of my mind that eggs on the possibility that he would have changed his will if he'd had the chance to after the night we spent together. Would he have chosen somebody else? I couldn't think of anybody else he would have asked to care for her, and I wonder if I won by default or he truly trusted me with his little girl.

I'll never know.

"I love you. He loved you too."

She nods in the crook of my neck, her tears absorbing into my skin. I keep combing my fingers through her hair until the noise subsides and she slowly, slowly falls back asleep.

I don't bother waking her up or worrying about school. Something tells me we both need a day off without responsibility. No school. No work. Just us.

I'm only half aware of the feeling somebody is staring at me when I crack my eyes open in the uncomfortable position I'm in on Ainsley's bed. She's still sleeping soundly in front of me, leaving my body twisted in ways it doesn't normally bend.

Easton's brows draw up as he glances at his phone, probably double checking the time. He glances back up at me. "It's after eight."

I nod, putting my finger to my lips and finagling my way out from behind Ainsley without waking her. Her face is finally content, her thumb in her mouth. She doesn't suck on it often, just when she's stressed. Knowing her mind isn't at ease even in sleep has me frowning as I meet Easton outside her room.

"You've been crying," he states coolly.

I swallow. "I'm fine."

"You're not at school."

My shoulders lift slightly. "Taking a day off with Ainsley. We need it."

His spine straightens. "Is she sick again?"

I quickly shake my head. "No, nothing like that. It's, uh..." My eyes go back to Ainsley, and I worry my lip. "Today is going to be a bad one for her. For ... us. So, we're going to spend it together."

He studies me too closely, making me squirm and avoid all eye contact. I don't want him to ask because I'm not sure I'll be able to hold it together if he does.

When his hand squeezes my wrist once, I close my eyes and let out a shaky breath. "We lost Danny three years ago today. She remembers, Easton."

He curses softly, pulling me into his arms and wrapping me up against his body. The way he holds me has me sinking into his chest, letting his arms keep me still. "Sorry, Piper."

As much as I don't want to, I pull away and swipe at a few loose tears. "You have nothing to be sorry for. But I don't want to talk about it."

His lips twitch before pressing into a thin line, and I wonder what he's thinking. He doesn't offer anything, just nods once and watches me shift my weight from one foot to another. When he looks at me like this, like I'm something to dissect, I get uncomfortable. What does he see when he pays close attention? Does he see the way my eyes dull when I think of Danny? Or heat when I think of him? Does he see desperation and despair knowing I could lose everything I've worked for because I mouthed off to my boss trying to defend Ainsley? I wonder what he thinks about me being a single mom. He knows the basics—that Ainsley isn't mine, that Danny died, and that the little girl who cried out for her dad in her sleep last night only has me.

I don't want him to think I'm pathetic, or worse. A charity case to pity. Deep down, I think we understand each other. Everybody has problems,

mine just resurface more than I like. And while I wish Danny hadn't freaked out after we had sex and left, that he hadn't gotten into that car, I wouldn't change the time I've gotten with Ainsley and all the time we still have in the future.

"You're leaving?" I ask, noting his long sleeve black Henley and faded jeans. He always dresses causally with clothes that fit his body well. Shirts that wrap around large muscles and jeans that emphasize long legs. The only tattoos visible on him today are on his right hand from the sleeve that covers his entire arm. I've always wanted to know what the story is behind the objects that seem so random—an hourglass, words, numbers, roses. None of them make sense, but I bet each one has meaning. Easton told me once that he hates tattooing customers who get tattoos for the hell of it, not connecting with the ink they're permanently putting on their bodies. It makes me think there's a story to be told. I'm just not brave enough to ask to hear it.

"Jay and I have some errands to run before we open," he explains, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

"Okay." I glance at the floor, pulling at the edge of my tee only then realizing how much skin is showing. I'm not sure why nerves suddenly creep into my consciousness considering he's seen me naked more times than I can count. It shouldn't matter how much thigh is on display, but it does. "Well, have a good day. We'll be here if you need something. Not that you probably do. But—" I cringe, not knowing why I'm rambling like an idiot. I take a deep breath and move frizzy hair out of my face. "Okay. Well, see you."

He stops me as I step toward Ainsley's door again. "If you need me, just call. I don't have a busy day anyway."

My brows furrow. Why would he even tell me that? But instead of asking, I just nod and force a tight-lipped smile that I hope looks at least semi-genuine. He confuses me more than I want to admit, but I think it's no different for him.

When we part ways, I lay down behind Ainsley and snuggle her close. It's an hour later when we both wake up again, her brown eyes staring right into mine ... and she's silent.

Completely, heartbreakingly silent.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE NEXT TIME I FIND MYSELF ON CAMPUS, TUTORING PASSES IN A BLINK and classes even quicker. I don't pay attention, too distracted. My fingernails are nothing but ridged edges from all the biting I've done, and the skin around them red and raw.

By the time I'm seated in my usual chair in Carter's—*Professor Ford's*—class, it's impossible to zone out no matter how much I want the day to end. I'm physically and emotionally drained after being scolded by my advisor this morning about my student teaching position, followed by the reprimanding conversation insisting I had very few options. She told me I wouldn't graduate unless I apologized to Harris and finished what I started.

Professor Ford's gaze scrolls across the room, waiting for someone to speak up on the question he asked. With each second that passes, his shoulders droop just a little lower by the lack of answers. I'm not sure why I feel bad about it, but I do.

"Why do myths exist?" he repeats, stopping a few feet in front of me. "This isn't a trick question. You're all adults with, hopefully, working minds. Think."

Internally sighing, I raise my hand.

His eyes cut to me instantly, like he was hoping I'd speak up. "Piper."

"Myths gives us reasons to justify why the world works the way it does," I answer, glancing at everyone staring at me. I return my gaze to his dark eyes. "They bring comfort to people who try rationalizing everything."

His arms cross. "Like?"

"Uh..." I blink. "I think about Greek Mythology and how there's a God for different aspects of life. There's a reason why the seasons change, and

where you go after death. There seems to be an answer for everything, which people need.”

“Because...?”

“It’s human nature to want answers. Nobody likes being left in the unknown. If you knew the Underworld existed, you’d probably feel a little more at ease about death.” My throat tightens over the thought of something like the afterlife existing. I used to be obsessed with Greek Mythology when I was younger. My mom would take me to the local library where I checked out every single book they had on the various myths.

What did Danny believe in? He went to church with his wife every Sunday, but he admitted he wasn’t sure if he fully believed in God or what happens after death. I wonder if he ever decided before the night of the accident. Did he make peace with his doubts? He wouldn’t be in the worst depths of Hades if that even exists. Danny was good. Too good. He cared.

Just not about me.

Carter must see me drift off, because he gets other people’s opinions on the matter. A few students go back and forth on the realness of myths, arguing that it’s all bullshit. Is it? Anything is possible.

I’m not sure where my mind is the rest of the class period. It’s not involved in the discussion, but not centered anywhere specific either. I’m stuck somewhere in between, drifting in nothingness that I suffocate in. My chest becomes heavy, but not as weighed down as my head from the feelings I refuse to accept. They pile on my shoulders until it’s hard to function at all. I’m Atlas.

Startled when everybody gets up, I snap out of whatever realm I’m stuck in and look around the room as it empties. I begin shoving my notebook into my bag, noting the empty paper that’s supposed to be full of discussion points from class, and sigh to myself.

“Piper,” Carter says, walking up to me with his hands in his pockets.

“I need to—”

“Stay,” he cuts me off. “Talk to me.”

My jaw ticks. Why do guys always assume I want to talk to them? “I have places I need to be, Professor Ford. But thanks for the offer.”

I stand up, he steps to block me. “It’s not an offer. You weren’t paying attention, you never wrote anything down, and barely participated. What’s going on?”

Not seeing how it's any of his business, I slide my bag strap over my shoulder and shake my head at him. "All due respect, my time with you is over for the day. I'm going home."

He doesn't grab me like East does, knowing his boundaries. But I can tell he wants to stop me. "You've always been a smart kid, Piper. Don't let whatever is going on in your personal life impact your schoolwork."

My nostrils flare. "You know nothing."

"That's because you won't tell me," he points out, arms crossing over his chest. Today's combo is a light gray button down shirt and black slacks. In hindsight, he's right. He knows it, I know it, but pride is a bitch. "If you're going to ignore me during class, it's my business."

A dry laugh bubbles past my lips. "You know what my problem is, Professor?"

"Carter," he says.

"It's that I'm probably not going to graduate on time like I planned," I continue, ignoring his pointless correction. "Once again, I'm getting screwed over no matter how hard I try. My life keeps getting thrown off course, and I'm so fucking sick of it."

I don't wince over swearing in front of him. In fact, I don't even care. It's the truth, every word. Every time I try to make something of my life, another storm comes and ruins the opportunity. But it doesn't just impact me now, it impacts Ainsley. I can't keep screwing up because I'm responsible for another human being.

And that's ... it's scary.

Too scary. Before I know it, tears well in my eyes but don't fall. I refuse to let them, especially in front of Carter. His posture tenses when he sees me tear up, his brows pinching with concern. "Piper? What's wrong?"

"I lost my placement," I tell him brokenly, squeezing my eyes shut and palming the lids with the heels of my hand. "I was just doing what was right and they told me not to come back. They told me to find somewhere better suited for me. But there's nowhere with availability. Everyone else in the program is taking up local schools."

"For student teaching?"

"Yes."

To my surprise, he says, "What about being a TA for a professor here on campus? I had an old friend from college who did that."

My hands fall to my sides as I look at him with a blurry gaze. "What?"

He nods, a small smile tipping up his lips in what little comfort he can offer me. “Sure. And if you’re interested in teaching for higher education, it’d be even better. But experience is experience, and I’d be happy to help you by talking to your adviser and my director to get approval for it.”

I gape at him, the tears drying quickly until his serious expression is clear as day. “Wait. Are you saying you’d let me be *your* teaching assistant?”

His chin dips. “Of course.”

Of course. How can it be that simple? “I don’t know if that would work. I mean, I’ve considered getting my PhD one day to become a History professor, but—”

“Good. So talk to your adviser.”

“Carter ... Professor Ford—”

He steps forward, the tips of his dress shoes brushing my thrift shop winter boots. “I want to help you, Piper. You deserve this. Why don’t we talk to people right now and you can email me about what your adviser says. I honestly don’t see why my director would be against it, especially if it’s for academic reasons.”

What other reason would there be? I shake it off, gripping my bag. “Why are you doing this for me? You don’t know me, and I was a bitch to you.”

“You had your reasons.”

“It’s no excuse.”

“You and Danny were close,” he says quietly, shifting slightly on his feet. “I know you cared about him. I know his death had to have been hard for you. Your anger was justified because you lost your friend. I’m not upset.”

He should be. Shouldn’t he? The way I acted is almost embarrassing to me now. “Are you sure about this? If they say yes, you’re stuck with me for the semester.”

His low chuckle fills the room. “It’ll be a help. My other 101 class is a handful and there’s more coursework. I could use a hand grading papers and splitting the work. You’ll need to teach a few classes, so we’ll figure it out once we know it’s happening.”

I’m too afraid to get my hopes up and believe it will. Every other time I’ve done that, I’ve crashed and burned from the expectations. Like when I thought I’d graduate with my bachelor’s degree, move onto my master’s,

and get the perfect job by the time I was twenty-four. I'd be with Danny and Ainsley, maybe down the fast track to a real happy place with a family, and all would be right in the world.

Instead, I'm a twenty-six-year-old single mom who's still mourning the death of her best friend turned one-night stand, and over a year behind on schooling because I took on the parental role to a girl who I have to fight for every single day because of her condition.

Nothing is what I planned.

Softly, I say, "Thank you, Professor."

"It's Carter, Piper. It'll always be Carter."

My heart aches over such a simple sentence, especially seeing how much he means it when I lock eyes with his. That dark color staring back at me paired with a pearly white smile has my chest tightening with a familiarity it held when I was a teenager. Maybe, just maybe, a little of my crush still remains on the man who's willing to help me even without knowing all the details.

That means something to me.

"And you're welcome," he adds, brushing my arm with his palm before squeezing it once. "If you need me, I'm here to help. I've known you for a long time and I want to make sure you're going to be okay."

I know why he says it. For Jesse. For Danny. He's making up lost time and trying to make it worth my forgiveness. But he doesn't have to. Not after talking to Mable.

But I don't tell him that.

JENNA DECIDES to give me time to myself by looking after Ainsley on Saturday, which lands me in front of The Inked Lotus. Their open sign stares me in the face as I sit in the car debating on whether to go in or not. East and I have been fine at home, not really skirting around each other, but also not engaging either.

It feels like it did when he first moved in, and I know I'm at fault. I've barely told him about the new arrangement I have for my student teaching hours, just that it worked out. He gave me a typical one-word response and watched me walk upstairs with Ainsley to get her ready. He hasn't been to my room or tried anything with me since the night in the kitchen, and I'm not sure if I'm glad or confused by it.

I take a deep breath and turn off the car, grabbing my purse and getting out. Easton has done way more than a roommate has to, and it's hard to ignore that fact. So, I ignore the weirdness that walking in might induce and push open the door with a smile on my face.

Like usual, Jay greets me first. He's not working on anybody like Easton is, so he pushes off the couch where he's laying down and pulls me into a one-armed hug. I laugh as he messes up my hair, pushing him away. "Really? I actually put effort into looking decent today." I brush out the frizz with my fingers, rolling my eyes at his goofy grin.

Jay reminds me of Danny. He's charming in a class-clown kind of way and isn't afraid to work for everything he wants. It's funny to see how opposite his personality is to Easton, who's much quieter and more subdued.

"What brings you here, Red?" He leans against the counter and studies me. "Let me guess, you're here to let me ink you."

"No."

His brows raise. "Pierce you?"

My lips part, then close.

His eyes widen. "Really?" He claps his hand and gestures for me to follow him to his chair. "Shit, Red. What kind of piercing? We just got new stock in the back. Let me go bring some out for you to choose from."

Before I can say anything, he's already down the hall. Blinking, I slowly sit at his station, peaking over at Easton whose needle has stopped moving over the guy's arm he's working on.

We lock eyes. His are narrow and skeptical as he studies me up and down. "You're getting a piercing?"

"I figured it's time."

He sets the needle down and says something to the man before walking over to me with his arms crossed over his chest. "I thought you couldn't because of school policy. You said it's against dress code."

I didn't realize he listened. "It is, but my new placement is at the college as a teaching assistant. If I get a piercing now, it'll have time to heal for when I get employed by a school district to teach in the future."

His jaw ticks as he looks over his shoulder at the man waiting for him. "Wait."

I go to ask him why, but he turns his back on me and saunters over to his station. When Jay comes out holding a black box, East calls him over

and murmurs something to him. The two have a quiet conversation, both looking over at me at one point or another, before Jay slaps East's shoulder and saunters over with a big grin on his face.

"What was that about?" I question, glancing over at Easton. He isn't looking, but I can tell his jaw is locked together.

"Nothing, Red." I don't buy it for a second, but I also don't want to analyze it. I *did* come here for Easton to give me a nose piercing, but he's busy. Who cares if Jay does it?

I show him where I want the piercing done before picking out a small diamond stud from the box. He smiles and gets me ready, telling me everything he's going to do. Giddiness consumes me as he raises his brows in silent question before going through with it.

I'm sure people will wonder why I'm getting a piercing like this in my mid-twenties. When I got my bellybutton done, I'd gotten enough flack about how I'd regret it when I was older. But my nose? I've learned that people have a lot more opinions to voice when they see women become mothers—as if we're not supposed to do the things we love because we're responsible for impressionable kids. But I want Ainsley to be herself in any form that comes. If the day arrives when she wants to get her nose pierced, what's the harm?

I feel another set of burning eyes on me, but don't dare move as Jay finishes the piercing. I don't even flinch when it goes in like I did last time, which made Jenna laugh at me after she complained that I nearly broke her hand from squeezing it so hard. I guess I'm so used to pain now that it doesn't bother me anymore.

Jay holds up a mirror for me to see, and a huge smile grows on my face at the stud in my left nostril. "You like it, Red?"

I nod and turn my head, seeing the diamond catch the light. From the corner of my eyes, I see East staring at me. It doesn't last long before he focuses back on the guy in front of him, getting to work without saying a word.

It isn't until I follow Jay over to the register that my roommate decides to speak up again. "It's on the house, Piper."

Drawing back, I shake my head. "No."

He stops and looks at me. "Yes. It is."

Jay clears his throat, stepping away from the cash register. "Don't worry about it, Red. He's right. Now if you let me ink you..."

I roll my eyes. “Not happening.” I dig through my wallet and read the pricelist for a nose piercing before shoving money into his chest. “Take the money. There’s a tip too.”

Wheels scrape back and footsteps come near us as East’s hard eyes find mine. “Outside.”

“You’re kicking me out?” I squeak. Why would he do that just because I’m trying to pay for the services here? “East—”

Jay watches with quirked brows as Easton guides me out the door, but not before grabbing the money from Jay and gripping it tight in his hand.

I yank my arm away from him. “What the hell is your problem? I’m just trying to pay. That’s what people do here, isn’t it? You can’t make money if you give free handouts.”

He steps forward, his eyes pinning me into silence as he reaches forward and slowly slips the money into my front pocket. His fingers linger for longer than necessary before slipping out again. “Just keep your money.”

“I don’t need you to take pity on me!”

“It’s called being nice,” he counters.

“It’s called being a shitty businessman.”

His nostrils flare. “Go home, Piper.”

“What? No!” He waves his hand in dismissal before turning to walk back inside, but this time *I* stop *him*. “I don’t know why you’re acting like this, but it’s annoying.”

He slowly turns his gaze to mine, his eyes darker than I’m used to. “I told you to wait. I would have done your piercing.”

My face twists. That’s what this is about? He’s got to be kidding me. “I planned on asking you to do it, but you were busy. Jay is just as qualified to do piercings. He’s told me that a million times before when I saw him.”

“But *I* should have done it,” he all but growls, causing me to flinch at the hostility. “I’m your roommate, the person you know here. You should have waited for me like I told you to.”

I can’t believe we’re even having this conversation. “You’re not the boss of me, Easton. I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings about your friend doing the piercing, but it’s not the end of the world. And it would be money all the same if you let me pay. Why are you being so stubborn about this?”

“Not the boss of you,” he repeats, a slow smirk curving his features. His body turns to face me, towering over me when he straightens to full height.

“I seem to recall that differently, especially when we’re in your bedroom and you’re begging me to bury my cock deeper inside you. Hmm. Have you forgotten how much you moan my name when I lick you, or how you pull my hair to go faster, or plead for me to fuck you just the way I know you like?”

My thighs press together as heat sweeps over my body. He knows what he’s doing because he chuckles like this amuses him. But I don’t find his mood swings funny. “What does that have to do with anything?”

He leans closer, brushing his lips against my ear as he speaks. “I should have been the one to give you what you wanted today because I *know* what you want. Just like I know what you sound like when you come, what it feels like when you squeeze my cock with that tight pussy of yours, and how loud you get when you don’t have to hold back. You want freedom, Piper. You always have.”

When he draws back, I’m stunned speechless. He takes advantage of it and shoots me a wink, causing my lips to part. He’s never winked before. And it’s ... wow. Between those words and that gesture, I’m not sure I can properly fathom a response, and he knows it. Which is why, this time, he walks away first.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AINSLEY HOLDS MY HAND TIGHTLY AS WE WALK TOWARD THE DOUBLE DOORS of Aberdeen's Rec Center. I look down at her with a comforting smile as I pull open the door covered in flyers of local events. One of them being the class we're going to.

Before we can step inside, I hear my name called from behind me. There's hesitation in the husky tone, and my spine straightens when I realize who it is. Turning, I watch Carter walk over in a pair of black joggers and oversized sweatshirt. My brows arch at the sight of his casual attire, but quickly notice the way his surprised features travel between me and the little girl beside me.

Clearing my throat, I watch as he takes hold of the door to keep it open. "Hey," he says quietly, his lips pulling up as he looks down at Ainsley.

I shift my weight. "Hi."

He tips his chin toward the entrance, following us in. When the door clicks shut behind us, he matches my steps. His hands are stuffed in the pockets of his pants as he stares down at the checkered red and white floor.

"What are you doing here?" My voice is quiet as I slow my steps, unsure of where the class is being held.

He stops a few feet ahead, realizing I'm not in step with him anymore. "I come here every other weekend to work out and then teach a boxing class."

Boxing? He's got the body for it that's for sure. I just wouldn't have pictured it. Out of Jesse, Carter, and Danny, I wouldn't have pictured Carter being into a sport that was so violent. That was always Jesse's thing.

"So..." He scratches his jaw.

Ainsley tugs on my hand, causing me to look down at her. “We’ll get going in a second, Nugget.” I can feel Carter staring and my cheeks heat. “Ainsley and I are taking a class here.”

“Ainsley,” he repeats slowly, nodding.

“Danny’s daughter.”

His eyes widen as he studies her a little closer, making Ainsley duck behind my legs. My hand goes to her head, bushing her hair in comfort. She’s like me, not wanting anyone to pay her attention for long.

I know what he sees—Danny’s nose, the shape and color of his eyes, his skin tone. Their personality is undoubtedly the same, though only I would know that.

“Wow.” The word is so quiet I almost miss it. It makes me swipe my dry lips and nod once, not knowing what to respond with.

He didn’t know about Ainsley. I’m not sure why that doesn’t sit well with me. “We should get going. Have fun with your class.”

“What room are you in?” he asks as we begin walking again.

I hesitate. “The Community Room.”

He gestures toward a side hall before putting his hands back into his pockets. “Room 104. It’s about three down. Can’t miss it.”

Blowing out a tiny breath, I nod once. Thanking him, we go our separate ways though eyes are watching me based on the prickling awareness on the back of my head.

When we make it and sign in, Ainsley pulls on my shirt sleeve and blinks up at me. I know what she’s thinking. “He’s an old friend of me and your dad’s.”

Her eyes widen a fraction.

I don’t tell her they stopped talking.

Or that Danny never mentioned her.

What’s the point? People go their own ways. It’s natural—a part of life. I should have let that factor into my opinion of Carter when he stepped into the classroom the first day. It shouldn’t have taken Mable to tell me not to be a bitch to somebody just because they weren’t close with Danny. I should be happy. In a way, it gave me Danny for myself.

“That was a long time ago,” is all I say, giving her a sad smile. I want to tell her that people change, but that’s something she’ll have to figure out for her own when the time comes.

The class is harder than I expect, and Ainsley and I share more than one lost look as the teacher goes over the basics of the two-month course. Every Saturday we'll meet in the same spot and learn the basics of American Sign Language, from the alphabet to simple sentences. Then after the two months are up, we'll move on to more advanced classes until we can communicate more clearly.

I yelp when Carter pushes off the wall outside the room when Ainsley and I walk out, heart racing over the unexpected presence of him. The front of his shirt is sweaty, and his hair looks wet. "What are you doing?"

He falls into step with us. "Sign Language?" I don't answer. It's not really a question and I owe him nothing. He clears his throat and grabs the back of his neck. "I have a class starting in about ten minutes."

"Cool."

"Hey." He gets in front of me to block me from walking toward the doors. "Meet me at my office early Monday morning. Say eight? We can talk about the schedule for the semester since everything has been approved."

"I can't," I answer slowly, eying Ainsley.

His lips purse. "Right. Well, the class starts at ten, so maybe we can meet before the start of mine."

I'm not sure he even wants to talk about the class. At least, it's not the main focus now that there's a baby elephant in the room. I can tell by the way his stature is tense, and how he tries not to look down at Ainsley but fails. The corner of his eye keeps traveling downward, his jaw ticking like he's upset. He has no reason to be.

"I can meet you at the classroom around nine-fifty if that works for you?"

His head bobs once. "I'll see you then."

My lips rub together. "Okay."

I walk forward without him stopping me, then squeeze Ainsley's hand once before turning again to face him. He hasn't moved. "I'm dedicated to this opportunity, Carter. I'll make sure to separate my personal and professional life. I promise."

His brows pinch. "I'm not worried about that, Piper. I just..." He sighs. "I didn't know he had a kid."

I knew it. "I thought so."

"She looks like him."

“She does,” I agree, smiling at Ainsley. Her thumb is in her mouth again as she looks between me and Carter.

His lips part, but nothing passes between them before he tips his head once and backs away. “I hope you two have a good weekend.”

It feels forced, like he has more to say but can’t get the words out. Something tells me Monday will be interesting when we find time to talk. And based on the way his eyes flick between me and Ainsley for the millionth time, I’ll need strong coffee to get through the conversation.

Because he looks hurt.

And I have no idea why.

THE RESTAURANT JENNA and I wind up in after twenty minutes of searching for somewhere to eat has a line longer than the last one we tried getting into. My feet ache from the heeled shin-high boots she made me wear with my tight skinny jeans that she insists makes my legs look longer. I don’t care what she says, my five-two figure isn’t going to match her five-eight one no matter what clothes I slap onto my body.

“If I don’t eat soon, I’m going to go Jeffrey Dahmer on some innocent person,” Jenna complains, slumping into my side.

Laughing, I push her away. “If we left when I said we should have, we probably could have missed the crowd.”

She groans like a little kid. Although, that’d be an insult to Ainsley. “It was a long day at work. I needed to put new warpaint on. Plus, do you see how tight these pants are? I swear I had to get a running start just to jump into these bitches.”

The man in front of us turns, his eyes casting downward at Jenna’s thighs. A sleezy smirk spreads on his face before the woman next to him smacks his chest and glares. He sighs and turns back around, leaving Jenna and me staring at each other before breaking into quiet laughter.

“Anyway,” she says, “it’s not like this is our only destination tonight. I’m determined to get you out. I don’t care if it’s a bar or club—”

“No.”

“Pip—”

I cross my arms on my chest. “I didn’t like going out when I was younger. What makes you think I want to now?”

She eyes me, her black-lined lids narrowing in disapproval. “You’re twenty-six, not forty. Plus, you’re kid free for the night thanks to your parents. Why not go out and have fun while you can?”

I gesture around us. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

She blinks.

I blink.

The line move, but barely allows us to get anywhere. “Listen, I appreciate you wanting to help me get a life. Mine may be boring compared to yours, but I like it. This is the kind of outing I enjoy. Bars aren’t my scene.”

Jenna looks around the suited man and cusses under her breath. “I swear to god, I’ve never seen this place so packed before.”

“It’s a Saturday night,” I remind her. After the class this morning, I’d been determined to stay in and watch Netflix all day with Ainsley. I was lazy and mentally preparing for whatever Monday brought. All I wanted was to get Carter out of my mind for a while. Then Jenna called and said we were going out. My argument that Ainsley was here was moot when she contacted my parents and had them agree to watch her. I regret ever giving her their numbers, but my parents love Jenna like a second daughter because she’s always looking out for me.

“You used to drink,” she insists, bringing the conversation back to a place I don’t want it to go. “Remember that time we were all hanging out in your dorm room at Maryland U and Chris brought rum and Coke? After your second huge glass, you felt the poor guy up in front of everyone.”

I’m ninety percent positive Chris didn’t mind me groping him. “I remember just fine. Thanks for reminding me that I grabbed his junk in front of people who probably took pictures and smacked his back in congratulations.”

She snickers, causing me to elbow her. “It doesn’t matter. As soon as I got Ainsley, I only wanted to focus on her. I’m here to make something of myself so I can support us better. Not go out and get handsy drunk like I’m twenty-one again.”

Her bottom lip sticks out as we move forward. I know it’s her way of silently telling me I’m no fun, but I’m fine with that. My version of fun has never lined up with hers. She liked dragging me to frat parties where I watched her dance with jocks all night while I hid in the corner waiting to go home. I took her to campus movie nights where we both devoured

popcorn and made fun of the movies they showed until people threatened to kick us out. I drank on occasion, but never much more than a cheap beer here and there because I knew I'd spend most of my night holding Jenna's hair back while she vomited.

We're standing for another few minutes before I hear my name being called from somewhere off to the side. My eyes scan the tables and booths until they lock on Carter's.

Carter-frigging-Ford.

Jenna leans close to me. "Piper?"

"Hmm?"

She wraps an arm around mine. "Is that hot guy calling out your name or have I become delusional from my state of starvation?"

Snorting, I nudge our shoulders. "Stop." I lift my hand and wave at him, offering a friendly smile that I'm not sure he'll see in the dim lighting. He waves us over, gesturing toward the open seats in front of him. I start to shake my head, but Jenna doesn't even give me a chance to turn him down before she's pulling me away from the line and toward the table he's occupying.

I nearly trip over the step that leads to the section he's sitting in, which would have taken both Jenna and I down. Glaring at her before we stop in front of him, I tighten my hold on her arm.

"I thought that was you," he says, looking between me and my best friend. He reaches out. "Carter Ford. It's nice to meet you."

Jenna smiles and shakes his hand. "Jenna Green. How do you two know each other?"

I'm about to explain that I'm in his class, when he takes the lead. "Friend of the family. I've known Piper since she was a kid."

Jenna turns to me with a quirked brow. "I don't recall her telling me about a silver fox." She winks at me before pulling out a seat. "Well, Carter, I'm about to go She Hulk on this entire restaurant if I don't eat something. Pipe, sit down."

Sighing, I give Carter an apologetic look before taking a seat directly across from him. I don't want to be here, but I also don't want to tell him that and risk an even more awkward conversation Monday. "I can't stop her when she gets like this. Feel free to tell us to go."

He chuckles, grabbing his glass. I'd bet my money it's full of sweet tea, probably peach flavored just like my mom used to make for him when he

visited. “I called you over so you could sit here anyway. It’s swamped tonight.”

Jenna props her elbow on the edge of the table and rests her chin in her palm. “Is there any reason you’re dining here alone?”

I kick her foot. It’s none of our business, but that’s never stopped her before. If she finds out I saw Carter earlier in the day *and* that he’s my professor who’s helping me get my graduating credits she’d overanalyze the situation and make something out of nothing. It’s bad enough she knows we were in each other’s life growing up.

Carter’s lips tilt at the corners. “I was supposed to meet with a coworker, but he canceled last minute. Figured I’d grab dinner while I was here, so I didn’t—what is it—Hulk out.”

Thankfully, a waitress appears and gives both of us menus. I opt to keep it simple with water and chef salad. Jenna, on the other hand, insists on ordering a margarita special, along with some seafood special I’ve never heard of in my entire life.

When it’s just the three of us again, I direct my focus on Carter, hoping to keep the conversation light. “Did you have a good day?”

The lack of a plate in front of him means he’s probably still waiting on his food. “It’s been productive.” I’m glad he doesn’t bring up the Rec Center and give him a small smile before glancing down at my lap.

Jenna intervenes. “What was my best friend like growing up? Was she the same quiet nerd I know her as? Or was she a bratty diva? I feel like you have stories.”

“Jenna,” I hiss under my breath.

“She was cute.”

Blinking at his words, I distract myself from the possibility of pushing Jenna out of her chair. His dark eyes are bright, playful. Sort of like they were when he and Jesse were up to no good. It makes me smile back easily, unexpectedly.

“Cute,” my best friend repeats slowly. “How so? What level of cuteness are we talking? I’m going to need details, since Piper never talks about her childhood.”

I throw my head back. “I’ve told you there’s nothing interesting to say. You know who my family are and what they do. You knew Danny. What else is there to know?”

Jenna gestures at Carter. "You forgot to mention that you have a family friend who is one hundred percent fuckable. That's important information."

My eyes bulge out of my head. She did not just call my professor fuckable. Based on the sudden throat clearing in front of me, she did.

"Not all of us are as horny as you," is my comeback, which makes me sink into my seat given the present company we have. Covering my flaming hot face, I try evening my breathing.

Jenna considers this. "True." After the waitress delivers our drinks, she takes a sip of hers before turning to Carter. "I want to know all the embarrassing stuff she won't enlighten me on. She's seen me do far too many stupid things. I feel like I need to even the playing field."

My eyes meet Carter's for a fraction of a second in a silent plea. The way his light up tells me that I may be in for a long dinner. Far from the relaxing one I hoped for.

He swipes his thumb across his bottom lip to hide his growing smirk. "She used to wear her hair in pigtails every day and call herself Pippi Longstocking."

Jenna bursts out laughing while I cover my face with my palms again and suppress a groan. "Why would you do that? I hope there's pictures, because I need to see evidence of this."

My shoulders drop as I glance up. "I found the book at a garage sale that my parents took me to and begged my mom to buy it for me. It just became an obsession I guess."

Carter wraps his long fingers around his sweet tea. "It was cute, like I said. I remember Jesse telling me that your parents would try putting on the television show, but you'd refuse to watch it because her hair wasn't right."

"It wasn't!"

Jenna snorts. "You're too adorable."

"Shut up. I can tell stories about you."

She makes a face at me. "At least those stories all involved me being drunk. You chose to be Pippi Longstocking sober."

Her argument isn't one I'd use in the court of law, but I let it slide. Mostly because we'd exchange stories all night, and the last thing I want Carter to hear is how I spent my college years being the teacher's pet.

"Speaking of drinking," she persists, shooting me a wicked grin before focusing on Carter. "I need your opinion about our dear old friend. She insists that she can't go out and have fun because she has *other*

responsibilities. You seem like a reasonable guy, so you'll give us your honest thoughts, right?"

Carter licks his dry lips, hesitation clear on my suddenly aware features. "Well—"

"Good. So, I'm trying to convince Piper to let loose for the night. She says that going out to eat is her version of that, which is pretty pathetic. She's too young to be this boring, am I right?"

Carter doesn't answer.

"And she's beautiful, right?"

Carter blinks, lifting his drink to his lips.

"Which means," Jenna concludes, "that she needs to go out and get laid."

"Oh my God," I whisper, sinking further into my seat while Carter coughs up his drink. A few drops dribble down his chin, which he quickly catches with a napkin.

"Wow. Was not expecting that." He sets his glass down and looks at no particular area in front of him, especially not me.

Jenna puts her hand on my shoulder. "I didn't hear you deny any of those claims. I'm simply saying that we both care about our friend's wellbeing, right?"

I brush her hand off. "Me and my wellbeing are just fine grabbing a quick bite to eat, thank you very much."

"Ainsley loves you—"

"Stop," I whisper. I can feel Carter's eyes on me, which makes me close mine. "Not here."

Her hand finds mine and squeezes. "I know for a fact that Danny wouldn't want you to stop living. That isn't why he asked you to take care of her."

Swallowing, I push my chair back. The tightening in my chest quickly rises, suffocating me slowly. "I just remembered that I have to get home." My voice cracks, leaving me vulnerable to the sets of eyes staring at me.

Jenna reaches out. "Piper, come on."

I just shake my head and walk out, not having the energy to deal with her telling me she's sorry when I know she is. Jenna never means any harm when she brings up Danny. The hurt still settles into my chest when she does though. Then the panic attacks start, leaving me winded and crying and begging for air.

I tell myself I'm fine, even when I'm not.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE FAKE SMILE PLASTERED ON MY FACE COULD BE PICKED APART EASILY BY anyone who knows me. Carter Ford isn't one of those people. He greets me without any hesitation when we meet in the classroom where he teaches American History 101.

For a few short moments, it seems like the weekend is behind us. There's no talk of the Rec Center, Ainsley, or the restaurant. But the tension in my shoulders doesn't ease because my mind knows it's coming.

His throat clears first, a sure sign that he's about to bring up a topic that I don't want to speak on. For a moment, I consider asking him to leave it be—my life, his questions. A different part of me, a dominant side, does the opposite and lets him say what he wants. "I wanted to apologize if I made you uncomfortable before," he begins quietly, gathering the graded papers in front of him and setting them on the small table between us.

"You didn't." Not intentionally, anyway. I can differentiate the two, given the experiences I've had with professors in the past. "Don't worry about it, Professor Ford. It's fine."

"It's not." He walks around the table and sits on the edge of it, stretching his long legs out and crossing his arms over his chest. "I was surprised to see you Saturday morning, and looking back, I'm a bit embarrassed over my reaction. I just wasn't expecting..."

"Ainsley?" I guess, putting distance between us like I have something to be embarrassed about. "We get that a lot. *I* do."

He rubs the back of his neck. "I didn't realize you and Danny..." He clears his throat. "I knew you liked him back then, but I didn't realize you had a kid. It makes even more sense why you were so upset with me."

I'd get back to the idea that everybody seemingly knew I'd had a thing for Danny, but it's not what my mind latches onto. "Carter, it isn't like that. My situation is complicated."

I notice a curious shift in his gaze, but it goes away quickly as he pushes up. "It's none of my business. I just wanted to apologize for how I acted."

Why do I feel the urge to tell him the truth? It's not some big secret that I'm supposed to keep. Ainsley doesn't look like me. Anyone who has ever paid attention or stayed in my life would know how she got into my care. They'd also see how much I love her—how much I fucking wish she could have been biologically mine. And that drives the desire to set the record straight even more because I'm angry.

I'm angry at Danny for not loving me. I'm angry at him for choosing someone else. A part of me despises him for dying. Not because he changed my life forever, but because it hurts too much to not see him in any form. Whether our friendship would have ended after the night we slept together or not doesn't matter, it couldn't anymore. But if I could do that night over...

"She's not mine," I whisper, almost to myself because saying it any louder physically cripples the half-dead organ in my chest. "The world got to see how much I loved Danny, but he never loved me."

Carter freezes, the marker in his hand gripped tight in his hold as he meets my gaze. He says nothing. I'm not sure there's anything he could say right now to make the pain any better.

My chapped bottom lip cracks when I run the tip of my tongue over it. "I had to watch him fall in love with somebody else. I was in his *wedding*. I became his daughter's godmother." I click my tongue, letting out a humorless laugh like the whole thing is funny. In a way, it is. "I'm not sure why I subjected myself to that kind of torture when I knew nothing would happen. I just hoped one day..."

"He'd choose you," he finishes quietly for me. I take a deep breath and nod slowly, feeling pathetic and slimy for having the thoughts.

"I liked his wife, for the record." It seems odd that I found the woman who took Danny away from me kind, but I did. She was sweet and wanted to be a mother more than anything. More than that, I knew the truth. You can't steal something that isn't yours—Danny was always the love of her life, just like she was his. "And there for a blip in time after he lost her, I

thought the universe would finally let us happen. I never stopped being there for Danny and Ainsley. It felt right to me. But Danny..."

Danny was in mourning. It never changed even when the years passed. He'd pretend like he was okay, like he'd found a way to heal, but if there's one thing that was cemented the night we locked ourselves in my bedroom, it's that he never stopped loving her or grieving her loss.

I could never be what he needed.

Because *he* needed *her*.

Shaking my head, I put an escaped strand of thick auburn hair behind my ear. "It doesn't matter anymore. What's done is done. I just hate that I'm trapped knowing how pathetic Danny must have thought I was after—" The door opens, and kids begin walking in, cutting me off from making myself sound even more tragic to Carter.

A fake smile spreads across my face as I tip my head at his prying eyes and turn to grab the stack of graded papers he asked me to hand out to everyone to help learn their names.

Class passes.

He stares.

I avoid.

And when the students don't give me an excuse to deflect his lingering gaze any longer, I have no option but to try leaving before he can say anything about what I admitted. He doesn't have to tell me that I should be ashamed for how I felt, or what I thought and hoped. I've been sick from guilt knowing what Danny must have thought about me in his last moments.

Did he love me even as a friend? Or despise me for pushing the line? Every time I let my mind wander to that place, another piece of me shatters inside.

"Piper, wait up," he calls, gathering his belongings as quickly as possible before I can make it to the door. He walks up beside me with firm eyes that are hard to look into. "You're not pathetic. You're human. A girl who had hope."

I roll my eyes. "Hope doesn't always get us anywhere, Professor. It's when you have too much of it that makes you pitiful for holding on by a thread."

"That's not a bad thing." He tilts his head and adjusts his messenger bag. "Listen, I think it's admirable what you've done for him and his wife. I

can tell just from the short interaction that you love his little girl. And she loves you.”

I have to look away, so he doesn’t see the tears begin welling up in my eyes. I’m grateful he doesn’t push me on the matter, tell me to look at him, or get me to talk.

All he says is, “If it makes you feel any better, I think Danny did love you.”

I huff out a dry laugh. “Not in the way that counted.”

His retort stops my bitter thoughts. “Is there any form of love that doesn’t count in the long run?”

When I finally look up, he just smiles softly and walks out the door. I watch him wave to somebody before pushing open the glass doors and disappearing outside. I manage to loosen a breath and shake the tension out that my body succumbs to on days like this.

The days where I admit the truth.

I hate myself.

Because I feel like I’m responsible for Danny’s death.

ON DAYS when my mood turns into an all-time low, I’m grateful for my best friend. It takes one phone call for her to be on top of the responsibilities I shouldn’t put second to my mental health, but when the weather gets bad, my anxiety takes over until I can’t breathe.

It’s only knowing that Ainsley is at Jenna’s with an array of bad food I can’t even be upset over that allows me to drag out a few deep breaths in my car. My car that won’t start. The very same vehicle sitting in the nearly abandoned lot on campus.

Honestly, I should have expected as much. Whenever the temperature goes below zero, the Highlander acts up. Last time it stopped working the local dealership told me there was nothing they could do. That left me and Ainsley stranded for over an hour until a tow truck and my dad could come to rescue us.

My hands stay gripped on the steering wheel as I rest my forehead against the top of the worn leather. I let out a shaky breath that fogs the air from the negative five-degree weather and try figuring out a plan. Neither of my parents would get here before my face goes numb, and I wouldn’t want them or Jenna and Ainsley, to drive in the flurry we’re having.

If I had watched the weather more closely, I wouldn't have stayed so long at the tutoring center with my last student. It's rare to have people who want the help, much less accept it when offered. I wasn't going to let anyone down by cutting out early because of a little snow.

I scream when knuckles tap against the window, jerking up to see Carter squinting inside. When we lock eyes, his widen like he wasn't expecting it to be me pathetically sitting in the driver's seat.

Shoulders dropping, I slowly open the door and give him my best smile. Though the defeat wavering the corners probably doesn't make it very believable. He and I have been fine since I started assisting his classes almost two weeks ago. We fall into a routine, bouncing class conversations off each other, and not diving too deep into personal conversations that surround Danny outside of class. Sometimes he'll bring up random things from the past, but usually it's about my older brother, and even that is a sore subject considering we don't speak.

"Piper?" he examines me, then my car.

"My car won't start."

"I didn't know it was you," he admits, jabbing his finger toward the faculty parking lot that neighbors the commuter one. "I thought I saw someone in here without it on."

"Yeah, well..." I shake my head and try not to curse like I want to. All I want is to go home and change into something warm and fuzzy. Hell, I might even find myself bold enough to knock on East's door.

Over the past few weeks, we've found ourselves seeking each other's company more often. Sometimes he'll come home in a bad mood and tell me business is bad or Jay annoys him, and then we do a whole lot of not talking until he leaves. Except, there's been two more times when he stays longer than normal. He'll stay, ask me questions. We'll just talk about anything.

And the weird thing is ... I don't mind it.

"...if you want." I blink, embarrassed to admit I didn't hear anything he just said. Instead, I wrap my arms around myself and slide out of the car once I have my bag and phone in my hands. "Unless you have someone else to call," he adds, watching me close the door.

He offered me a ride home.

I shake my head. "I don't. Well, not anyone nearby. Mom and Dad would come get me, but I don't want them out here in this."

The snow has picked up and based on the way it pelts the knit hat Mom made me last year, I know it's starting to mix. Sleet. Ice. I need to get home.

Carter gestures toward the other parking lot, gently putting his hand on the small of my back to guide me over the small strip of grass that separates the parking lots, to a large black Sedan parked a row away from where I parked. He opens the passenger side door for me and smiles before closing it, opening the back up to set his stuff down on the seat.

When we're both inside, he cranks up the heat and turns the vents to point on me. "You look like an icicle right now."

I blush, but the warmth of my cheeks feels anything but. Putting my hands up to the heat, I rub them together for friction before letting out a tiny breath of relief. "I was sitting there for twenty minutes."

He stares at me. "You should have tried finding someone," he scolds, backing out of the spot. "Or calling a tow truck at least."

I don't want to tell him that I can't afford another tow. My paychecks haven't been great, and I was already forced to use some of Danny's money to pay my half of the bills. I know it's what the funds are there for, to keep a roof over Ainsley's head and food in the fridge, but it feels wrong. Like dirty money somehow.

"I would have figured something out," is all I can say, staring out the window as we drive through campus toward the main road.

After a long stretch of silence, he breaks it with a question I should have logically given him an answer to before shutting down. "Where do you live?"

Playing with the bag draped on my lap, I give him my address and watch him nod. It seems like an eternity before he opts to reach over and turn the radio on. It's playing the type of rock songs that I remember Jesse always listening to.

It makes me smile. "Jesse got me into this band," I tell him quietly, easing back into the seat and getting comfortable. "He'd tell me I didn't have to listen to country all the time just because my parents liked it."

He chuckles. "This was his favorite. We'd go out sometimes and he'd always be playing their CD until I wanted to smack him."

Sounds like him. "Have you talked with him lately? I should probably check in, but we don't really do that much these days."

His face screws as he glances at me for a millisecond. "Why?"

I shrug. “We just don’t. We’re both busy and living our own lives. It’s not a big deal or anything. Jesse and I were never that close.”

His lips purse before he nods once. “He’s doing fine. Just got promoted at the shop he works at. I think his plans to start his own automotive business didn’t pan out, so he’s trying to get his boss to agree to a partnership.”

I try forcing my lips neutral, but they curve into a frown. Why didn’t I know Jesse wanted to own his own shop? It’s never come up in any conversations we’ve had in the past, and I doubt that was some new dream. “Oh. Cool.”

He must sense the shift in my mood. “I think he’s been busy. He and Ren have been in a weird place lately and he’s worked a lot to save up for —” His abrupt stop makes me turn to him and away from the scenery I’m watching pass us on the interstate leading to my house.

“What?”

He blows out a breath. “They, uh, have been trying for kids. It hasn’t been working out and it’s put a lot of stress on their marriage. Jesse’s been picking up more projects to pay for treatment for her.”

I blink. “Oh.”

Oh. My body tenses again as I shift my attention back out the passenger window. I know Carter is only answering my question, but it doesn’t stop the hurt from sinking in. It’s not like he intentionally said that to upset me, but I thought Jesse and I were at least in a place to know the basics. Kids is a big deal.

“Sorry,” he murmurs quietly.

“I asked.”

“You’re upset.”

“I’m...” I shake my head. “He probably didn’t want to tell me because of everything that’s happened. After Danny’s funeral it felt sort of like this mutual interest wasn’t there anymore.”

He merges into a different lane to pass a car in front of us. “I’m sure that’s not true.”

“It is.” We’re quiet for a moment. “I never knew they wanted kids. Once, he and Ren came by to see me around the holidays at my old apartment and they left in a weird mood. I thought it was because of Danny, but...”

Carter doesn't say anything, leaving me to collect my thoughts for a moment. Are they upset with me because of Ainsley? It isn't like Jesse and Danny were as close as we were.

"Maybe they're upset with me." I like Ren a lot. The last thing I want is her and my brother to have a problem with the guardianship I got for Ainsley. It was never expected. Kids was the last thing on my mind. But maybe that's the problem. "It makes sense, I guess."

Carter doesn't seem to agree. "I'm sure they're not upset with you. Why would they be? Look, they're both just busy with a lot on their plates. Reach out. It couldn't hurt."

He's right. But that doesn't mean I'll send a text and bite my nails until I get one back that isn't more than a word or two like normal. Sometimes it's better not to feed the disappointment and just assume the worst.

"He loves you," Carter states. "And he—" Something hard smacks into my chest as the car fishtails on the road, causing my heartrate to spike and tears to instantly begin pouring down my eyes. It's a response I can't help as Carter evens out the vehicle without getting us into an accident, and I can't control my ragged breathing.

I start hyperventilating as adrenaline courses through my veins. Glancing down, I see his forearm still held out in front of me in protection, with fresh teardrops on his jacket sleeve from the train wreck that is my existence.

He pulls over as soon as we get off the exit, turning his body to scope me out. His arm has since lowered, his hand now resting on my knee and squeezing as I try containing the tears. "Are you okay? Piper, look at me."

I keep shaking my head, burying my face into my palms as I heave out another sob.

"It's okay. *We're* okay."

But we're not.

"D-Danny d-died in a c-car crash," I manage to force out between suffocating cries, too worked up to be embarrassed that I'm bawling in front of him.

But Carter isn't just some random guy who teaches me and offered me a ride home. He knows me—the old me. The version of me who loved Danny and knew what kind of amazing person he was growing up. That kind of connection has me dropping my hand on his and squeezing until the tears subside nearly ten minutes later.

And he stays quiet and lets me calm down without saying a word through it all, just keeps his hand underneath mine, draped on my knee, with nothing but the radio and the rush of passing cars to fill the silence.

I finally look at him, eyes blurring my vision and sore as I wipe at them. “I miss him, Carter. I miss him so much.”

His hand flips and takes mine in his, tightening his hold once. Just once. But that small, comforting gesture is everything. “I know you do, Piper.”

He doesn’t say he misses him too.

But I can see it in his eyes.

When we finally arrive at my house, he studies the outside and lone light on upstairs that must be from Easton’s room. I don’t mention my roommate, or Ainsley, or Danny. I just say, “Thank you” and feel his heavy gaze on my every step until I’m locked inside my house.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE SWEET SMELL OF MAPLE BACON LURES ME INTO THE KITCHEN, TIRED eyes scoping out the way Easton towers over the stove and Ainsley stabs into eggs at the counter. I blink a few times before walking to the full coffee pot, watching my roommate take the pieces of bacon and slide them onto a napkin-covered plate beside him.

“Morning,” he murmurs, focused on finishing the eggs that sizzle on the pan over.

My eyes study the whole scene curiously, wondering why he’s cooking breakfast. “Uh, hey. Is that real bacon?”

One of his brows quirks. “Yeah.”

“But you’re vegetarian.” It seems stupid to point out to someone what food preferences they have, but I’m a little lost. It’s not the first time he’s cooked something, it’s just usually tied to an apology or bad mood he’s in. “Did you have a good night?”

He grumbles something under his breath before flicking off the burners. “Just thought I’d make breakfast. That so bad?”

I quickly shake my head, brining my full mug of coffee over to the seat by Ainsley and sitting down as he sets a plate of eggs and bacon in front of me. My stomach grumbles loudly over the mouthwatering smell as I pick up a fork and look at Ainsley. “Did you just get up?”

She hesitates, looks at Easton who’s not paying us any attention, before signing yes. I smile at the use of a word we learned over the course of weeks, knowing we still have a long way to go. But it’s better than a head nod or shake or tugging on my clothes when she wants something.

“Didn’t see your car,” he notes, sliding eggs from the frying pan onto a new plate. I stab some of my eggs and watch him grab the stool at the end, picking up a glass of water and sipping it while watching me expectedly.

Oh. “I got a ride home from somebody. My car broke down on campus.” Eyes widening, I murmur a curse and look around for my phone, only to remember I left it in my room. “I need to call someone to look at it.”

His eyes stay locked on my face. “I can.”

I blink. “You’re a mechanic?”

“I know a thing or two.”

Contemplating it, I shake my head. “It’s okay. I’ll call my dad after I’m done eating. I’m just glad Jenna had Ainsley. It was ... the weather was pretty bad.”

“I can look at the car. I’m closer.”

How he knows that is beyond me. I don’t remember telling him where my hometown is. Then again, it’s probably not hard to assume that wherever it is isn’t as close as our house is to campus. Still. “Easton, it’s fine. Plus, don’t you have work today? My dad can come look at it later on.”

His head cocks. “And how are you going to get to campus?”

Damn. He has me there. “Uh...”

Sighing, he picks up his fork. “I’ll drive you. The shop doesn’t open until later anyway.”

I glance at Ainsley. “I don’t want to be an inconvenience to you or anything. Ains needs to get to school, then me to campus—”

All he says is, “Better get eating then.”

And all I can do is shut up and stare.

THE HOOD on my car is up with my roommate bundled up in layers that hides his tattoos well. For some reason, it saddens me. Then again, the girls that pass by in swarms and glance at his toned butt that’s bent over the front as he looks at the engine garners enough attention—add ink and he’ll never get away without getting passed more phone numbers than he’ll know what to do with.

Grinding my teeth, I reposition my bag strap and watch him carefully. I know nothing about cars beside where to put windshield washer fluid in,

and how to check my oil. If I ever got a flat tire I'd be screwed. Everything else? It's why I have my Dad and a roadside assistance card.

"You can go," he tells me, standing up and looking at me from around the hood. "I think I know what's wrong. Wouldn't want to make you late."

I frown. "I feel bad ditching you."

"You're not going to be much help standing around," he points out. I make a face at the blunt statement knowing it's true. He gestures for me to go, making my shoulders drop a little.

"Thank you. For everything." I take a step away, then stop again and turn. "I'll make it up to you. Dinner or something."

He just nods once before turning his back to me and focusing on the car again. When I give him a once-over, I swear the corners of his lips are tilted up into a tiny smile.

I find myself smiling too.

When I arrive at Carter's room before class begins, I drop my bag next to his on the front table and greet him like usual. I don't want to mention last night, though I know I should thank him again. He didn't have to give me a ride home, which would have saved him from having to comfort me after my breakdown.

"Want to lead the discussion today?" he asks, giving me an out like he knew I needed it. Or maybe he's not even thinking about last night.

"Sure. Where we left off?"

He grabs his textbook and flips to a bookmarked page. Like me, he color-codes the chapters with Post-It tabs. His eyes scan over the page before he hands it to me and points toward a highlighted chapter. "I think we'll start off with a pop quiz based on this section to make sure they read. Then we'll begin with any last remarks on Wednesday's discussion."

I nod and read over the text to memorize the topic. I'd been reading up on it the other night but got distracted when Easton knocked on my bedroom door. Even though nothing happened between us that night, I never went back to the passage because I couldn't stop thinking about how East and I had talked before he left.

Just talked.

About ... nothing.

"Piper?"

I blink at Carter, cheeks heating. "Huh?"

Amusement flickers across his face as he leans against the blank whiteboard. “You okay? You spaced out on me.”

“Oh.” I wave it off. “Yeah. I was thinking about homework, that’s all. Speaking of, these guys have their first paper due soon, right?”

His head bobs. “Correct. I’ll need your help grading them. I figured we could choose a day that works best for both of us and go over a grading rubric then split the papers in half to grade.”

After agreeing, we let the oncoming students fill the room and break any conversation. The pop quiz seemingly puts a damper on everyone’s Friday as Carter writes the questions on the board and tells everyone to take out a sheet of paper to answer them on.

Based on the pinched faces and minimal writing, I’m pretty sure nobody did the assigned reading. It makes me think back to my freshman year, where I color-coded everything and wrote two sets of notes to get lectures in my head. I did readings ahead of time and studied way too hard when I knew exams were approaching.

I was always serious about schoolwork and grades, which is a huge reason I hated going to parties with Jenna. She’d bust me out of my dorm room and drag me along by guilting me about never seeing her because I was too busy worrying about getting A’s in class.

Looking back now, I realize I might have been *too* focused. How much did I miss out on because I thought nothing could be more important than homework? Danny used to tease me whenever I called him to complain about a party I went to by force, telling me I should stop complaining and have fun for a change.

“Enjoy things while they last, Pipe. It won’t last forever,” he’d always say.

And God was he right.

The fifty-minute period goes by smoothly, though conversation was limited after everyone turned in their quizzes. Carter would intervene and ask someone to speak up or reiterate a point I made to get dialogue flowing.

When class ends and almost everyone files out in grumbled murmurs and talk of skipping the rest of their classes, Carter walks over to the table and pulls out something from his bag. I’m grabbing my things the same time he’s holding out a plastic card toward me. Hesitantly, I take it and examine the words on the front.

“Why am I holding a gift card?”

“So you can eat at the restaurant you left before getting your food,” he answers simply, turning away to pack up his things.

What?

Staring at his back, I begin to reply when one of his students walks up to us. “Professor Ford? I was wondering if I could set up a time to talk to you about the first writing assignment.”

Carter turns to her with pressed lips. “It isn’t due for almost two weeks.”

The poor girl’s cheeks redden. “Yeah, but ... uh, I wanted to make sure I’m understanding it. My scholarship depends on my grades, so I need to keep them up.”

Pressing my lips together, I stare down at the gift card while Carter tells her to meet him during office hours tomorrow. She nods and then looks at me with a timid smile before leaving. I can’t help but feel bad for her.

“She was flirting.”

He pauses. “What?”

I bob my head. “I don’t care how important school is to someone, you don’t try getting one-on-one time with a professor two weeks before something is due unless you want time alone with them for another reason. I’d know. I used to be that person.” Eyes widening, I quickly backtrack. “I mean the person who always got work done early, not the person who wanted special one on one time with a professor.”

There’s no refraining my laughter when his face scrunches with discomfort. “I’m practically old enough to be her father.”

Shrugging nonchalantly, I readjust my bag and try handing him back the card. “I’m sure you are, grandpa, but people don’t care about that if they think you’re attractive. My best friend is obsessed with Jeff Goldblum. See my point?” I shake the gift card at him. “I’m not taking this. I can go back there and eat whenever I want with my own money.”

He sighs, not reaching for the object I want him to take back. “Piper, the restaurant insisted on me giving it to you. I think they assumed the worst when you left before receiving your meal. I’ve had it for a while and just never got a chance to give it to you.”

“Oh.” Slowly, I lower my arm. “Are you sure you don’t want it? My time is kind of limited, so I don’t go out very often.”

Cringing at how pathetic that sounds, I play it off by giving him a friendly smile. He’s probably figured out as much considering I have a little

girl to take care of on top of school.

"It's yours," he insists, draping his bag over his shoulder and nodding toward the door. We're quiet for a moment as we walk toward the exit, before he says, "Why does she like Jeff Goldblum?"

Snickering, I shake my head. "She's obsessed with the *Jurassic Park* movies. I keep telling her that the guy is creepy, but then she just spams my messages with pictures of him. One time, she drunk dialed me and started rambling on about what a Zaddy he is because she'd binge-watched all the movies after consuming her weight in rum."

He stops. "A ... what?"

I throw my hands up. "I don't know!"

He scratches the back of his neck. "Huh. I thought I was finally catching up on new terms, then weirder ones appear."

"Right?" He pushes open a door and holds it for me. "Jesse used the word salty once, and I stupidly assumed he meant something was *actually* salty. Shouldn't I be the one using words like that? I'm such a grandma."

His bellowing laughter shakes his broad shoulders. "You're not a grandma, Piper."

"Is this the part where you tell me that I could be your daughter too?" Rolling my eyes, I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

He purses his lips and glances at me with eyes I can't quite read before he murmurs, "I can honestly say I never considered you that."

My lips twitch upward. "That's because I was the annoying little sister. I used to bug you guys all the time. It's kind of embarrassing."

When I notice him looking at me, it's with narrowed eyes that makes me squirm. Neither one of us says anything for a long moment as we stop out in the guard between two different academic halls. Finally, he says, "No. You're not like an annoying little sister either."

Lips parted, I watch him tip his head and give me a once over before shaking his head and telling me he'll see me tomorrow.

Tomorrow. For my Mythology Class.

I stare at the gift card.

Why is my heart racing so fast?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

VALENTINE'S DAY.

I don't remember the last time I actually liked the pointless holiday. Elementary school comes to mind when everyone was forced to buy little cards for their classmates. It's why I'm standing with Ainsley beside me in the seasonal aisle at the store staring at forty different options of cards that we're supposed to address for her peers by tomorrow. If I'd checked her backpack at the beginning of the week, maybe I wouldn't be in my frumpiest pair of sweatpants with stains down the front of them and holes in the seams with a tired six-year-old hanging onto me debating between two of her favorite cartoon characters.

"Why don't we get both?" I suggest, hoping she'll say yes. But she doesn't. Her eyes travel to the cards with chocolates before lighting up and pointing, but my eyes widen when I see the price of them. "Ainsley..."

She tugs on my hand and signs *please*? And how the hell am I supposed to say no to that when communicating with her is all I wanted? So, I grab two bags worth for her class and lead her to checkout.

When we get home, I know the reality of my night is putting together all the cards using the list of names from the sheet Evie sent home with all the kids. As soon as we're back, I put Ainsley to bed after the quickest bath known to man and get to work sitting on the floor in front of the coffee table. A sappy movie plays in the background as I carefully jot down names before putting them all in a plastic bag for her to take. It doesn't take more than half an hour, but the long day I had from exams in every single one of my classes makes exhaustion seep into my bones.

It's not until I feel the warmth of sunlight on my face when I open my eyes and groan at the stiffness settled into my body. My eyes don't take long to adjust to what little light comes in through the curtained living room window, darkness from the early morning still predominant.

Sitting up, I cringe at the twinge in my neck that I rub out and roll before standing. There's a full glass of water on the coffee table I don't remember getting, and everything has been tidied up. The Valentines are all in a neat pile, the packaging is no longer thrown on the floor, and the sandwich bag full of the ones for her class is folded over and set next to where Ainsley's backpack rests against the coffee table.

My brows pinch as I grab the glass and take a sip. The water is long since warm, but it still feels good against my dry throat. I walk into the kitchen, rubbing my tired eyes and start my morning pot of coffee.

When noise stirs from upstairs, I glance at the time on the stove and know it's Easton getting ready for his run. I barely have time to grab a coffee mug and walk over to watch the pot fill with hot salvation before he's walking down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Morning." I smile at him, noting the black sweatpants and gray thermal he always wears to workout in. Knowing what he's going to grab before he can, I get the plastic bottle that he'll fill with his protein shake and pass it to him as he takes the powder from the cupboard. He grunts out a grateful retort, seemingly as tired as I feel.

"Why do you run so early?"

He stops what he's doing for a moment before glancing at me pouring my coffee. "I like it." That's it. That's all he gives me before he finishes making his shake, passes me milk for my coffee, and proceeds to plug his earbuds in.

I wet my lips. "Thanks for cleaning up last night. I know I left the living room a mess. I planned on dealing with it this morning."

He shakes his drink, puts in his earbuds, and tips his head once. "No problem."

I don't bother stopping him when he leaves, music pumping from the small white buds hanging from both ears. Shrugging, I focus on getting breakfast ready—heart shaped pancakes. Danny used to make them for Ainsley and her mother all the time. Sometimes, on rare occasions, he made them for me.

"Everyone needs a little love on Valentine's Day," he'd tell me.

I let out a tiny breath and force the memory away. Smiling at the heart in the pan, I carefully flip it and silently wonder if I even have the same toppings Danny did. Chocolate chips, strawberries, whipped cream in a can.

“What is that supposed to be?” I laugh, staring at the melted chocolate that I think it supposed to resemble a happy face. “It looks like a slightly less deranged version of the Joker.”

Danny had fixed it by piling whipped cream over the top, but I always knew the failed attempt at a smiley face. It was our secret though. Ainsley never even knew.

Grabbing chocolate chips from the cabinet above my head, I cut it open and carefully place the chips in the cooking batter, watching them bake in as I flip it. The sweet smell has me nibbling a few of the chips as I make more, only burning two in the process that I’ll give myself... And cover them with whipped cream.

It’s after Ainsley is buckled in my car with her backpack sitting beside her booster seat when East strolls up the walkway. Peeling out his earbuds, he stops beside me, sweat drenching his entire front. His already black hair looks more so from the dampness, causing my brows to go up.

“Good run?” I guess. He’s never gone so long, but I don’t tell him I know that.

“Heading out for the day?” he returns.

I just nod.

His chin dips. “Happy Valentine’s Day, by the way.” Clearing his throat, he wipes his forehead off with his bicep before gripping his empty protein bottle and frowning.

“Thanks. You too.” I rub my arm for friction once the cold air picks up. “I don’t know if you want any, but there are pancakes in the microwave for you. A couple are plain, the others have chocolate chips.”

“Thanks.”

Another nod. “Well, I should go.”

He backs toward the house. “See you later.” His eyes go to the open back door, where he waves at Ainsley. “Have a good day, dudette.”

I blink, closing the door and getting in the front the same time he disappears into the house. When I look into the rearview at Ainsley, I slowly ask, “Did he just call you dudette?”

All I get is a tiny little smile.

NOTHING SPECIAL HAPPENS throughout the day except my second class being cancelled giving me time to hit up the Coffee Cottage until my third one begins. There's still a long line of people waiting in front of me when I arrive, so I pull out my phone and text Jenna to see how her day's been since we haven't spoken as much as we usually do.

"Long line this morning," someone says from behind me.

My attention is still plastered to my phone screen as I scan through my emails in wait for my best friend to reply. The amount of realtor junk I'm spammed with still makes me regret ever searching for houses online before reaching out to local agencies who represent the market in the area.

"Piper?" Spine straightening, I turn to see Carter standing behind me in his usual attire—his white shirt, black tie, and black pant combo makes him look more professional than usual.

Blowing out a breath, I wave the hand with my phone in it at him. "Sorry, I'm a bit distracted."

His smile makes my own grow slightly as his focus flicks to the line in front of us. "How's your day been?"

Simple conversation. I can handle that. "I only have two classes. I'm normally doing a check in with my professor who handles student teaching since my schedule is different than my other classmates. She's out today."

"You'd be surprised at the amount of people who take today off," he muses, moving up the same time I do as the line shifts.

I make a face. "For Valentine's Day?"

One of his shoulders goes up.

"Huh." I never considered the holiday anything but a commercial one to get people to spend money on pointless stuff. Then again, I love the chocolates they sell and am guilty of buying myself some. It makes me giggle before I can stop myself.

Carter cocks his head. "What's so funny?"

Cheeks heating, I wave my hand. "It's stupid. I was just thinking about the box of chocolates I'd buy myself the day after Valentine's Day when all the candy is on sale."

"Nobody to send you some?"

His question surprises me, my brows arching as I give him a momentary glance. Eventually, I shrug it off. "No, not really. Sometimes Danny would buy me flowers or chocolates or those little stuffed animals you can find for cheap at the store."

He wouldn't even stop after he got married. Our friendship was known to everyone, and not once did Willow get upset over it. She was glad we had each other. Another reason to like her. She wasn't set on getting rid of me because I was close with her husband.

I didn't realize how easy it'd be to talk about Danny to Carter. He knows him—there's no long, drawn out explanation about our complicated dynamic. Somehow, it doesn't hurt as much knowing Carter got to witness what a wonderful man Daniel McCray was.

"What about you? Any lucky lady?" The words are out before I can even process them, firing up my entire face when I realize what was said aloud. Eyes widening, my lips part to take it back or apologize, but he shakes his head with an easy smile directed at me.

"Not at the moment." His voice is soft as he gives me a quick look before focusing his attention to the people in front of us again.

I vaguely remember my mother talking about a woman named Elizabeth. She'd mentioned it in passing, saying she and Carter were serious. Talks of marriage, even. But I never bothered asking for details because I hadn't spoken to him or even thought about him enough to believe it was any of my business.

Instead of pushing the issue, I let it go. "I always thought this holiday was so stupid."

We move forward. "Why is that?"

I find myself shrugging. "It's all about the money corporations make. I used to get so upset by it. But really..." My voice fades as I stare at the floor. He waits patiently, his eyes burning with interest directed at my face. "It's different when you have someone to share it with, I guess. Even with Danny it was nice."

He makes a small noise of agreement with the back of his throat.

"How have you liked living around here?" he asks, breaking the comfortable silence.

My eyes peel away from the chocolate scone that's calling my name from the pastry display, and back to him. "I like it. It's different. Good different."

He understands, based on the slightest crinkle by his eyes that his smile forms. "There aren't as many farm animals here."

"Is it weird I miss the smell of manure?" I note the disgusted looks casted my way from the two girls waiting for their orders. I promptly ignore

it.

“Nah. I get it.” He nods as the line moves, stepping with me. “How about ... Ainsley, right? Does she like it here? The school?”

A funny feeling tugs at my heart. Nobody has asked about her outside my family and Jenna. Easton will too, but we all live together so it seems obligatory. Very few people know about her. Danny was estranged from his extended family, so they never tried to get to know the sweet little girl that I’m lucky enough to have.

Taken by surprise, I shake my head and give him a quick once over to see if he really wants to know. Carter seems genuinely interested though, which is foreign to me.

Wetting my lips, I say, “Ainsley is ... uh, special. She adjusts pretty quickly, but it’s not necessarily mutual. She has more room to play in this house than the apartment we lived in, so I know she likes that. School has been tough, but I know she can handle it.”

His head tilts and nods slowly. “Kids can adapt fast to new situations. How old is she?”

Talking about her brings a smile to my face that I lack too often. “She just turned six.”

When I get called up to order, I tell the cashier what drink I want and then glance at the display case to see the scone missing. Grumbling over the missed opportunity, I ask for a cinnamon apple muffin and search my bag for my wallet.

“I’ve got it,” Carter says, lowering my hand and passing the woman a twenty-dollar bill while placing his own order.

“You don’t have to—”

“Don’t worry about it.”

It’s pointless to argue when he collects the change from the student worker who very clearly doesn’t want to be here. Her lack of enthusiasm as she passes him the receipt has me biting back my smile.

We walk to the pick-up counter and stand side by side as Carter puts his money back into the new-looking leather wallet.

“Thanks,” I murmur.

He dips his chin.

We wait in silence for another moment, neither of us saying anything. I watch people come and go from the tiny establishment, guys pushing each other and laughing, girls whispering and giggling. It seems like everything I

missed. I had three years to form those kinds of friendships, and I'd only sort of managed it with Jenna. But I never went out to get coffee with her, or gossip about campus life, or tell her all about some guy I slept with because I could.

Did I regret that? Regret Danny?

A ping of hurt radiates in my chest as soon as the thought sweeps across my mind. How could I ever regret somebody who impacted my life as much as he did? Even if he and I didn't become more like I wanted, I loved him regardless. As a friend—someone to depend on.

A throat clears. "You okay?"

I blink. Then blink again. Carter comes into focus when I come back to reality. The one where I'm standing next to my attractive professor amidst the local college kids instead of the man I'd always pictured myself with.

Because Carter exists.

And Danny no longer does.

Heart hurting, I force a tight smile. "Lost in thought. I'm fine." My eyes turn to the counter where one of the other student workers finishes putting tops on two coffees.

"Danny?"

My bottom lip quivers. "Yeah."

"You can talk to me, Piper," he murmurs, eyes focused downward on mine despite my lack of attentiveness toward him.

I know I can talk to him. That's the problem. It doesn't matter what roles we play here on campus—professor and student or not. I shouldn't have to talk to anybody about someone I lost three years ago like it still slices me up as if I'd just said goodbye to him yesterday.

"That's all right, Professor Ford," is the reply I manage to say evenly. Our order is called, and I happily take the white bag with my pastry and the cool drink that feels like heaven against my clammy palm and thank Carter again. "I'm going to be late."

It isn't until I powerwalk out that I realize how stupid that was to say. It's his class I'm going to next, and it doesn't start for another thirty minutes. And that's when I decide to be weak for a day and walk to my car, unlock the door, and drive anywhere but here.

No classes.

No Carter Ford.

No feelings.

And when I eventually find my way home with Ainsley in the back seat after school, we walk into the house that smells like chocolate brownies and something else—something floral. I walk into the kitchen and reveal the reason why, a six-year-old hot on my heels and tugging on the hem of my shirt when she sees the pan of brownies.

My eyes are stuck on the flowers.

It's a beautiful bouquet of assorted flowers that brings the kitchen to life. I drag my fingertips across the petals and note the pretty white ribbon tied along the small of the vase they're sitting in. From the corner of my eye, I see Ainsley climb onto the chair and glance down at the dessert in the baking tray.

"Hold on," I direct, seeing the small note in front of them. It's in East's scratchy handwriting.

Enjoy.

I grab a plate and napkin for Ainsley before taking out a piece for her to snack on. My eyes go back to the flowers. Moving aside some in search of another note, I realize there is none other than a generic Happy Valentine's Day card stuck in the middle with the local shop's logo and number.

Sliding my phone from my back pocket, I shoot a quick text to Easton saying Ainsley loves the brownies.

East: *Glad to hear*

Biting my lip, I stare at the flowers for another moment before thumbing the keys on my screen again.

Me: *Thank you for the flowers*

It doesn't take long before bubbles appear at the bottom followed by his response.

East: *Don't know what you're talking about*

At first, I think he's joking. It makes me smile for a moment to think he wouldn't want me knowing, but that smile quickly disappears when I see the two texts he sends directly after.

East: *They're not from me*

East: *Be back late*

I blink and reread the texts before shaking my head and looking up at the flowers. If he didn't send them, I have no clue who did. Jenna hates this holiday with a burning passion and boycotts any stores that try getting her to buy something for a special someone. Plus, she's never sent flowers before. The only other person who knows where I live is my family. And...

Carter.

Swallowing past the surprise lodged in the back of my throat, I move the flowers from the middle of the island and put them next to the sink where more sunlight filters through the small window. Unsure of how to feel, I turn my back on the beautiful gesture and read my roommates messages again.

Why would I assume he'd buy me flowers? Now that I know he didn't, I feel stupid. He probably thinks I expect something now because we're sleeping together.

Cursing lightly under my breath, I shake my head at the piece of brownie Ainsley offers me. At least I know he made those. I just kiss her temple, grab her bag, and busy myself with making dinner.

Not knowing when Easton will be home since he said it'll be late, I only make enough for two.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I'M WOKEN UP BY THE FAMILIAR SOUND OF MY DOOR CRACKING OPEN AND letting in what little light the small nightlight in the hall offers. Cracking my eyes open, I half expect to see a little girl sneaking in wanting to curl up beside me. It's not often she does it, but I always secretly love it when she decides she needs to be close.

It's Easton who walks in. He quietly closes the door and turns to me as I sit up slowly, rubbing one of the heels of my hands against my tired eyelid. When I see it's almost four in the morning, I shake my head at him. "Did you just get in?"

"Told you I'd be late."

I lay back down. "Go to bed, East."

"Piper..."

Closing my eyes, I give him my back. "I want to go back to sleep. You should go. I'm sure you're plenty tired."

His footsteps get closer instead of back tacking to the door. The mattress dips. "What's that supposed to mean?" There's an edge to his voice, and when I turn back around to face him, I smell the alcohol radiating from him.

"Seriously?" I groan. "You're drunk."

"Tipsy."

"You drove here?"

"Friend." His head cocks, eyes hard on my face as they study me. "What did you mean, Piper?"

"Go. To. Bed." If he thinks I won't shove him off the mattress, he's wrong. I'm tired, crabby, and just want the two hours of sleep I can still get before my alarm goes off.

He tugs on the comforter that I try covering my face with. “Not until you talk to me.”

I smack his hands away from my blanket and sit up hastily. “Easton, I’m fucking tired. The last thing I want is you to stumble in here again and fall asleep for Ainsley to see. You should have just stayed at whoever’s place you’ve been at this whole time.”

His expression darkens. “I was with Jay.”

“Mmhmm.”

His eyes narrow. “We went to Divers.”

Divers? “And then you met...?” I bait him, picturing some woman there giving him the eyes. I wouldn’t blame anyone. He’s good looking and screams sex.

“I was with Jay,” he repeats slowly, eyeing me skeptically.

Scrubbing my palms down my face, I finally nod. “Okay. You were with Jay. Drinking. Again. Hope you had fun.”

“Piper.” It’s a growl this time.

“Easton,” I counter, “I would very much not like to be woken up hours before my alarm goes off. So, if you don’t mind...”

He doesn’t let it go. “I haven’t been with anyone but you since we started this. Don’t act like I’m out there fucking random women. You can’t even be jealous.”

Jealous? Maybe for a moment, the tiniest, slightest moment, I’d had ill feelings over the idea of him being with other women while he was with me. But the thing is, we’re *not* together. There is no us. There is no we. We have sex. A lot. Slowly. Quickly. Hard. Soft. We use each other for reasons I can only assume are mutual.

To escape.

Because it’s fun.

Because *we can*.

“I’m not jealous,” is all he gets from me, and I’m proud it comes out calm. The last thing I want is for him to think I actually care enough to purposefully be a bitch. “Listen, I’m just tired. I have a busy day ahead of me and am looking forward to the weekend more than you could ever know. I plan to sleep. A lot. Maybe watch a bunch of movies that will make me cry. I don’t know. So, I’m sorry if I’m being bitchy. What you do is not my business.”

His nostrils flare, and I notice his hands clenching at in his lap. "I had a shit night and Jay and I went out to let loose. There were no women involved. Just booze. We sobered up before even leaving the bar."

My lips twitch. He doesn't seem sober right now, but I don't bring that up.

"It's easier," he murmurs.

That makes me confused. "What is?"

"Talking to you when I'm buzzed." I cringe at how that must make me. Am I unapproachable when he's sober? Do I act like I don't care? Go me.

"Sorry?"

He sighs, his shoulders slumping. "It's not easy for me to open up to people, Piper. But I do with you. It's just easier when I've had a few drinks and get in a mood."

One of my brows quirk up. "You need liquid courage to speak to me?" It's wrong to find that amusing when he's so ... him. Sex on a stick. An inked orgasm waiting to happen. If anything, I should need alcohol to approach him.

Been there, done that.

"You love her," he states randomly, his eyes locking on the picture of Danny. "I can tell how much you love her. That makes me respect you because you don't have to." Not knowing what to say, I just keep quiet and let him speak his mind. "People don't have to love kids. They don't have to give them their time. I know that first-hand. But you? Shit, Piper. You took in your friend's daughter even when you could have found another way. But you love her and would do anything for her. That shit gets to me. You get to me. So, yeah. Liquid courage is sometimes needed when I feel like shit and need somebody to talk to."

And he wants that someone to be me? I let my shoulders loosen from their tight stance, easing my back against the headboard. "Ainsley really did love the brownies you made. She had three even though I told her two was enough. I swear she cons me with just one little look."

His eyes light up, and the barely-there smile on his face returns. Only this time, it lasts longer than the normal three seconds I'm used to seeing it. "I'm sorry for waking you up. I shouldn't have come in."

"Why did you?" Why did he tell me anything he did? He never talks about his personal life. His past. Maybe I don't give him a chance to before I use him to escape mine.

His voice is soft. “Just needed to.”

There’s something familiar in his tone that has me reaching out and placing my hand on top of his. Defeat. I’ve felt it before, heard it lingering in my voice when I wished I didn’t.

Easton and I are a lot alike.

In pain.

Needing comfort.

Wanting to escape the reasons why.

So, I lean forward the same time he does until our lips meet in the middle. It starts as a soft kiss, lingering, exploring. He brushes mine with a gentleness I didn’t know he could possess. Once, twice, a third time. Each pass gets a little firmer, like he’s searching for something.

One of his hands goes to my hip, where he slides me down the mattress until I’m lying flat on my back with him hovering over me. Our lips never stop touching. His tongue sweeps my bottom lip until I open for him, and I can taste the bitterness of his choice of poison from the bar. But I ignore it and reach for his shirt, guiding it up and palming his hard stomach along the way.

He moves back peeling his shirt off, then helping me with mine. The movements are calculated yet slow, like he wants this but not with the same urgency as before. What he needs now isn’t to forget. He needs to remember—he needs my body, my warmth, the way I pant and whisper and plead.

And I give it to him.

Our clothes shed slowly as his hands caress my body. His lips find my chest, tease my breasts, nip my stomach, until they trail downward and meet the bundle of nerves that ache for him between my legs. He kisses me and sucks me and licks me and plays with me until I’m gripping the sheets on either side of my body and biting my bottom lip to keep quiet.

After my climax subsides, he trails kisses up my body until his hard cock is positioned at my entrance. He knows I’m on the pill, we’ve talked about it before. But unlike all the other times when condoms sheathed him, he gives me one long look as if to ask if this is all right.

And I nod.

His movements are torturous as he enters me an inch at a time, pausing, pulling out, and moving in further—again and again until one of his hands finds mine and we interlock our fingers, thrusting in until he fills me

completely. My fingers twitch around his as he holds my hand, drawing back and filling me again. It's slow, too slow, and I use my free hand to cup his face and try kissing him harder, quicker, but he won't have it.

Every time our hips meet, it's with thought-out precision. He's searching, searching, searching for something inside of me. His free hand cups my face like mine does his, and he deepens the kiss, tasting me and nipping my bottom lip as he continues his rhythmic movements.

The feelings building inside my chest warm my entire body as I realize how different this is from the other times. We're always looking for ways to use sex as a means to an end. This isn't like that.

And I want to know why.

What triggered you, Easton?

Whatever it is changed him. Instead of seeking a fuck buddy for a few hours, he sought after something entirely else. A person to cherish. To hold. To find shelter in. Me. He confided in me for that.

I find myself unlinking our hands and wrapping my arms around his neck as I draw my legs around his waist. I don't rush the way he enters me or try changing the pace again. I settle for everything and anything he gives me and get lost in the foreign feeling as our heavy breaths mix.

What happened to you, Easton?

Thrust.

Talk to me, Easton.

Thrust.

I'm here for you, Easton.

My lips form an O as he thrusts one more time and hits me in the perfect spot until black spots dot my eyes and I silently orgasm with my body arching into his. I feel him empty himself inside of me and it's the most erotic feeling I've ever felt before.

He doesn't pull out right away. And before I know it ... we're doing it again. Only slower, drawing it out—prolonging the moment.

And I get lost all over again.

THE GIFT CARD to Bellamy's Bistro stares at me from the bottom of my purse. Nibbling my bottom lip as I sift through the contents to find the Chapstick I lost, I pull out the card and study it for a long moment with

indecision. I haven't even thought about using it until now—out of sight, out of mind.

But a part of me wants to use it soon to get out and enjoy myself. I doubt Ainsley would be interested in going since their kid's menu is barely more than a few basic selections, and she was never one to like restaurants anyways. I blame Danny for that because he was the same way. He liked ordering delivery or cooking at home, even though I know Willow preferred dressing up and going out. She'd confided in me about it in hopes I could convince Danny to get someone to babysit while they had date nights. I talked to him and babysat Ainsley.

After the night I spent with Easton more than a week ago, I can't help but wonder if he'd want to go with me. The Bistro supplied a card with more than enough for two people. I could ask Jenna, even be safer to, but it's not her I want a night out with. And I'm not sure how to feel about that.

Pulling out my phone while waiting for Carter to show up at his office like we'd planned, I shoot East a text before I chicken out.

Me: *Ever been to Bellamy's?*

Biting down on my thumbnail in wait of a reply, I turn my focus to the half-eaten granola bar in my other hand. Not hungry, I wrap the plastic wrapper around what's left and stuff it in my purse. The gift card rests beside it, taunting me as my phone buzzes in my hand some minutes later.

East: *Not usually my scene*

What *is* his scene? After the night I've thought about way too much, I've wondered more about him. I want to ask him about his mom, what her name is, about his father and if they talk, and if he has any siblings. I want to get to know the man who practically admitted little old me intimidates him enough to only open up after he's been drinking. Maybe I should be offended, but for some reason I'm flattered.

My brilliant response to him? *Oh. Okay.*

When I reread my message, I cringe and click my screen off, so I don't have to look at his reply. He didn't send me flowers and he doesn't want to go to the restaurant with me. Fine. The more I open my mouth with him, the greedier I become. He probably thinks I'm desperate—like sex equals a relationship. I need to back off and give him space. Give *us* space.

"Good morning," Carter greets, rounding the corner with his keys in hand. His coat is still buttoned and spattered with the snow that's been flurrying all morning.

I put my phone into my purse pocket and smile up from where I sit on the floor by his door. He walks over and offers me his hand, which I take to pull myself up. “Thanks. Morning. Still snowing out I take it?”

He nods, unlocking his door and pushing it open. With his free hand, he flicks on the lights and gestures for me to follow him in. “It’s lightened up some.”

I put my bag down in the spare chair beside where his desk is perched against the side wall. The first time I saw his office, I was mesmerized by the bookshelves lining the opposite wall covered in history textbooks, mythology novels, encyclopedias, pictures, and trinkets that seemed random. But I know Carter and he doesn’t display random objects. They all mean something to him, just like the pictures he selected do.

Smiling when I see a new one added at the end, I walk over to it as I unzip my own jacket and slide it off. “Jesse would hate you if he knew you had this on your shelf.”

It’s one of Jesse, Danny, Carter, and me. I still had braces, so I had to of been ten or eleven. Danny had an arm draped across my shoulder and Jesse’s face looked like he wanted to murder whoever was taking the picture. Was it my mom? Our dad? I don’t remember.

Carter chuckles, resting his jacket on the back of his office chair and walking over with his hands in his pockets. “He never liked getting photos taken of him. Danny’s grandmother had to bribe him with cookies just to take that one.”

Mable. I’ve only seen her twice since Ainsley’s birthday party. Her nurses keep me updated on her health and they haven’t had a lot of positive news to give me. She’s been struggling and there’s nothing I can do to help.

Something brushes my arm. “You okay?”

I find myself shaking my head. “Mable isn’t doing well these days. She’s in a home for her dementia and it’s getting worse.”

His frown greets me when I look up. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry.” He studies my sullen expression for a moment before looking back at the picture. “Do you see her a lot?”

“I try to go a couple times a month.” My schedule hasn’t allowed me to do that lately, and if I do have time her nurses tell me it may be better not to come until she’s having a better day. It kills me to see her like that. They know it. I know it. It’s better for everyone if my emotional ass isn’t there when she slips. “It’s hard not to react when the switch flips for her. One

minute you're you, the next she thinks you're somebody else. It happens in seconds, Carter."

His hand squeezes mine. "She's strong."

My lips rub together. "Nobody is strong enough to fight that." It's a truth I hate speaking aloud, but it's true. There are a lot of diseases that aren't fair. Why they exist is beyond me. I've never been a religious person, never once been to church, but if there's a God out there I don't get why He'd create such horrible things.

I clear my throat and walk over to my bag, moving it to the floor and sitting in the hideous yellow chairs they supply for the faculty offices. He follows suit, pressing a hand against the front of his black shirt before sitting in his. "I meant what I said before. You can talk to me about anything. If there's anybody who can understand, it's me. Danny, Mable, I know them. I get it."

"I know." I loosen a sigh and settle into the uncomfortable excuse of a cushion. "I just don't think it's appropriate. You're my professor, not my friend."

"Who says I can't be both?"

"School policy?" I guess dumbly.

He chuckles, leaning back and resting his folded hands on his stomach. "There's nothing against students confiding in their professors. In fact, it's encouraged."

I level with him. "There's a difference in confiding in a professor and finding friendship in one. Friendship opens doors that I'm sure the administration would frown on."

His head cocks to the side, his brown eyes burning into mine with interest. "Like?"

"Trust."

"Professors aren't allowed to be trusted?"

I scoot forward, leaning my elbows on my knees. "It's like this, Professor Ford. Trust is an intimate thing. It means that you're willing to open up to a person with anything and everything. That person, then, will be there for you. It's rare to be able to find that in somebody and have it be pure and genuine. It'll shift because of its rarity. Lines get blurred. Trust then becomes complicated. Administration doesn't like complicated things."

He blinks, taken aback. "Huh."

That's all I get. *Huh*. "We'd be even more complicated because of our situation. I knew you from the past. We sort of grew up together. That adds a layer they wouldn't like if we decided to be friends."

"You're overthinking this," he states simply, his shoulders lifting. But am I? I've always been a goody-goody. I never liked being on anybody's bad side or getting into trouble. And Carter? I think of the ride home and the flowers and everything he's done for me with my student teaching placement.

We're already complicated.

"Maybe," I relent.

His smirk tells me he doesn't believe my reply, so he just lets it go. "Regardless of what anybody might think, I *am* here for you. Nobody deserves to go through what you have. You're strong, Piper. You always have been."

That makes me snort. "I was never strong. In fact, I remember Jesse telling me I was a baby whenever I pitched a fit about something."

His lips quirk. "Jesse's your brother. He's supposed to be an asshole to you. But even he was amazed by you at times. Like when the neighbor's dog bit you in the leg and you managed to fight him off and run back home even though you were bleeding pretty bad. You never cried once. Not even when Jesse rushed you to the hospital once he realized what happened. He said you never shed a tear even when you were getting stitches."

I rolled my eyes. "They numbed my leg." I still have scars from that. It wasn't the dog's fault I tried to pet it while it was eating in his yard. I got too close and he got territorial. Not once had the German Shepard ever bit anyone. In fact, it was usually the friendliest animal. "If I'd ratted out the dog, they would have had to put it down. I had a classmate who got bit by her parent's dog and they had to put it to sleep."

Carter just looks at me.

"Anyway," I continue, "Jesse bribed me with ice cream after that whole ordeal. I didn't want to cry because I was afraid he'd go back on his deal. I'm not strong."

"You are."

We'll agree to disagree.

We move onto the actual reason we're in here, which is to go over the first papers that were due for his 101 class. He shows me the grading rubric and what to look for, then shows me the stack of papers on the corner of his

desk. There are thirty students in his class and the paper was a minimum of five pages, no more than ten. My bet is that most of these are four and a half with a work cited page.

When I grab a pen out of my bag to jot down some pointers he gave me, the gift card falls out with it. I pick it up, but not before Carter says, “Still haven’t gone?”

I put it back, giving him a small smile. “I told you before I don’t have a lot of time. I’ve thought about going soon though. I just haven’t worked out the details.”

His brows go up in curiosity.

“On whom to go with,” I enlighten, waving my hand in dismissal. “It doesn’t really matter. I always feel weird eating at places on my own unless I can sit at the counter so it’s less weird. You know?” I’m babbling now, which makes my cheeks heat. “But yeah. I’ll go. I’m sure they think I really hated their stuff now.”

“We can go.”

I jerk back.

“If you’d like,” he adds casually.

Uh... “Did the whole friendship conversation get lost on you? If the administration would look down on us possibly being friends, they definitely wouldn’t like the idea of us going out to eat together. Platonically, of course.”

He nods once, lips twitching upward slightly like he’s amused. “Of course.”

“And if they knew you drove me home, it’d only be worse,” I point out for good measure.

He watches me for a moment. “We already saw each other there once. By pure coincidence.” And his point is what? “Who’s to say we wouldn’t meet there again by the same odds? It’s not that big of an area.”

Is he saying what I think he’s saying?

“We could find ourselves there together,” is the next statement that leaves my lips parting at him in wonder. “Tomorrow night at seven.”

Tomorrow. Friday. Friday is like a date night. That’s when people meet up for ... dates. Is that weird? Am I really overthinking things with him?

He adds, “Platonically.”

I swallow. Platonically. I could do that. Find myself there at seven tomorrow. It gives me time to find somebody to watch Ainsley. Maybe

Jenna. My parents would probably do it if they didn't have plans for themselves.

I'm not sure when I start nodding, but he's nodding back. It's a silent agreement.

Carter Ford and I will go to dinner.

Together.

On a platonic non-date.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ANXIETY CREEPS INTO MY CONSCIENCE AS I FLATTEN MY PALMS DOWN THE sides of my outfit that Jenna picked out for me. The black lace blouse is tucked into the extra tight skinny jeans that my best friend insisted was casual and sexy—two things she told me I needed to go for. Pairing them with a comfortable pair of gray heeled boots that go to my shins, I examine myself once more in the mirror before accepting this is as good as it'll get.

The ride to Bellamy's is quiet. Too nervous to listen to the radio, I absorb the sound of passing traffic instead. I'm in the parking lot next to the dimly lit restaurant before I know it, noting the familiar vehicle Carter gave me a ride in a few rows in front of me. My eyes drift to the time on the dashboard. We're both early.

Clearing my throat, I give myself a pep talk like Jenna told me to do and then get out of my car. Purse over my shoulder, phone in hand, I walk up to the entrance and falter when I realize I don't know what to say. Do I say I'm waiting for someone? Request if he's here? The panic settled into me earlier comes back tenfold as somebody opens the inside door for me with a smile, giving me no other choice but to walk in.

"Hey." Stricken, I glance to the voice that greets me, noting Carter leaning against the wall. Like my eyes that drift down his black pants and the royal blue button down tucked into his waist, he gives me a once over with a growing smile on his face. "You look beautiful tonight."

We saw each other earlier for the class we now co-teach and there was nothing unusual about it. He taught, I made a point or two, but mostly focused on the students. Nobody would have guessed we'd be here hours later, both in new outfits and waiting for each other for dinner.

“Hi.” I lick my lips. “And thanks.” My hands go to my sides again, brushing out a wrinkle in the shirt I should have left untucked. Jenna told me my figure is shown off better if I tuck it in, but now I regret listening to her.

“You look sexy, Piper. Sexy is good.”

“Sexy isn’t what I’m shooting for.”

“Everybody shoots for sexy,” she argues, giving me the evil eye that I know better than to argue with. “Make him drool and regret this is a non-date.”

Like always, my extravagant bestie made me feel empowered. But as soon as the tables turn and I’m on my own, self-doubt takes over any courage she gave me. While I do like the outfit, I think I could have gone with something slightly more casual. Preferably something that doesn’t feel as painted on as the jeans I squeezed into.

He gestures toward the hostess booth. “Table for Ford,” he tells the young girl.

She checks the book in front of her and nods once, grabbing two menus and telling us to follow her. Carter’s hand goes to the small of my back, gesturing for me to go first. I look over my shoulder at him and smile. “You must have great intuition to reserve a table for the possibility of somebody showing up at the same time as you.”

“Maybe I just hoped,” is his smooth reply. It makes me bite my lip and overanalyze each of the four words. He *hoped* to see me. I’m not sure what to do with that.

When we arrive at our table in the corner, Carter pulls out a chair for me. Surprised, I take a seat and smile gratefully at him and watch him sit across from me as the hostess gives us our menus and says the waitress will be over shortly.

For some reason, I decide to blurt, “I’ve never had anybody pull out a chair for me. That was ... nice.”

One side of his lips quirk up as he takes the menu and examines the beverage section on the back panel. “Sounds like the people you’ve been out with are lacking on their manners.”

A smile tugs on my lips. “Is that your way of trying to figure out what kind of people I dated?”

He chuckles, setting the menu down. “If this were a date, which it’s not, I’d say no. It’s rude to talk about exes on the first date. But since it’s *not* a

date, then yes.”

My brows go up. “You want to know about my exes?”

His chin dips.

“I don’t have any.”

Now his brows arch, surprise clearly coating his face. “You’ve never dated anybody? Not once?”

Clicking my tongue over how pathetic that sounds coming from him, I simply shake my head and stare at the fountain drinks they offer. It seems wrong to go for the alcohol, though this conversation is making me want some.

He makes a noise with the back of his throat and leans back in his chair. “Why not?”

Groaning, I dare to meet his eyes. “There are a lot of reasons. The most recent would be the six-year-old I take care of. Guys don’t really pick single mothers as their first go-to. We’re like the tapioca when all the other pudding flavors are sold out, you know?”

“I don’t know.” His eyes dance, the dark brown now full of mischievous. “I happen to love tapioca.”

My heartrate picks up a little.

“That’s the most recent reason,” he redirects. “What about the other reasons? You can’t tell me Ainsley is why you don’t see people. There’s not a doubt in my mind you’re the type to be noticed by men.”

Wow. This is not how I expected dinner to go. Body heating over the question, I try focusing on the menu to choose something to eat that won’t go over the gift card balance. “You already know the reason, Carter.”

He’s quiet for a moment, his eyes on me based on the way the top of my head burns. I choose a salad, memorizing it for when the waitress comes. “Because of Danny?”

I remain silent.

“Because of Danny,” he confirms to himself quietly.

Finally, I say, “Because of an unrequited love I held onto. Maybe there were guys who were interested in me, but I never noticed them. If I wasn’t swept up in Danny, I busied myself with school. Then the accident happened, and my life changed forever. Danny was gone and I got Ainsley, and people started looking at me for an entirely different reason. So, no. I’ve never really dated.”

His lips press together, but before he can reply, the waitress comes over and asks for our order. Once both drinks and food have been placed, she takes our menus and leaves us be again. The air is tense. His eyes are dark. And my mind is screaming to run.

But I don't.

I'm sick of running.

"What about you?" I ask, changing the subject in hopes he'll roll with it. "Any exes that plague your mind and dreams?"

He manages to grin, letting the focus on me go. That's why I like Carter. Not once has he pushed with me. "An ex fiancée actually. Elizabeth. We dated for about three years before I popped the question."

I blink. He was engaged to the woman I heard my mother talk about. "Wow. I'm sorry that didn't work out."

His shoulders lift. "It was mutual to end things. Nobody cheated. Nobody lied. We realized that we weren't made for each other before it was too late."

"Do you still talk?"

He shakes his head. "There's nothing for us to say. She moved back to Georgia where her family is, so we don't see each other. Before her were a few others—girlfriends, not fiancées. More than I'd like to admit. Not as much as your brother though."

I roll my eyes at the last remark. "Jesse always insisted he'd never settle, huh?"

His nod comes easily. "Ren is good for him. He's changed a lot since she came into his life and I'm happy for them."

"Me too." The answer is quick, genuine. Even if we don't talk or see each other much, I'm happy my brother could find that happiness.

His body shifts on the seat. "Do you mind me asking why you were taking a sign language class at the Rec Center? You don't have to explain, I was just curious."

Wetting my bottom lip, I take a moment to decide if it's my story to tell. "It's for Ainsley. Well, the both of us. She doesn't verbally communicate, so one of her teachers suggested learning sign language."

"She's mute?"

"Select mute," I correct quietly. I'll always remember the day she stopped talking. She was young, always babbling on about something to whoever would listen. She learned to talk at a young age and knew things

most kids didn't. Ainsley was smart. So, so smart. And after her father passed away, she shut down. Never again did I hear her questions or random facts or laughter.

I miss that the most.

Her laughter.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

My shoulders lift like it's not a big deal. It is, it's just not one he can do anything about. His apology will get us nowhere. "We've been signing more to each other as we learn. She's picking it up quicker than I am. I swear she's a child genius, Carter. It makes me wonder if she was really Danny's." A laugh bubbles past my lips at the ridiculous statement. "I mean, of course she was. But he always hated school and learning and nearly failed a grade. Remember? I think Ainsley takes after her mom. I didn't know her that well.

"Anyway, it's nice to see her talk in some form. I'm not as quick to learn, but I know enough to get by. We're going to keep taking classes to get better since the courses aren't that long at the Center. My parents are even learning, and my best friend said she'd sign up too." Smiling at the effort everyone wants to make for Ainsley, I sigh. "I'm lucky. I always thought I was cursed, but I'm lucky to have them. You know?"

"It sounds like you surround yourself with good people," he agrees, smiling.

And I do. I really do.

Feeling the pressure of first non-date jitters leave my body as the heavy conversation lightens, I lean back in my chair and give him a sultry smile. "So, Carter Ford. Tell me all your deepest, darkest secrets."

His eyes burn into mine, something lingering in them as he studies my expression closely before his own lips carve into a smirk mixed with amusement and something else. Interest? I can't be sure. "I don't think we're quite ready for that."

We. Not me.

It's pitch-black when I make it back home, well past midnight. After dinner was drinks and a long walk to sober up and talk about everything and anything we wanted to. Mundane fun facts like favorite colors, food, and movies. He was surprised to learn mine are purple, barbecue chicken

pizza, and *The Wizard of Oz*. Though, I'm not sure why the movie choice is that shocking since I watched it all the time when I was younger.

It was his choices that didn't surprise me at all. I've always known blue was his favorite color and that he loved any type of pasta, or that *Chainsaw Massacre* was his nostalgic go-to. He and Jesse would always bribe me into watching the movies with them as more came out, then betting each other how long I'd last before hiding in my room.

Carter always bet in my favor.

He also always lost.

With barely any buzz coursing through my limbs, I lock the front door and note the kitchen light on. Stepping out of my shoes and leaving them by the couch, I walk into the kitchen for a glass of water and see Easton making a sandwich on the island.

"Hey," I greet, grabbing a glass from the cabinet and filling it with water.

"You're home late." There's no accusation in his tone. It's just a simple statement.

I turn and watch him slather mayo on the bread and note the tomatoes sliced on the other. It makes my stomach rumble even though Carter bought us a late-night dessert at a café right before we parted ways. "I was out to dinner with somebody."

His eyes go to the clock on the oven before swiping over to my face. "Dinner? Like a date?"

Wincing, I shake my head as he studies the outfit melded to my body with a sour look crossing his features. "Not really a date, no. More like ... two people who met up and ate a meal together and talked. It was a non-date."

"A non-date?" he says slowly.

I nod, sipping my water. "It was probably with the same guy who sent the flowers."

"The flowers?"

Why the hell is he repeating everything I'm saying? "Yes, the flowers." Both our attention turns to the bouquet in question, still holding strong behind me on the counter. "You know, the ones I embarrassingly thought you bought for me. And it's honestly fine you didn't. I don't expect anything from you. It's just sex. *Good* sex. So, yeah. I went out. But not on a date. On a non-date with food and conversation. And then alcohol."

His eye twitches. “You’re drunk.”

“I’ve sobered up.”

His eyes flick back to the flowers. “The flowers, huh?” He shakes his head and puts his sandwich together, cleaning up after himself. “I hope you had fun then.”

Walking past me without a second look back, he exits the kitchen. But I don’t want to end the conversation knowing the pinched expression on his face is there. “Why do I feel like you’re mad at me?” I call after him, following the brooding man toward the stairs.

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

He stops a few steps up and turns. “Why should I care if you go out on a date, Piper? We’re just fucking, like you said. Go out and see whoever the hell you want. Just know that this thing between us ends here. I’m not into double dipping.”

My lips part as hurt slices my chest. Is that what he really thinks of me right now? “I didn’t sleep with him. Not that it’s any of your business.”

He lifts his shoulders. “Like I said, I don’t care. It’s probably better we stop anyway. You’re free to go on as many non-dates as you want. I probably have plans for tomorrow night as is. Look at us moving on.”

Moving—

I watch as he walks upstairs, biting into his sandwich and closing himself in his room. I remain at the bottom of the stairs, unsure of what just happened. My grip on the railing tightens as tears blur my vision, but I force them away and clear the emotion clogged in my throat. The burning sensation resides despite me holding my head up and pretending it doesn’t matter.

There’s no reason to cry over Easton.

After all, we were just fucking.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SEEING MABLE TENDING TO HER PLANTS WHEN I WALK INTO HER ROOM makes me smile. The window is covered in them, even more than the last time I was here to see her. The nurse working the floor today said gardening keeps her calm, so they kept getting her more.

“Piper,” Mable greets when she turns and sees me, setting the green watering pot down and walking over to give me a hug. “How are you, dear?”

I loosen the grip on her that I want nothing more than to keep, knowing her warmth is the only thing that can make me feel better. It’s been days since my non-date with Carter and the tense conversation with Easton following it. He hasn’t been home since, though he told me via a single text that he was staying with Jay.

With Jay. That was all his text said when I asked if he was okay because he hadn’t been home. I was worried, but he must not have noticed or just didn’t care. My guess was the latter. It was Jenna who noticed the sign on The Inked Lotus door saying they were closed for a convention until Monday.

I didn’t expect Easton to tell me everything, but it would have been nice to hear it from him instead. Then again, he didn’t owe me anything. It wouldn’t be fair to ask him where he was when it wasn’t really any of my business.

“I’m okay,” I lie through a smile.

She pats my arms, not seeming to know the difference. I follow her over to her plants. Her fingers brush the leaves as she picks up her watering can and moves onto the ones in the back.

“Have any wild parties without me?” I tease, leaning against the wall and watching her.

She turns and blinks at me. “Oh, I’m too old for that.” When she resumes her task, I find myself frowning. Mable would always joke about seeing a different man every week and doing shots with male strippers she hired. Was any of it true? No. But that was Mable. Was. I guess that’s the keyword.

Swallowing, I force a smile. “I went on a date the other day.” The words are out of my mouth before I can process them. “Well, it was more like two old friends catching up. But it was nice. I had fun.”

I’m not sure why I’m telling her. Jenna got every detail from me over wine and pizza the following night. I excluded anything about Easton, though his absence isn’t lost on her. She was happy for me when I admitted I enjoyed the night with Carter. The conversation between us over dinner and drinks wasn’t forced, even if it got tense at some points, and Carter and I teased easily and without care. We’d bring up school, teaching, my future plans. Carter Ford was interested in me. And that made me interested in him. Teenage me was screaming with joy internally.

“That’s nice, dear.” She sounds absent, but her early signs of an episode aren’t there. I manage to push past it, nodding.

“It was with Carter Ford.”

Her eyes drift to meet mine, a genuine Mable smile stretched on her face. “He’s such a nice boy.”

“He is.”

“Did you have fun?”

I pause, then say, “I did. Thank you.”

Her head moves up and down. “He’s such a nice boy. Not as nice as my boy. Danny was such a good boy. Wasn’t he?”

Struggling to swallow, I bob my head. “I don’t know anybody who would say otherwise, Mable.”

She wags her finger at me. “You two would have made a great couple. Two good people together. Never understood why he chose the other one.”

My shoulders tighten. Mable loved Willow. She said she was the next best baker next to herself. And I agreed. Willow could make anything in the kitchen. Danny used to love it when his wife and grandmother would spend time together. And they’d spend hours baking cookies for the entire neighborhood.

They were both good people.

“Because they were in love,” I whisper, more to myself than Mable. Breathing in slowly, I wet my bottom lip. “Danny loved Willow so much, Mable. She was a great woman. Better than me.”

The truth in those words doesn’t hurt me but breaks past a wall I built. I was always comparing myself to Willow trying to figure out why he chose her instead of me. They’d known each other for a short amount of time compared to how long I knew him. But every time I thought about those reasons, envy grew thicker. Willow never envied anybody. She never complained. I can honestly admit now that she was better than most people I know.

“No, no,” the sweet old woman disagrees.

I have no energy to fight. “I see you have more plants. Glenda out front said they might have one more for you.”

Her eyes brighten. “Oh, I love my plants. They keep these old hands busy. Mind, too. I know what they say about me.”

My brows quirk. “What do they say?”

She taps her head. “Not all the tools are in the shed, if you know what I mean. Meredith always talks about me with the other gossips. Jokes on her, Piper. I happen to know she’s got an STD from sleeping with Harold. He gets around here.”

Eyes bulging, I can’t help but laugh until tears sting my eyes. For a moment I thought I was going to lose Mable to another episode. But here she is, talking like she always used to. I cling to that for when she slips.

I know it’ll happen.

“Hey, Mable?”

“Hmm?”

I hesitate, watching her peel off a dead leaf and examining the other plants. “I loved Danny very much. I thought he was the one for me. I wanted him to be.”

She doesn’t say anything.

“But he wasn’t.” It’s a reluctant admission, one that will always sting like any long-lasting first love is.

Finally, Mable turns. “I know, dear.”

We just stare at each other.

“Harold has a grandson, you know.”

My head tilts. “Does he have STDs too?”

She shrugs.
I grin. "I think I'm good."
My thoughts drift to Carter.
I'm not sure why.

IT'S ALREADY GETTING dark by the time tutoring ends. The weather forecast calls for rain on top of this unusually nice weather that makes winter feel more like spring. But I know it'll turn back into ice and snow, so I don't get my hopes up that the season is ending early.

I'm walking toward the commuter lot when I see Carter waving in my direction and calling out my name. Smiling tiredly, I meet him halfway up the path and bury my hands in my jacket pockets. "Hi, Professor Ford."

He eyes me but doesn't correct the name. I told him at dinner I felt weird calling him Carter on campus. It slips out of familiarity more than I like, but I always hound myself silently for it after. "Piper. I'm glad I caught you. I was— Are you okay? You look a little pale."

There's a headache pounding in my temples that's overheating my body and making me nauseous, but I smile. "I'm fine. I just have a little headache. Anyway, what's up?"

He studies me for a moment. "I was wondering if you had time tomorrow to help me grade assignments. I have a few meetings between classes, but I'm free around four."

Nibbling my lip, I give him an unsure look while I contemplate Ainsley. I've been asking a lot of Jenna and my parents over the past couple of months. They always happily help me, Jenna especially. She spoils Ainsley rotten even though she's always said she's never been a fan of kids. "How long do you think it'd take? I can definitely help, I'll just pick some up and grade them at home."

"Some of them I'd like to look at together." He shifts his messenger bag over his shoulder and puts a hand in his pants pocket. "I know you're busy, so we can figure something out. If not this week, maybe on Monday."

"What about Saturday?" I surprise myself by those words, making myself wince a little and try covering it. "I mean, if you want. We both go to the Rec Center anyway, and there's a play area for kids while parents go to programs. Not that I expect you to drop your weekend plans to do work. That's unfair and probably stupid of me to even say. So—"

“Saturday works for me,” he cuts me off, fighting a smile. The corners of his lips twitch upward but neutralize. “What time were you thinking? We could work in the afternoon, maybe grab some food.”

My teeth dig into my bottom lip. “I’ll have Ainsley, so...”

“She could come,” he offers. His head tilts slightly when he sees the uncertainty lingering in my eyes. “Or not. I don’t want to make you or her uncomfortable. I just figured it’d make things easier on you. Work, food.”

“It’s not...” I hesitate, trying to gather my thoughts for a moment. “It doesn’t make me uncomfortable. I just don’t know what the right protocol is for bringing people into her life.”

I think about Easton. I was desperate to get a roommate and went through enough of a screening process to know he wouldn’t murder us, but I still brought a total stranger in our home to live. And while it worked out in some ways, the tension lingers in every room. Easton and Ainsley get along, they like each other. But I don’t know what she’d think of Carter, or what she’d even assume was going on if I introduced them.

“Hey, don’t worry about it.” He must take my silence as something different. “I’m not offended, honest. We can think of another plan. You have somebody else you need to take into consideration. I get it.”

My shoulders ease a centimeter over as I mull over something in curiosity. “Why don’t you? Have somebody else to consider, I mean.”

His eyebrows go up a fraction.

I blush. “It’s none of my business, but you’re...” How do I put this nicely?

“Old?” he guesses.

I roll my eyes. “Older than me. Most guys your age I know have wives and kids. It’s not for everybody, so I get it if that’s why. I’m just curious because you used to tell Jesse you wanted that someday.”

He rubs his jaw with his palm. “You remember that, huh?”

“I remember a lot of things.”

His grin reappears.

Sighing, I give him a knowing look. “You don’t have to pretend like it wasn’t obvious I didn’t like you. Of course I was going to remember what you said, especially about having a family. It was stupid.”

“Liking me was stupid?”

My eyes narrow thoughtfully in consideration even though I knew it wasn’t. “No. It wasn’t liking you that was stupid. It was thinking that I had

a chance when you're thirteen years older. I was young and dumb. Naïve."

He wants to say something, I can tell. But whatever it is doesn't pass his lips. "The reason I don't have that with somebody is because I haven't found the right person for the job. I'm working on that though."

Lips parting, I stare at him before collecting myself and nodding slowly. "Yeah. Well ... that makes sense."

His lips spread into a higher curve as he glances down at the ground. "For what it's worth, I think things happen for a reason. I don't think it was dumb or naïve of you to like somebody older. It's natural. I was always around."

I want nothing more than to end this conversation. The last thing I want to talk to my professor-slash-old family friend about is my pre-teen crush on him before moving onto to the man who really tore me apart. I can really choose them.

He clears his throat and steps back, his eyes flashing with something I can't quite make out. "And you know what? Life is full of chances, Piper. You never know what will happen."

I blink.

And blink again.

Before I can really process what he says, Carter is already gone.

Lips parting, I let out a breath.

My alarm goes off. I need to get Ainsley.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A SPOON HANGS FROM JENNA'S MOUTH AS SHE GRIPS HER FAVORITE hazelnut spread in her palm and dangles her feet off the island countertop. "Tell me exactly what he said again."

Rolling my eyes, I stop the working pizza dough I'm flattening onto the pan. "I already did. Five times. I'm not about to make it six."

She drops her head back and dips her spoon into the jar. "You're no fun, Piper. I just want to see you get all flushed and girly when you tell me. There's a look in your eyes."

I scoff and reach for the tomato sauce. "I don't have a look. You're just crazy." Eyeing the half-empty jar in her hands, I narrow my gaze at her before reaching for the shredded cheese on the counter. "Are you going to save room for dinner or keep eating that? Who even travels with hazelnut spread?"

She holds it closer to her. "I do, bitch. Don't judge me. I mean, who travels with a book? You don't go anywhere without one in your bag."

I blink. "A lot of people do."

"Well I'm sure people carry hazelnut spread," she counters in a huff, though we both know they don't. "Remember that one chick from freshman year?"

I bite back a smile. "Oh, sure. That one chick. Among the three thousand that attended with us. I definitely remember her."

If she had something to throw at me right now, I know she would. "Ugh, you suck. I'm talking about the one who used to carry honey mustard with her everywhere. Like there'd be a need for it."

Scrunching my nose, I try recalling the person she's talking about. It sounds like someone worth remembering. "I have no idea who you're talking about. But that is a little weird," I admit openly.

"A little? Honey mustard, Piper!"

"Hazelnut spread, Jenna," I deadpan.

She hops off the counter. "Can we talk about you and your sexy professor again? Are you going to sleep with him?"

I drop the bag of cheese onto the counter and watch shreds of it go everywhere. Cursing, I brush it into a pile. "Why would you even ask me that? No. We're not like that."

She helps me clean up the mess. "But you want to. You have to admit that."

"I don't have to do anything."

She grabs my hand to stop me. "As your best friend, I need to inform you that I'm concerned. I love you. It's because I love you that I feel the need to voice said concerns."

"Concerns?"

She turns me to face her. "You don't want to ask for help. You've always been like that. I get you have Ainsley to look after, but you can ask me for help, and I'll come whenever you need. Like when a hot, grown ass man wants to hang out with you."

"To work—"

"He says it's work." Her brows arch. "I want you to ask me to watch Ainsley so you can give yourself a chance."

I click my tongue. "I'm not seeing where you're concerned."

Her hold tightens, the expression on her face suddenly serious. "I'm concerned for your vagina."

Yanking my hands away, I shake my head and focus back on the pizza. "You're too much, Jen. And stop being worried about that part of me."

I feel her burning gaze on me. "You haven't been sleeping with Easton. Don't tell me I'm wrong because I know he hasn't been here in the house or the town. And your mood is always better when you get a little something after hours."

I say nothing.

"Ask me to watch Ainsley."

"I'm not sleeping with Carter," I whisper hiss, knowing that Ainsley is watching television in the other room. "And keep your voice down. I don't

need her hearing you.”

Her hands go up in mock surrender. “So, you’re not going to sleep with him. Not *now*. But you might down the line if you two progress to that point. And— Don’t give me that look, Piper! There’s nothing wrong with you trying to have somebody in your life. Don’t make excuses as to why you can’t be happy.”

I sigh. “I am happy, Jenna.”

“But Carter could make you happier...”

Once again, I’m silent.

“Please?”

“It’s complicated with us,” I reason. She knows he’s my professor and it doesn’t seem to deter her. She likes that he gave me a chance to assist him, and even more that we knew each other when I was younger. In her mind, we make sense. In mine? “We’d be a mess.”

“You don’t know that.” Then. “Ask me, Piper.”

“No.”

“I’ll watch Ainsley.”

I glare. She smiles. Shaking my head, I finish the pizza and put it into the oven without looking at her. I know she’s watching me because the back of my head burns. She’ll do this all night unless I tell her to stop. Even then, she’ll find other ways to annoy me.

Turning, I grip the edge of the counter and look at her puppy-dog eyes. “Why do you want me to go out with him so bad? There’s a lot against us, you know.”

“You’re my friend,” is her reply, her shoulders shrugging. “I want to see you happy. If things with East aren’t going to progress as more than casual sex, you should at least try with Carter. He knows you, your past, and might be able to help with the Danny thing.”

Jaw ticking, I go back to busying myself by cleaning up my dirty utensils. “I don’t know what you mean.”

She helps, saddling up beside me to wet a rag for the counter. “You refuse to let go because it makes you feel something. But don’t you want to feel more than pain? More than loss? What if Carter can give you that, Piper?”

Can he though? “I just don’t think it’s worth the stress,” I admit quietly, running water for the dishes. “He knows I liked him. Everybody did—”

“That was then,” she cuts me off. “He said it himself, dude. You have a chance. Anything can happen. You’re both older, consenting adults.”

“Who have a complicated dynamic.”

“You’re graduating soon!”

Narrowing my eyes, I shift to look at her. She means business, staring back at me with her arms crossed over her chest. The rag is left on the countertop, long since forgotten. “Do you think that makes a difference if people find out something happened before then? That’s still a relationship we could both get in trouble for.”

“Well I don’t think you should wait.”

Taking a deep breath, I count to five. “I don’t think you have any say. It’s not your life that could be ruined. It’s mine.”

She’s quiet, too quiet, and it doesn’t take long for hurt to spread in her eyes. I feel bad, but it’s the truth. Her life hasn’t been flipped upside down like mine has. Jenna has no idea what it’s like to be in my position.

“I have Ainsley to think about,” I add, turning away from her and scrubbing one of the plates in the sink. “It’d be selfish to even think about getting involved with somebody like him.”

“Because of her or you?” The counter question throws me off, but I don’t falter from moving onto the next dirty plate. “I mean it, Piper. You’re the queen of excuses. I understand why you’re hesitant, but you’re not a reckless person. It isn’t like I’m telling you to have sex with the guy in the classroom in front of everybody. Hell, ignore each other. You already went out on one date with him. And *don’t* tell me otherwise. He paid even though you could have used the gift card. That’s a date.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It was.”

“Jen—”

“What are you so worried about?” she demands firmly. “I love you, but you honestly annoy me sometimes. The guy you admittedly crushed on for years finally gives you a second look. He took you out. He paid for your meal. He’s helping you finish your master’s. I may not know the guy as well as I know Easton—” I want to tell her she doesn’t know East, but I’m not even sure I really do. “—but he sounds like a good man. Definitely somebody you should give a chance to. See where it goes.”

My heart squeezes a little over the thought of my absent roommate. Jenna heard through the grapevine that he’s supposed to be back tomorrow

night. I don't know when, I didn't ask. I tell myself it's none of my business regardless of our living arrangements.

"What's really stopping you?" she finally asks quietly, her hand brushing my arm as she walks over to face me.

When I meet her eyes, I bite down on my bottom lip and fight off the onslaught of tears that well there and blur her image. "Everything."

She hugs me. "It'll be okay, Piper."

I want to believe that.

But do I?

I'M NOT sure how she does it, but Jenna gets me to agree to watch Ainsley for the night so I can grade papers with Carter in his office. No dinner, no outings, just work. At least, that's what I tell myself. But when I arrive at his office at the agreed upon time in the late afternoon, the smell of Chinese food wafting from the opened door has my eyes narrowing and stomach growling.

Knocking on the doorjamb, he looks up from the computer and smiles at me. Sitting on the corner of his desk is a bag with a well-known Chinese restaurant logo on the front. I've seen the delivery vehicles coming and going when I walk to my car. "You ordered food?"

Dropping my bag beside the usual chair I occupy I study the various boxes and containers piled inside the delivery bag.

He gives me a small smile and rolls back in his chair, standing to reach for the bag. "I skipped lunch earlier because I had to head home for a tiny emergency. Figured I'd order some food for us while we work." His brows go up as he pulls one of the containers out, lips twitching upward as he passes me it. "You still obsessed with sweet and sour chicken?"

Cheeks blossoming with heat, I accept the container full of my favorite Chinese entree and plop down into the seat. Memories of begging Jesse and Carter to take me with them to the Chinese restaurant in the town over from where we lived buzzes to the front of my mind. "Why do I feel like I'll never live those moments down with you guys?"

His low chuckle makes me shake my head as he places all the takeout containers on his desk before sitting back down. "Jesse was adamant on not letting you come every time you asked, but you were insistent otherwise."

“Jesse never wanted me around,” I grumble, popping open the food and searching for a utensil to use. “Like I said before, I get it. You guys are older than I am and it probably wouldn’t have been fun to have me along wherever you two went.”

He passes me chopsticks and a plastic fork, giving me a knowing look. “I never figured out how to use those, but I know you did. And if it makes you feel better, I was always cool with you tagging along. Jesse just had a lot going on back then.”

I rip open the chopstick wrapper. “I know he did.” Between his mother and sister, I just wanted to be there for him. “That’s why I wanted to be around. To look after him. Show I cared.”

Cared. Care. Same difference.

He watches me for a moment. “He knows you do. We actually spoke the other day. I mentioned you were doing your student teaching with me. He asked how you were.”

I snort, picking up a piece of chicken. “I bet you told him I’m riding on rainbows and unicorns over here. That I’m your favorite student-slash-assistant. Am I right?”

Amusement lightens his features. “You know, I must have forgotten to enlighten him on the rainbows and unicorns thing, but he knows you’re doing well. He’s proud.”

Refraining from rolling my eyes over that, I pop some chicken into my mouth and chew slowly while he digs into his own food. He leans back in his chair, shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and cocks his head at me.

I squirm. “What?”

His lips rub together. “Nothing.”

“You’re thinking something. What?”

He rests the box of some sort of noodles down on his lap. “You’re different. A good different.”

Putting my container down on his desk, I grab a napkin and wipe my lips off. “I’d hope so. I was, what? Sixteen, seventeen the last time we saw each other? People do tend to change in that time period. Ten years, in fact.” He just hums out in agreement and proceeds to pick up his food and eat again. “Is everything okay? You said you went home because of an emergency.”

He nods, catching a fallen piece of food before it hits his lap and draws it back into his mouth with his finger. For some reason, I’m transfixed by

the movement and have to force my gaze away before he sees me staring.
“Yeah. Cap got out.”

My brows pinch. “Cap?”

“My dog.”

I perk up. “I didn’t know you had a dog! What kind it is? Is it a boy or a girl?”

“I forgot how much you love dogs,” he muses, reaching forward and grabbing a napkin for himself. “He’s a Great Dane who loves to escape. My neighbors always call me when they see him lingering in people’s yards. Thankfully, he doesn’t wander into traffic. The big brute is terrified of vehicles.”

“For the better,” I agree. I try picturing him with a Dane and smile to myself. “It seems like the perfect dog for you. Why Cap?”

I notice the faintest pinkening of his cheeks, which makes me very inclined in hearing his answer. “I named him after Captain America. It was either that or Steve, and frankly, I thought Cap worked better.”

A humorous smile spreads across my face as I study him. “Agreed. Though Jesse named a dog Bruce once after Batman, so…”

We both laugh.

“Do you have a picture?” I fidget in my chair to get comfortable as he reaches for his phone and swipes the screen a few times. When he turns it to face me, an even bigger smile stretches my lips when I see the white and black speckled dog standing next to him. “That’s such a huge ass dog. He’s cute though.”

He clicks his phone screen off and sets it back down. “He’s a good boy. Besides the occasional escape routine. I think he gets antsy being alone in the daytime. Elizabeth used to—”

When he cuts himself off, I tilt my head wondering why. He clicks his tongue and stares at his food for a moment. “Elizabeth would stay at home with him as a puppy. I think he got used to it and has some form of separation anxiety.”

It’s none of my business. “Do you miss her sometimes? My mom mentioned her before in passing. You guys were engaged. Even if you separated amicably there’s got to be some feelings still.”

Without hesitation, he responds, “Of course. I was going to marry her. Spend forever with her. Even if we did, I wouldn’t have been miserable. We were happy for the most part. Content.”

I frown at that. "Love should be more than contentment though."

"Exactly."

Itching for more information, I dig despite my conscience telling me not to. "What made you realize contentment wasn't enough? I know from personal experience that it's hard to figure out what feelings are real or not."

He gives me a thoughtful look before setting his food down in front of him and leaning back with his hands on his stomach. "It's not so much about what feelings are real or not. There isn't such thing as fake feelings. For me, it was more about being aware of her feelings in order to better understand mine. If it was the forever kind of love, we wouldn't have been searching for something else."

I cross my legs under me in the chair, interest bubbling inside me. "What were you looking for?"

For a long moment, he doesn't answer. Instead, he stares off like he's lost in thought. When the tip of his tongue swipes across his bottom lip, I track the movement with my eyes. He looks then, catching me staring at his mouth. My face heats with embarrassment.

His eyes narrow slightly, thoughtfully. "I wasn't sure then, but I think I am now."

My brows furrow down.

He picks up his food. "I'm looking for something that's easy. No forced conversations or hurt feelings when I poke fun. I want to talk about work and life and old memories. What I want is this."

I'm taken aback by his answer, staring at him with a new kind of feeling in my heart. It doesn't squeeze with hurt this time, but pumps with anticipation and nervousness. "Carter..."

He gestures toward my food. "Eat before it gets cold. There's more here. Rice, vegetables, dumplings. You still like those too, right?"

My lips open, but nothing comes out.

What is happening right now?

"Can I ask you something?" He asks the question with such casualness that I almost forget what he'd just said.

"Uh ... sure."

"It was Danny," he murmurs, "right? The person you struggled figuring out if you had real feelings for or not."

My shoulders tighten as I sit back, picking at my food again to stall. “There was never a doubt I had feelings for him. It was him who didn’t have the same kind for me. *That’s* what always confused me. How could one person fall hopelessly in love with somebody else who doesn’t feel the same? That means everything I believe in is a lie.”

He pauses. “What do you believe in?”

“That true love only exists once,” I whisper in return, not meeting his eyes. I sit in the chair, staring at my food, no longer hungry despite the way my stomach tells me to fill it with every strong scent of greasy food that I breathe in from the selection around me. “That heartbreak can’t hurt me more than once. That things happen for a reason.”

I hear his chair move from his weight leaning forward and feel the burn of his inquisitive eyes roving over my face. “And you don’t believe those things anymore?” His tone is gravelly, low, weaved with interest that my heart pounds harder over.

Wetting my dry lips, I look up. “If any of that were true, I never would have watched Daniel McCray get married to another woman, have a beautiful baby girl, and pass away.”

His throat bobs, but he’s silent.

“So, yeah. Everything I knew was a lie.”

“Piper...”

I shrug, forcing a smile that’s no longer foreign on my face. It’s tight, uncomfortable, but resembling some mask that indicates I’m okay. The way Carter looks at me, studies me with narrowed brown eyes, tells me he knows I’m not.

“There’s more than one person out there for us,” he states with a tip of his head. Settling back in his seat, he smiles in a way that seems genuine, not fake. “There’s somebody for us in every situation, people we need in the moment.”

The more those words soak in, the more hope I have in believing he’s right. Maybe one day I can even claim them to be true. One day I can say I’ve experienced three kinds of love; the one I lost, the one I found, and the one I reconnected with.

I think about Danny.

About Easton.

...and I stare at Carter.

“Is there something going on here?” I ask in an audible tone, observing the food and the conversation that comes a little too easily.

“The truth?”

I nod, listening to my heart pumping to a new beat that doesn’t hurt but keeps me hyperaware of the way his body shifts toward mine. His chair squeaks, his head tilts, and his eyes darken. I take in every part of him.

He says five words.

Five words that change everything.

“I’d like there to be.”

In that moment, I hold my breath.

I let goosebumps pimple my arms.

I let the hurt that’s simmered for so long inside of me loose into the wild so it can’t be contained in the organ drumming within my chest. Instead, I repeat his words in my head.

I’d like there to be.

Those words make all the difference.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE EVENING SPENT WITH CARTER ENDED IN A FULL STOMACH AND permanent smile on my face. Our conversation turned into reminiscing in between paper grading. Jokes were made, we teased each other about the stuff we did growing up, and he chuckled every time my cheeks would turn red when I remembered something embarrassing that I did to try getting his attention.

Jenna was disappointed when I came home at a decent time without so much as a peck on the lips to tell her about even though I told her nothing like that would happen. When we finished grading the assignments, Carter asked if I wanted any leftovers, mentioned grabbing dinner again sometime soon, and smiled before saying goodbye. Nothing was uncomfortable, and the smile on my face, the one *still* wavering there, is the only reason Jenna didn't push me.

I'm sitting on the living room floor with Ainsley playing tea party when she begins signing to me about the fake food in front of us. Our next course began yesterday, and I know the next stage will improve our communication in ways I only dreamed about. She's open to talking this way, and it thaws the worry coating my heart all this time.

We're in the middle of having fake tea and cookies when the front door opens for the first time in too long. Both Ainsley and I look at it as Easton makes his way in, his eyes immediately finding ours where we're perched around the coffee table. His gaze drifts to the food and plate set, the very ones he bought her for Christmas, before he tips his head.

It's nearing March, but the cold weather hasn't broken. Cold air drifts in behind him as he shuts and locks the door, the chill pebbling my arms with

goosebumps. “Welcome back,” I tell him quietly.

His grip on the strap of his black backpack hanging from his shoulder loosens, then tightens as he examines the living room. Toys are scattered everywhere from Ainsley’s playtime antics and a partial blanket fort is constructed next to the couch. I tried making one like he did the day he watched her, but when Ainsley and I stepped back to examine the horrible job I did, she yanked on my shirt and signed, *He did it better*.

“Piper. Dudette.”

Once again, a smile forms on Ainsley’s face over their special nickname. Every time I see the sliver of white from her happy smile, it tugs on my heartstrings. “How was the convention?” He stops moving toward the stairs to look at me, not saying a word. I clear my throat. “Jenna saw the sign on the shop door.”

His chin dips. “It was good.”

Rubbing my lips together, I manage a nod before pushing myself up. “Mind if we talk for a minute? I’m sure you’re busy, but...” Letting my words fade, I gnaw on the inside of my cheek while he contemplates his answer. When he finally bobs his head, I sign to Ainsley that I’ll be right back and follow him upstairs.

When he opens his bedroom door and walks in without looking back at me, I hesitate. It feels weird entering his domain when he’s always come into mine. I stop at the door, glancing around the beige walls like the rest of the house is painted, noting very few personalized items littering the room. There aren’t any picture frames or trinkets or posters, just a shelf with some books on them, a nightstand that doesn’t match his bedframe with a light on it, and a dresser with a half-dead plant on top with some folded clothes next to it.

His bedding is dark, his curtain light, and nothing about what I see is ... Easton. Then again, what do I know about him? He’s quiet, cautious, and good in bed. He gets along with kids, or at least Ainsley, and would give you the shirt off his back. His love for art design made him thrive as a tattoo artist, and his best friend and co-owner is the only other person he seems to talk to besides me.

“What’d you want to talk about?” he grumbles, setting his bag down on his bed and finally turning to me.

“Where’s all your stuff?” I blurt.

His brows go up. “What stuff?”

I hesitate, regretting even asking when I hear the irritation in his tone. “You don’t have any pictures.”

The curt reply comes quick. “Don’t have anyone worth remembering.” It pierces my heart as he turns back to his bag and takes out clothes and a few other items. “Is that all you wanted to talk about? I’ve got shit to do.”

My jaw ticks. “You don’t have to be a dickhead, Easton. Not that you care, but I was worried when you didn’t come home.”

His back straightens, shoulders pulling back as he abruptly faces me. “Why would you care?”

I blink. “Because I ... do.” Crossing my arms over my chest, I add, “I don’t know if that’s a foreign thing to you, but you do have people who give a shit. You could have texted me saying you were going away for a while that way I didn’t think anything bad happened.”

“Stop,” he grinds out.

My eyes widen. “Stop what?”

“I don’t have to report to you, Piper.”

Lips parting, I find words lacking in response to him. I know he doesn’t have to report to me. I’ve reminded myself of that multiple times. But doesn’t he see that I care? That we’re friends? “I know that. I just—”

“What?” he challenges.

“Jesus.” I throw my hands up. “Why are you being such an ass? I thought we were friends. Friends tell each other if they’re going to be gone that way people don’t think they’re trapped in a ditch somewhere hurt. I’m so sorry for worrying about you. I’ll try not to give a shit next time.”

Starting to walk away, I hear him curse before calling out to me. “Stop. I’m just ... shit, I’m tired. I didn’t mean to snap. I don’t know how to do the friends thing.”

That halts me. “You have Jay.”

“Yeah, well I haven’t slept with him.”

I cringe, slowly turning to face him again. My palm rests on the doorjamb. “I can see where that puts us in an awkward situation. That doesn’t mean I can’t care about you.”

He just rubs the back of his neck.

“You’re right, though. You don’t owe me any explanations about where you’re going or who you’re going with,” I relent softly. “If it came off that way, I’m sorry. It’s just that...” His eyes stay locked on my face in wait.

“Danny died leaving my apartment. Car accident. I didn’t know until Mable called me because the hospital contacted her to identify the body.”

Another curse escapes his lips. “I didn’t know that.”

I shrug. “We don’t know each other,” is all I offer him, smiling the best I can. “I just want you to know that I want to be friends. If that’s too weird, I get it. How we left things the other day was... It sucked, honestly. I won’t push for anything that makes you uncomfortable though.”

“You don’t make me uncomfortable.”

“You were angry with me,” I murmur.

“More like myself,” he mumbles, just loud enough for me to hear. But I don’t think he meant me to. He clears his throat and sits on the edge of his bed, resting his elbows on his knees and looks around the room. “I was in the system until I was eighteen. Never got adopted. Never found a good home. I don’t have family worth putting in frames and displaying anywhere. Jay and I don’t really get pictures together, and he’s the only one I have. Besides you.”

He says the last part so quietly it’s almost full of uncertainty. It doesn’t take long for that to fall from his features, as if the hesitation of our status never crossed his mind.

I give him a sad look. “I didn’t know.”

“I didn’t want you to.”

“If you ever want to talk about it...”

He shakes his head. “The past is the past, Piper. There’s a reason I don’t dwell on it. Some things can’t be changed. That’s life. I know I’m lucky even if I never got adopted or given a chance. I was never beaten, neglected, starved, or abused like so many others in the system are. I’ve heard some awful shit and accepted that getting out unscathed is nothing short of a miracle. That’s all that matters. All that needs to be said.”

Rubbing my upper arm, I manage to nod even if I don’t agree. That has to weigh on his conscience even if he pretends it doesn’t. “Do you mind me asking about your birth parents?”

“I don’t know much about them.”

“You’ve never tried asking?”

His eyes darken as he scrubs a palm down the side of his face, the muscles in his arm flexing from the movement. “I was told they were young when they abandoned me on the steps of a church for a pastor to find the following morning. I was cold, struggling to breathe, and had to be in the

hospital for a month to recover before social workers came and took me away. They were never found. I never asked.”

I can see why he wouldn't. Sometimes it's better not to ask questions if you don't want the answers. Then again, I've always been the opposite. “You don't think you'll ever wonder?”

“Piper.” He sighs heavily. “No, I don't think I'll ever wonder why they gave me up. They did for whatever reasons they felt were justified and it's over with. I'm content with my life. Why would I disrupt that?”

My mind instantly goes to the conversation I had with Carter in his office. “You shouldn't have to settle with contentment. Listen, you obviously do what's best for you. I'll back you no matter what because that's what friends do. But if you ever feel the need to talk, just know I'm here.”

He doesn't say anything.

Clicking my tongue, I nudge my bare toes against the carpet. “About before you left...” I press my lips together for a moment before nodding once in encouragement to myself. “I'm sorry about upsetting you. When I went out before, it really wasn't a date.”

His eye twitches. “Before,” he repeats slowly, looking away. “I take it you've had dinner since?”

I try to keep my voice even. “He ordered us something.” I'm not sure why I tell him. Maybe it's because it seemed so final when he blew me off—like he didn't care about it because we were just sleeping together. “Anyway, I'm sorry. Like I said, I'm here if you need anything. Roommate. Friend. Whatever.”

He just looks at me. “What about you?”

That catches me off guard. “What about me?”

“Are you content?” When I realize he's asking about Carter, I let my lips part as oxygen slowly floods my lungs. There are many things I could answer. I could be honest, I could lie, or I could avoid it altogether. But I meant what I said to him. I want to be there for him which means it's a two-way street.

“I'm working on it,” I admit.

He simply nods.

“You should too,” I add. “Work on being happy, I mean. Nobody should settle for anything less. Life is too short for that.” My voice breaks as I think of Danny. He'd been happy, I knew as much. Willow made him that

way. Ainsley. Mable. Me. He was surrounded with the kind of happiness I strive to experience too.

His death took that from me. Maybe, just maybe, Carter can change that. And the way Easton watches me for a long, stretched out moment, I wonder if he has somebody that he's willing to find happiness with too.

He blinks. "Yeah, Piper. I'll work on it."

I smile.

He doesn't smile back.

TEACHING CARTER'S class has become a favorite part of my day. Being in front of the classroom feels natural, it clears my head from everything except what's in the moment. Carter could see that when he watched me, I noticed as much. I also ignored it because I couldn't risk looking at him like I wanted to.

When the classroom empties every time, my heart goes into overdrive as we clean up our things and listen to hordes of students walking in and out of the building outside the room. There's something lingering in the air, a feeling, an unspoken thought.

Today we're slower. We pick up every piece of paper with strategy. He stays close to me while collecting his textbook and packing his bag, and I track my movements that leads my arm to brush his. There are no other sounds besides the *thump, thump, thump* of my heartbeat.

It's when there's nothing left to pick up and put away and mere feet separating us from the door when we finally glance at each other. Me through my lashes, and him straight on without apology. Those brown eyes heat my cheeks and stir my mind with the encouragement I've been getting from Jenna and my own conscience.

"Is there something here?"

"I'd like there to be."

We haven't talked about it, but we haven't skated around it either. We've just done what we're here to do—teach and learn. And that makes this easier. *This. Us.* Whatever it is.

"You're doing well," he says softly, bumping my shoulder gently with his. "I can tell you love being up there."

Nibbling my lip, I situate my bag on my shoulder. "It feels good to be there in front of them. I wasn't sure this would be the right path for me

when I first started. I was too shy.”

He cocks his head. “You were never that shy growing up. What changed?”

My shoulders lift on their own accord. “I did, I guess. Time. Practicability.” We begin walking to the door side by side. “When I was in undergrad, I chose a History major because it’s the only subject I love. The past fascinates me. Seeing what the future holds because of it has always kept me on my toes. But then Danny’s accident happened, and I wasn’t sure I was going to finish my degree because I didn’t have a game plan. And with Ainsley in my care, I knew I needed one.”

“So you decided to teach,” he confirms.

I nod, thanking him for holding the exit door open for me as we walk outside into the brisk morning air. “It made sense. A lot of the people I had classes with were moving onto their master’s for teaching or already a dual major on that path.”

“But you love it. I can see it.”

I follow him down the crowded paved path of students on their way to various classes. It doesn’t take me long to formulate a response because I know in my heart I do. “I fell in love with having a plan. I’d always been organized. My friends teased me about liking school and focusing on grades and trying to be on top of things, but my future was one thing that always seemed uncertain. In a horrible way, Danny gave me one. Just not the one I thought he’d give me.”

“He gave you Ainsley.”

I lick my bottom lip before drawing it into my mouth, heart easing with tenderness over the small strawberry blonde in my head. “He gave me somebody to love.”

Staring at the salted ground as we walk toward the administration building with his office housed inside, I struggle to swallow past the lump in my throat when I repeat those words to myself.

Danny couldn’t love me.

He knew it. I knew it.

But he gave me somebody who could.

Tears well in my eyes that hurt to hold back. Before I can stop it, one rolls down my cheek and lands on the ground. Carter murmurs something before tugging me toward the building.

We're silent until we get to his office. He unlocks the door and gently guides me in. Not one person looked at us the entire way—not caring, unknowing.

And when the door closes behind me...

"Piper," he whispers, drawing me into his body in a tight hug. I find myself melting into his warmth, burying my now-damp face into his shirt and winding my arms around his torso. His cheek rests on the top of my head.

"I'm n-not sad. I'm..." What am I? I shake my head and stay in the position we're in, needing this. Needing him to hug me and remain silent and just be warmth in a cold season. When my thoughts are collected, I move my face enough to speak without jumbling my words into his chest. "I'm happy that I have her, but that means it was at his expense, his *life*, Carter. It took him dying for me to feel such an impenetrable love for another human. And I hate myself for it."

"Hey—" His hold tightens on my body, one of his arms sliding just enough to hook around the small of my waist and pull me harder against his body. "—you do not need to hate yourself over that. You have no reason to be guilty or any other bad thing just because you love his daughter. He gave you a gift because he trusted you with it. Danny knew what he was doing when he gave you that responsibility."

But did he? Did he know my future was never planned? Or that there were days I could barely function on my own. I was isolated. I hated going out. I considered college a period of stalling that way I didn't have to live life yet.

The more I think, the more I realize he did. Carter is right. Danny knew exactly what he was doing when he put my name down on that piece of paper that changed my life forever.

I didn't resent him.

Not for not loving me.

Not for giving me Ainsley.

Things happened for a reason.

When I peel myself away and blink up at him with sore, watery eyes, his expression is soft as he studies me. One of his hands comes up, his thumb brushing at my wet cheek, as he leans forward and presses a light kiss to my opposite one.

My heart stops.

My breath holds.

And when he draws back and smiles with his palm cupping the cheek, I know I'll be okay because I have him in some way, some form, and some fashion. "I'll always be here if you need to talk, Piper. You know that, right?"

Thump, thump, thump.

My lips part. "I know."

In this very moment, with little room between us, I feel the shift. He looks at me in a new light. Not like the teen he used to know, or as his best friend's little sister. And definitely not as his student.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

IT'S WELL PAST MIDNIGHT WHEN I CREEP DOWNSTAIRS, WITH TIRED EYES and a headache, unable to fall back asleep. After popping a couple pills and laying in my bed with no luck, all I wanted was a cold glass of water and background noise.

Curling up in a ball on the couch, I rest my head on the piled-up pillows and close my eyes once I put a feel-good show on. The throbbing in my temples only eases when I lower the volume and loosen my body to settle into the cushions.

I'm not sure what time it is when I hear a soft voice ask, "Can't sleep?"

Flickering my eyes open, I see a shirtless Easton in black sweatpants with a glass of water in his hands. "Headache."

He sits in the armchair. "Take something for it?" Sipping his water, he looks at me with wary eyes. "You're pale."

I don't tell him that I've been staying up late doing homework, grading papers, and thinking about Carter and the dinner he asked me out on the day before. Stress and overthinking have a lot to do with the current state of my temples. "I took some already. Thanks."

He makes an affirmative noise.

"Can't sleep either?" At first glance, he doesn't look that tired. He got home early and went upstairs after saying hi to Ainsley and me where I was helping her do homework in the living room.

"No."

I don't ask if he wants to talk because I know he would if he wanted to. "Sorry."

He scrubs at his clean-shaven jaw. "It's cool. What are you watching?" His eyes travel to the television screen, showcasing one of my favorites. "Looks girly."

It's a weird reality TV show that I honestly didn't think I'd like but do. "It is, but it's not bad. A group of people get put into this building without any interaction face to face. They can only talk through text message."

He blinks, then makes a face.

I stifle a laugh. "It's a guilty pleasure show. Some people catfish the others, but there's a lot of genuine people who just remain themselves throughout the game. They vote each other out using an anonymous rating system."

"So, it's *Big Brother* meets *Survivor*."

Cracking a smile, I answer, "Pretty much."

He doesn't say anything else as he watches it with me, making noises when somebody says something weird, or the players overly flirt to build alliances. Easton isn't a flirt, not an intentional one. But I wonder if he realizes he doesn't need to be. All it takes is him giving somebody an intense look before panties everywhere melt right off women's bodies.

I snort to myself over the thought, catching his attention. "What's so funny?"

Trying to pass it off like somebody did something funny wouldn't even work because nothing interesting is happening right now. "I was just trying to picture you in the game."

He remains quiet.

"You'd be voted off pretty quick."

"Why?"

I look over at him, sitting up slightly so I see him better. "Well, you'd have the looks advantage with the ladies if you chose to use your real pictures. But it's the personality that keeps people in the game. Like the bromance between Max and Alex. They're forming connections. You know, using words."

One of his brows lifts. "Are you saying I don't know how to use my words?"

I click my tongue. "I'm saying it takes somebody with a strong personality to win this sort of game. Someone who's willing to flirt with the right people and befriend the others to keep themselves safe."

Another throaty noise comes from him. “I would make it at least a couple days. There are better ways to get people to like me if my personality doesn’t do the trick.”

Rolling my eyes, I remind him of something important. “You can’t sleep with the contestants, Easton. There are cameras literally everywhere in the apartments. Even if they let you meet them face-to-face, you’d just be creating porn.”

“And who doesn’t love porn?”

Both my eyebrows raise over that question as heat creeps up the back of my neck. I guess he has me there, but I choose not to comment on it. “If it makes you feel better, I’d probably be voted off in the beginning too.”

“I don’t buy that. If you go in as yourself, people will love you.” His voice is uncharacteristically soft as he delivers the sweet sentiment that makes my lips stretch upward.

Headache easing, I loosen a sigh. “That’s sweet, but I feel like the downside would be my alliance with the guys. They’re all flirting to try making the right connections. Almost all the real people playing are doing it to stay in. I’m a terrible flirt. We’re talking awkward.”

“Now I feel like I’ve missed out,” he muses, picking up his water to finish it.

I shake my head. “Trust me, I’m saving you. You’d never want to talk to me again.”

“I doubt that.”

Humming, I focus back on the TV. “Or they’d all think I’m so irresistibly adorable they all want to tuck me in their back pockets.”

His chuckle makes my smile grow. He can pretend he doesn’t find this show interesting, but he watches it like he does. I can tell he’s calculating who will be voted off and who will form the alliances that’ll save them. When he leans back and spreads his leg to get comfortable, I know he’ll want to watch the next episode.

So, we do.

I wake up when something stabs me in the ribcage and sends pain shooting through my body. When my eyes open, I’m instantly met with a face full of strawberry hair tucked in the front of me, and a pointy elbow digging into my side. I wince and try not to rouse the little girl who tucked herself on the couch at some point last night. Looking over when I hear a

faint sound of deep snoring, I notice Easton still perched in the chair with his face resting against the back.

We all slept in the living room.

Bladder screaming at me to empty it, I try figuring out how to get up without waking Ainsley. It's barely light out which tells me we have time before she needs to be up, so I shift ever so slightly and practically yelp when a voice cuts through the silence. "Need help?"

Biting my lip to keep quiet, I let my tired eyes drift back to my roommate. He's scrubbing at his hooded lids as he yawns and tips his head toward Ainsley. I just nod, watching him get up and roll his neck before walking over and carefully picking her up. He cradles her against his chest while I slide off the couch, then slowly lowers her back down and pulls a blanket up to cover her.

And I watch them with something filling my chest that I can't decipher. Not wanting to analyze it, I escape to the bathroom to relieve myself and quickly wash my hands, run a brush through my hair, and head back downstairs to see Ainsley still sleeping soundly where Easton left her.

I listen to him make noise in the kitchen. When I walk in, he gestures toward the coffee pot which he already turned on. "Should be done in a few. Want me to cook breakfast?"

I look at him and I think, *thank you*.

It's my first thought, but many more accompany it. Ones I don't let myself ponder on as I grab a mug from the cupboard and set it on the counter. "Only if you're having some. I know you probably want to run this morning."

His palm reaches behind his neck and kneads at the skin. "Nah, I think I'll take it easy today. Slept wrong and think I pulled something."

"Here." I walk behind him and reach up, taking over his hand and feeling the knots in his neck and shoulders. Working them out, he rolls his head forward and groans as I dig my thumbs into one of the tougher areas.

"Fuck. That feels good."

"You were twisted when I woke up," I note quietly, trying to get the knot to loosen. "It doesn't surprise me you're sore."

He doesn't reply, just absorbs the message I'm giving him. I don't really think about how I shouldn't be touching him even if it's innocent. A friend helping a friend. Two roommates. But then he turns and looks down at me,

my hands drift to work the tops of his shoulders as he watches me with dark eyes.

I let out a quiet breath as he watches me with the same intensity that weakens my knees. My heart reacts in one way, with fullness, and my body with another. He doesn't make a move. There's no kiss or touch or words that make this more than just me massaging his shoulders.

But the look...

He's the first one to step back, nostrils flaring slightly. "What kind of eggs do you want? I think we still have stuff to make omelets."

It takes me a moment to find my words, my body still searing from whatever just passed between us. "Scrambled is fine for both Ainsley and me. I can pop the toast in."

"Bacon?"

"We're out."

"Want me to get some today?"

I pause, faltering on the twist tie that keeps the bread bag closed. Shaking myself out of it, I muster a smile. "Yeah, that'd be great."

We get busy with breakfast. Me with the toast, him with the eggs. When the coffee is done, I fill the cup and wrap my greedy hands around the mug and breathe in the strong scent that helps wake me up a little faster. Drinking half of it before I decide to wake Ainsley, I set three plates down on the island and place silverware next to them as he finishes off the eggs.

When Ainsley is up and sitting beside me in front of the plate that Easton makes quick to cover with food, I observe the scene with a new kind of interest. Everything about it is domesticated. Normal. After breakfast is in front of us all, I wait until Ainsley and him start eating before I let my gaze wander over both of them.

Ainsley doesn't notice at all.

But Easton does.

And the look he gives me...

I quickly glance down, too unsure and unconfident to keep the stare. I focus on my food, on Ainsley, on my headache being gone.

Anything but Easton.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN YEARS, MARCH LEAVES WINTER IN THE REARVIEW and offers us fifty-degree weather for the first two weeks. No snow, just sunshine. It leaves me breathing a little easier when I drive Ainsley to school and me to campus. There's no internal pep-talk before I get behind the wheel or anymore panic attacks when ice coats the roads.

The flowers in the front lawn planted around the dogwood tree begin to bloom, mixing with the pretty white blossoms on the branches above them. It brings color to the yard that's otherwise a murky green and brown from the melted snow and mud. But I don't complain, not even when Ainsley chooses to go outside in her good clothes and rainboots to jump around until she's dirty from head to toe.

She smiles. Like me, she loves the nicer weather. I don't know if it's because she can go outside and play easier, or because the spring reminds her of her father. Danny loved springtime the best. He and Willow would always comment on how everything comes to life after months of a dark depression that seems void.

Clicking my tongue as I help Ainsley finish drying off from her much-needed bath, I run a brush through her damp hair and note how long it's gotten. When she meets my eyes in the mirror in front of us, I realize even more how much she looks like Danny. There are bits of her mother mixed into her soft features, but my late best friend is who stares back at me.

Emotion clogging my throat, I clear it and kiss her cheek once her hair is smoothed out. "I left clothes on the counter for you. Get changed, okay? We'll go downstairs and make dinner."

She hurries and meets me outside the room, holding my hand all the way downstairs. I wonder what's going through her mind today. Ever since we got home from the Rec Center after our class, she's latched onto me. I don't mind it one bit—seeing her play outside and smile with bright eyes in the sunlight makes me happier than I've been in a while. But I also know that she shares more than just her father's looks. Like him, she prefers being on her own unless there's something on her mind.

When I start a pot of boiling water, I turn to face her, signing, *Is everything okay?*

She stares at my hands for a moment, her bottom lip drawing into her mouth. A sure sign something's up. But she eventually nods like all is well.

You can talk to me, Ainsley.

Her eyes go to the floor.

I kneel, tapping her chin until she meets my eyes with those beautiful brown ones I love so much. Instead of signing, I just hold her hand and smile. Her hands twitch like she's itching to sign, but they remain at her sides.

I say, "I love you, Nugget. Whatever is on your mind you can tell me if you want. I won't force you either way. Just know I'm here." Pecking her forehead, I stand up and turn back to the water on the stove that's just beginning to bubble on the bottom.

A small hand wraps around mine and tugs, causing my attention to look downward at the trembling lip on Ainsley's face. She signs three words that assault my heart.

I miss Daddy.

My arms are instantly around her, hers clinging to my neck. I pick her up until her legs wrap around my waist. Flicking off the burner on the stovetop, I walk us into the living room the same time the front door opens. Easton enters with paper grocery bags nestled into his arms and looks between us with concern etched into his face as he kicks the door closed.

I just shake my head at him.

He presses his lips together and nods once, disappearing into the kitchen. I sit on the couch with Ainsley hugging the life out of me, and I absorb the pain and hurt in any way I can. I pepper kisses on her forehead, brush my fingers through her hair, and let her cry.

Sometimes we need that, to be held while our feelings show. For a long time after the accident I let the tears aid me to sleep at night while I thought

about Danny, about the past, about how unfair life is. I used to think I was weak for letting myself feel too much, crying into my pillow to soak up the desperate sounds until my body forced itself to shut down. Listening to Ainsley, this beautiful little girl, I realize it's not weakness at all. We just chose to be strong for too long until our hearts needed a break.

"I miss him too, baby girl." My words are breathed into the top of her head, the smell of her lavender shampoo wafting around me. "Your father was such a wonderful man, and the best dad to you. He loved you so, so much. So did your mother." She tightens her hold, burying her face into my now-damp shirt. "You know, I remember the day your daddy told me they were expecting you. The light in his eyes was one I'd never seen before. He loved you from the second he knew about you, and I..."

That day, I'd felt something deep inside of me that I was ashamed of. I felt anger. I felt envy. I felt a mix of horrible things that faded with time as I watched them prepare for Ainsley. Every update he told me, every image he showed me, the nursery they'd built from scratch. The love he had for his daughter and wife couldn't be beat, and I'd known it. It'd chipped at those ill feelings and turned them into different ones, lighter ones. While I still held onto jealousy that ate at my conscience, it was only because I couldn't feel the same thing that I'd witnessed them experience.

Love. Unconditional, honest love.

"I just miss him so much too," I finish in a whisper that breaks. I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment to stop a tear from sliding out. Once I've collected myself, I take a deep breath and open my eyes. From the corner of my gaze, I see Easton leaning against the archway staring at us.

He heard the entire thing.

He sees my heartbreak.

What else does he see?

When he realizes I've caught him looking, he pushes himself off the wall. "Want me to make dinner?"

I glance at Ainsley, then back at him. "I started to boil water. I was going to make some sort of pasta."

"Spaghetti?"

"Sure."

"I have stuff to make mac and cheese."

That gets Ainsley's attention. She peels herself away from me, eyes red and cheeks flushed, and blinks between me and Easton.

I manage to smile. “I think macaroni and cheese is exactly what we need tonight. Do you need any help?”

He shakes his head and hesitates like he wants to say something. His eyes go to Ainsley, his brows furrowing in the slightest way, but then he nods to himself and heads back into the kitchen.

I listen to him moving around, clattering pans, and opening the refrigerator, all while Ainsley settles back into me. I tell her about Danny and her mom, how they met and fell in love in the same day. Danny was shy, Willow was not. The couple was one anybody would envy when they went out and showed how genuine their kind of love was.

And it makes me feel like scum, but I’ve long since accepted that I’m human—a human with feelings. Feelings that went unrequited for as long as I could remember.

But the bitterness that was there before no longer resonates. It doesn’t burn me or choke me at night when I sleep. There are no haunting thoughts that plague my conscience when my mind stops being distracted by everyday tasks.

I blow out a deep breath.

God, I’d always love Daniel McCray. But for once, I don’t think I’m *in love* with him. The thought alone lifts a one-ton weight off my chest and allows me to breathe easier.

I snuggle into Ainsley until sometime later when Easton hand delivers us bowls with our steaming dinner filling them.

When I smile at him, he stares at me with curious eyes. I’m telling him thank you in silence, but my mind clings to something else. Something deeper.

Maybe I’m thanking him for more.

THAT NIGHT there’s a knock at my bedroom door. It’s a foreign sound at this point, but I quietly tell the person responsible to come in knowing who it is.

When East enters, one hand is shoved in the pocket of his jeans, and the other is holding onto the edge of the door. “Mind if I come in?”

The soft words aren’t lost on me as he stays near the door like I’ll tell him no. “Sure.”

He steps further inside and quietly closes the door behind him, lingering near it. “I come as a friend.”

My bedside lamp is on because I'm doing last minute homework, so I can see the genuine half-smile he shoots me. "Is that what we are?"

One of his shoulders lifts. "I think so."

"Good." I smile. "What's up?"

He clears his throat, waiting for a moment before answering. "I wanted to make sure you were okay. You know, from earlier. I could see it in your eyes when you told Ainsley about her dad. You were upset."

I blink at him, quickly looking down at the papers scattered in front of my crossed legs. I wasn't expecting him to notice, much less ask me that. But am I really surprised? "He was my best friend and I've always felt his loss in such a deep way that I refused to think about it for too long. I never talked about him much if I could help it."

"You loved him." It's not a question.

"In some ways." I pick up a paper and stare absently at it. "There are so many forms of love and I only ever focused on the one I thought mattered most. I never thought about what other kinds he offered me. I didn't think they were enough."

"And now?"

Now it doesn't matter. "Now..." Clicking my tongue, I drop the paper and look at him. "I realized very recently that I don't want to hold onto what I thought I felt then. It hurts too much."

He studies me but doesn't speak.

"Having you in my life has been unexpectedly great," I admit sheepishly. "I don't mean that as a come on or anything. For me, I didn't really let anyone in because I didn't want many people to know how messed up my head was for pining over a man who clearly didn't want me. But I'm learning to let that shame go."

His eyes don't wander from me as I deliver that quiet statement. I feel his gaze on my skin, burning, tingling. I'm hyperaware that he's giving me his full attention and I'm not used to it. With him or anyone. "Can I ask you something?"

I shrug. "Go for it."

"You mentioned a guy from your past that you and ... Danny grew up with. Is that the same one you went out to dinner with?"

Lips parted, I stare at him with wrinkled brows. Easton has always been intuitive. In many ways, he's the fly on the wall who observes everything and silently puts the pieces together. In fact, I forgot I even

mentioned Carter before the dinner fiasco that put a wedge between East and me. “Uh ... yeah. It is.”

His face twists for a microsecond. If I blinked, I would have missed it. He gives me a terse nod and that’s it.

“What?”

He shakes his head.

“East?” I unfold my legs and swing them over the side of the bed. “Come on, tell me. I can tell you’re thinking something. Friends share.”

His eyes heat, darkening as if he takes that in an entirely different way. “Oh, trust me. I know that well now.”

My face turns red. “That isn’t what I meant, and you know it,” I grumble. Shaking it off, I give him a pleading look. “Please?”

Sighing, he scrubs a hand down his face and clasps it around his neck. “Just be careful. I think it’s good you have somebody to talk to about the shit you went through, but sometimes we latch onto the wrong things.”

The wrong...? “What do you mean?”

“Nothing.” He reaches for the door. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Carter would never hurt me,” I tell him confidently.

His jaw ticks. “Okay.”

When he leaves after saying goodnight, I wonder what the look on his face was. It was distant but not cold. It’s like he knew something I didn’t. Worried about something I hadn’t thought of. It makes me wonder if he was talking about Carter or something else.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

AGREEING TO WILLINGLY GO OUT WITH CARTER SEEMED LIKE A GOOD IDEA until he pulled into my driveway. With my parents watching Ainsley and Easton at work, it left me in an empty house overthinking about every little detail. Jenna was working overtime at the boutique, and I didn't want to bother her with my unnecessary freak-out when I realized what I'd gotten myself into.

The clamminess of my hands never eases as he drives us to a diner he chose thirty minutes away. It's a decent drive. The windows are down because of the warmer weather and bright sun gracing the blue sky, and the early 2000s rock music plays on low to fill his vehicle when our conversation lulls.

And it lulls because of me.

"You look lost in thought," he says quietly, glancing at me for a moment before returning his eyes to the road.

When he asked me again a few days ago if I wanted to have an early dinner with him at his favorite place, I'd contemplated saying no. But the way his warm eyes watched me made something in my chest shift. I couldn't find an excuse not to. Ainsley was already being watched by my parents because they decided they wanted to take her to a movie and give me time to myself. I'd planned on doing homework and cooking the kind of food I know she hates because she's not there to complain.

"I'm just thinking about school." The lie slips off my tongue as I stare out the window. "I don't have that much longer to go."

He doesn't call me out on it if he expects as much. "Are you excited?"

I go to answer but stop myself. Am I? I've always enjoyed school. I like the routine, the schedule to abide by. It makes having to make decisions easier. "Sort of," I settle with. "I think I'm going to enjoy not having to stay up late to get homework done, but everything that comes after graduating? It scares me."

"It's scary," he agrees. "But I have no doubt in my mind you'll be just fine. Look how well you're doing right now."

Snorting wouldn't be attractive, but it's what I want to do. Most days, I barely hold on by a thread. I'm surviving on the extra money from my student loans and the money that Danny left to pay some of my rent. My paychecks from tutoring help me pay some of the smaller bills or groceries, but never both. Substituting made me enough to not have to dip into Danny's money.

"It doesn't feel like it most days."

"Trust me, Piper. That's normal."

My head turns to him. "You trying to tell me that you don't have it together? I'm not sure I buy that, *Professor Ford*."

His chuckle surprises me. "Just because I have a decent job doesn't mean there aren't aspects of my life that aren't askew. Everybody has moments that challenge them. It's part of life, especially for those just starting out."

Why does that bother me so much? He says it like I'm so young—fresh to the real world. But what he doesn't know about are all the hard times I've had. How much I've had to work my ass off to make ends meet. I always manage, but barely. My parents would notice my weight loss and conveniently have premade food for me and Ainsley or slip twenty dollars into my purse. They knew I wasn't eating because I had to make sure Ainsley was.

"I know," I reply distantly.

It's a few minutes before he speaks up again, his voice softer than before. "My dad asks me when I'm finally going to settle down. He was upset with me for not marrying Elizabeth, but I know he's also glad I didn't once I explained she wasn't it. He loved mom. He understood not wanting to marry somebody I didn't love."

Not sure what to say, I press my lips together and shift slightly toward him to see his eased facial expression as he continues to talk. "I got a dog because the house I own is empty and cold. I needed to fill it with more

than just furniture. You know, I thought once I checked things off a list I'd feel complete. Graduate. Get a good job. Do what I love. Buy a house. But none of that was enough for me. I have no social life because I bury myself with work, and the only time I usually get out is to walk Cap."

Again, I say nothing.

"We all have our things," he concludes, giving me a pointed look. "Nobody has it all together. Believe me."

Biting down on the inside of my cheek, I count to three before saying anything. "I use Ainsley as an excuse a lot of times. It annoys my best friend. I think my parents pity me and Jesse doesn't talk to me enough for me to know what he must think. Sometimes I wonder if I made the right choices in life, like if I'd done something differently, I'd be somewhere else. But I'm not sure I'd want to be."

"What would you have done differently?"

I shrug. "Anything. Like gone to a different college or gone out more. Dated. Made other friends. There are so many things I could have done and I'm pretty sure it would have impacted where I am now. But despite all the times I struggle, I don't think I'd change it even if I could. I mean, I have the smartest, sweetest, kindest little girl. I'm lucky."

He smiles. "I'm glad."

I nod. "Me too."

The rest of the drive is peacefully quiet as we listen to tunes. He sings along to himself, and I smile as I look out the window and listen to him. He's different, less guarded, when he's not on campus. There's always something holding him back when we're there. A barrier.

His job.

My position.

It isn't until we're seated in a booth in the cute log cabin-like establishment with our drink and food order in that I look at him with curiosity. "Doesn't this feel wrong to you?"

His eyes widen a fraction. "Wrong?"

"I can see it in the way you compose yourself now compared to on campus." I lean back, playing with my straw wrapper to busy my hands. "Your walls are up. You're cautious there. Like if somebody sees us talking it'll be bad. But it still doesn't stop you from being there for me. It just made me wonder what you thought about it. You know, who we are to each other."

“We’re friends. Old friends.”

I shake my head, brushing hair behind my ear and choosing my words carefully. “You’re my brother’s friend. You were Danny’s. I was the tagalong who you guys never wanted around.”

“That’s not true.”

I give him a knowing look.

“That’s not *entirely* true,” he amends apologetically. “I don’t think this is wrong, Piper. Do I think it’s fine? That we’re not potentially crossing some lines we shouldn’t? No. Part of me has to be cautious because of the delicate situation. But it doesn’t feel wrong.”

His honesty is appreciated.

“You’re going to gradate soon. If this is something you want to continue pursuing, if you decide to give me a shot, then we’ll discuss it when the time comes.” He leans forward, his forearms resting on the edge of the table. “But that doesn’t have to be a decision we make now, tomorrow, or next week. We’ll do what we always do. Go to school. Work. Be part of the environment we’re placed in and see where it takes us. Sound good?”

I blink. I’m not used to guys being so forward. He isn’t pushing anything on me, not even expectations. In fact, he doesn’t seem to hold onto anything that would indicate this could work. “Do you think it’ll work out for us?”

“I know that I like you,” he answers without a moment’s hesitation. “I admire you and your strength. You love with everything inside of you and are willing to sacrifice yourself for Ainsley. Anybody would be stupid not to want to make things work.”

His words make me think of Easton, which makes the water I sip hard to swallow. Guilt rises in my chest and seeps into my conscience, but I keep brushing it away.

“What is it?” he asks.

Shaking my head, I keep a hold of the water glass. The condensation pools on my hand as my grip loosens. “I was just thinking about something ... somebody.”

“Danny?”

I don’t answer.

He nods once. “Not Danny.” There’s no sadness in his tone. No accusation. He just states what he knows. “Want to talk about it?”

The last thing I want to talk to Carter about is my prior sleeping arrangements with my roommate. “Not really. I just had something with somebody for a while and it ended.”

“Exes can be tough to let go of,” is his response. I’m not sure how to take it. I’m glad he’s not upset that I brought it up or even had the thought. But shouldn’t he be?

My cheeks heat. “I’m not sure I can consider him an ex, but you’re right. Anyway, I was just thinking about how I never really dated. This is sort of it for me, which is embarrassing. I don’t have much of a social life either.”

“Do you regret that at all?”

“No.” I rub my lips together. “It’d make things like this easier. Knowing what to expect. Then I wouldn’t feel like I’m about to say or do the wrong thing. There’s a lot I could mess up here, and I’m just worried you’ll...”

That causes his brows to furrow. “You’re worried that I’ll what?”

I look at the table. “You’re older than me with more life experience. You have a great job and a house and ... I don’t know. I guess I’m just thinking about all the stuff I’ve done and what I’ll have to do and wonder if that’ll be enough.”

“You’re too hard on yourself.”

Maybe. Maybe not. “Why me? You said it’s because you admire me, but I’m nothing special. In fact, I’m a mess like most of the human population.”

He studies me for a long moment, making it hard to keep eye contact. I want to break it and look anywhere but those brown eyes, but I don’t. I can’t. “You have a story to tell. One I want to hear. I just want to get to know you, Piper. It doesn’t have to be anything more than that and the reasons I mentioned before.”

It just seems like it’s not enough. Why does anybody choose to pursue other people? Attraction? Common interests? Carter and I both love history and teaching it. We have a past. Similar friends. Mutual acquaintances. I think about Danny and try remembering all the reasons I clung on to him.

He was kind. He made me smile. He got me to laugh when I wanted to cry or hit something if I was in a bad mood. He always knew how to fix it and make me feel better. I liked Danny because he was a good person.

So, maybe it wasn’t that complicated.

I’m not a bad person.

I deserve this.

WE'RE LAUGHING SO HARD my sides hurt, but it doesn't stop us from cracking more jokes at my brother's expense. I'm pretty sure Jesse would be pissed if he knew Carter was divulging some of his past failures with women. I, however, am living for it.

"...then she dumped her drink on him and walked out with all her friends." His eyes are as watery as mine. I swipe away a tear and reach for my water, taking a sip to calm down.

"I can't believe he had that many fails with women," I muse, shaking my head. "He always used to brag about what a lady's man he was, you know? I'm glad some women were smart enough not to fall for it."

Carter's shoulders shake with laughter. "I used to be amazed at how hard he tried. Do you know about the day he met his wife?" I shake my head, enthralled by where this could go. He sets his own glass down. "We were at a pool hall catching up. It'd been a while since we'd hung out, so he reached out asking if I wanted to play a game and grab some drinks. Ren worked as a bartender and I swear, Piper, as soon as your brother saw her that was it. His eyes stayed on her all night even when he pretended that he wasn't interested. I kept telling him to go talk to her, gave him money to buy us more beer, anything to get the guy to say something instead of staring like a creep.

"He went up after cursing me out and waited to get her attention. I wondered if he was going to give her some cheesy ass pickup line or do something else. You know what he did? He passed her the money, ordered another pitcher of beer, and brought the drinks back to where we were sitting. That's it."

I blink. How ... anticlimactic. "Are you saying he did absolutely nothing?"

He nods once. "Not a damn thing. That's when I knew he was a goner. He loved women." I make a face at that. "Sorry, but it's true. When he didn't make a move to try getting her number, I knew there was more to it. We didn't drink much that night, but any time we ordered something, he'd go up and get it. They'd have a quick exchange, watch each other, but do nothing else. Their eyes, though ... that was where you could see it."

"See what?" I'm enamored by this side of my brother I didn't know. Granted, there weren't many sides of him I knew well, but the soft one? The

one in love?

“They were both gone.” I swear my heart swooned over that. And knowing Carter and his genuine nature, I know he isn’t playing up a story to get me all doe eyed. If he says it happened like that, it happened. “We went back to that same place so many times and I’d have to watch the same thing. A whole lot of nothing. Then one day he was getting flustered when a guy was hitting on her and he got up to leave. Ren called after him, stopping him before he could go. She asked where he was going and said he couldn’t leave.”

I blink. “What? Why?”

His lips lift slightly. “I believe her exact words were ‘you haven’t asked me out yet, asshole. Do it before somebody else does.’” His head shakes with an amused laugh.

“That sounds like Ren,” I confirm.

“Yep.”

“Wow.” I didn’t realize how much I’d love that story. It’s not what I’d expected to hear knowing the player Jesse used to be. Yet, it gives me hope that anything can happen. Why would I need that reassurance when I’m on a date with a great guy—a guy I used to crush on. I’ve dreamt of having this kind of one on one time with him before. Now? It just feels ... natural. Normal. Like there’s nothing surreal about us coming full circle or reacquainting.

It’s nuts to me. “If I hadn’t moved, we wouldn’t have seen each other again,” I murmur, almost to myself in realization. My eyes pivot to his. “That’s sort of weird to think about.”

“I’m sure we would have crossed paths eventually. I know Jesse, your family,” he points out evenly.

“Do you really believe that?” In all these years, we haven’t crossed paths once. I’d hear about him occasionally from somebody, but it was rare. And, in all honesty, I tended to tune out the conversation if the topic drifted in his direction. I was bitter.

“I believe things happen when they’re meant to, yes. Maybe we wouldn’t have crossed paths right away, but eventually.” He says it so calmly, so sure, that I can do nothing but study him. His eyes are light, content, and his almost-empty glass in front of him has his loose hand wrapped around it without tension. He really does mean that.

“Huh.” It’s all I can muster.

“Think about it,” he says. “We all do things that lead us to one point or another. I had job offers at a few other colleges. One out of state I considered taking because of the pay. But I chose Linwood. I live here. You made decisions that led you to Aberdeen and I think that means something.”

I want to tell him that it means I couldn’t find a cheaper place, but I refrain. “I never took you as a fate kind of guy, Carter.”

His lips quirk up. “I guess I need to do better at opening up, so you get to know me then. How about we go somewhere else? Talk?”

“Aren’t we talking now?”

“Want to see where Jesse and Ren met?”

My chest tingles over the idea, and it’s hard not to smile as soon as the offer is out in the open. Of course, I want to see where they met. After that story, how can I not?

“Isn’t it too early to drink?” It’s not even four o’clock yet.

“But it’s not too early for pool.”

I lick my lips. “Okay.”

I realize after following him out of the restaurant once he pays that I like this. Getting out. Talking to Carter. Having a life. I can picture doing it more often; smiling, laughing, feeling lighter than normal.

When Carter looks at me, it’s like he knows what I’m thinking. He reaches over and holds my hand, folding our fingers together the whole way to our next destination.

My smile grows bigger.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MOM HELPS ME SET THE TABLE THAT WE NEVER TYPICALLY USE WHILE I pull the vegetable lasagna out of the oven. Ainsley is in the living room with Dad playing Barbie's together. She always gets people wrapped around her finger, but him especially.

"That smells good." Mom comes up beside me, examining the bubbling cheese. "It looks like it's done. Did you make something different for your father? You know how he is."

Rolling my eyes, I point toward another dish on the top rack of the oven. "I made macaroni and cheese with hamburger in it. Ainsley likes that too thanks to him." Scrunching my nose over the combination, I check their food. "Don't get me started on her ketchup obsession. I'm pretty sure I have Jesse to blame for that."

Jesse and Ainsley haven't had many interactions. The first time they met, she was young. I used to think too young to remember anything about him. But Danny, Willow, Ainsley, Jesse, and me had gone out for breakfast one day just before she'd turned three, and Jesse put ketchup over the scrambled eggs he ordered. He puts the stuff on everything, just like her. That morning, she'd asked him for some and the look on her face when she puckered from the sweet taste didn't stop her from eating half of what was on his plate.

She's been obsessed since.

Mom smiles at that. "He should be here soon. Ren had to work, but I know he's looking forward to seeing you."

Somehow, I doubt that. "That's a shame Ren won't be here." Jesse texted me this morning asking if he should bring anything. He said nothing

about Ren. When was the last time I saw her? I'm not even sure.

I think about what Carter told me a while ago. Are Jesse and Ren still trying to have kids? Have they been fighting? Ren seems to work every time I try making plans, and I've never taken it personally until now. Maybe she doesn't want to be around me and Ainsley.

"When is your roommate coming home?"

I push the thought away and turn to my mother. She's patiently waiting for an answer, seemingly not knowing the thought that crossed my mind before then. "Soon. He was just out running errands with his friend."

There's a knock at the door. Knowing it wouldn't be Easton, I head out and smile at Ainsley and Dad on the couch. Dad's holding a teddy bear in one hand and a doll in the other, seemingly letting them converse. Shaking my head, I open the door and find my brother staring back at me with wine in his hand.

"I told you not to bring anything," I tell him, accepting the bottle he holds out. It would go well with the dish I made. Maybe not the macaroni and cheese, but it's not like Dad is a wine drinker anyway. Stepping aside, he passes me and greets Dad and Ainsley. "So, Ren couldn't make it?"

Jesse pulls off his sweatshirt and drapes it across the armchair. "Yeah, her parents are in town, so she wanted to see them." It comes off his tongue so easily, I can't help but blink in confusion at him.

I notice Mom from the corner of my eye, her expression sympathetic toward me. The lie is out there for me to dissect, but I choose not to call either of them out on it. Instead, it simmers silently while we proceed with the greetings. Ainsley reaches out and high fives Jesse when he offers her his palm. He and Dad catch up for a bit while I walk into the kitchen and check on the last dish.

Mom doesn't say anything.

I don't either.

With perfect timing, the front door opens with rattling keys. Talking pauses for a moment from the boys before they greet East. My family has met my roommate a few times. They all like him, Jesse and him always find things to talk about, Mom ogles him, and Dad is usually too busy fussing with Ainsley to pay him much attention.

About fifteen minutes later, we're all surrounding the table together with steaming food in front of us. Easton watches Dad fill Ainsley's plate, then notes the eagerness of Ainsley when she grabs the ketchup placed next

to her and covers her plate with it. I press my lips together when he glances between her and me, not really disgusted by the addition to her food, but not impressed either.

Jesse, sitting next to Ainsley, nudges her arm with a smile. “Want more macaroni with your ketchup, kid?”

Her eyes brighten when he talks to her, and I suppress a giggle. She’s crushing on him, that much is obvious. When he takes the ketchup from her and caps the lid, he winks and takes a forkful of food from her plate, causing her smile to widen at him.

Easton chuckles to himself, pulling my gaze between Ainsley and my brother to him. He notices where Ainsley’s attention is too as she stays saddled to Jesse’s side. I know the age is full of innocent crushes. I held quite a few with random people then too, and it only grew as I got older. When my roommate sees my plate still empty, he reaches for the veggie lasagna and grabs my plate to fill it.

“Thanks.”

Mom watches us as I accept the plate, her eyes twinkling as she smiles to herself. I’m not sure what she’s thinking, so I just focus on eating while everybody else talks about random things—jobs, weather, life.

Jesse says, “Carter mentioned you’re almost done with your semester. Said you’re doing well with teaching his class.”

For some reason, heat creeps up into my cheeks as I nod. I know everyone is watching. Well, everybody but Ainsley. She’s poking macaroni with her fork and eating happily while people wait for my response. “It’s been great teaching the course. I’m lucky he was there to help me when things didn’t work out at my last placement.”

Easton’s gaze especially burns from his close proximity, but I brush it off. It’s Mom who decides to speak. “He’s always been a good man. I wondered what he’s been up to since he moved. I still see his father mowing the yard once in a while. He always says hi. Nice people.”

I nod in agreement, not saying anything.

Dad picks at his plate. “He should stop by the house when he’s in town. Don’t know if he visits his father or not, but I hear they talk occasionally.”

“I’m sure he’d like that,” is all I offer. He told me not long ago he speaks to his father on the phone at least twice a month. Sometimes they’ll go out to eat, but I don’t know if he goes back to his childhood home.

Jesse leans back. “Considering teaching at college like him? I can picture it. Carter always wanted to be a professor. Talked about it ever since we were younger. But you’d make a good one too, Pipe.”

My brows raise. He thinks so? “Thanks, Jesse. I’m not sure what I’ll do, just that I’ll teach.” Going on to get my PhD didn’t seem logical. I loved being in front of Carter’s class, but I also loved being in front of the high school one too. Plus, that’s more debt on my shoulders for after I graduate.

“He could help you,” my brother replies causally.

I wet my lips when I see the way East’s jaw ticks. He doesn’t say a word, but I know he’s connected the dots. I’ve mentioned Carter’s name before in passing conversation—I’ve been on more dates with Carter and East has asked about them out of consideration. There’s distance though. The last time he asked, he didn’t really want to know.

Jesse doesn’t know about Carter and me, I can tell. I would have heard about it by now. Gotten the stares. Asked the questions. My family wouldn’t just sit here without grilling me about the guy they all knew I had a thing for. “He’s offered to help me figure things out since he knows the process.” Not wanting to dwell on the topic, I turn to Ainsley. “How’s dinner, Nugget?”

She smiles and signs, *Good*.

I tweak her nose and watch her go back to her food while my parents talk about Carter’s father. I participate once in a while whenever they ask something about school or graduation. I’m not attending the ceremony, which even Easton seems surprised by. Mom tells me I need to since I skipped my undergrad graduation too, but I don’t want to bother.

What I want is to go out to eat with people I care about, maybe plan a trip somewhere for a day or two. I want to enjoy my life and do it in ways that don’t hold me back. No barriers. No guilt. I look at Ainsley, and picture us in a car with the windows down and the radio up.

I see her talking.

Laughing.

It makes my smile falter for a moment.

“Piper?” It’s Easton who speaks.

I blink a few times before turning to him, lips twitching downward. He studies me, brows furrowed as he looks over my expression. What does he see? I’m not sure I want to know.

He quietly asks, “You good?”

Once again, Mom stares at me from across the table. I feel her gaze on me and I don't analyze it. There have been plenty of times in the past when she's asked about guys. She told me to date, to put myself out there when Danny did. I never listened, never told her I did. Sometimes I wonder if she was upset that I never tried harder.

But I'm trying now.

"I'm good," I assure him.

I don't think he buys it, but I can't tell. We stay up and talk some nights, catching up on our days. He brought Jay over one time for dinner, but Ainsley didn't take well to him even though he was no harm to her. She hid behind me or Easton, and Jay always stared at the three of us like he was amused by what he saw.

Easton and I are friends.

We're roommates.

We're...

"...what do you say, Piper?" Dad asks.

I shift my weight in the chair. "Sorry. What did you say?"

Jesse rolls his eyes. "He asked if you'd be interested in us all going out. I'm sure Ren would love going to The Grove."

Would she though? My eyes must reflect my doubt, because he doesn't keep eye contact with me. I know then his wife is upset. Maybe not with me, but the situation. I'm not angry over it. I'm not guilty over her pain.

But I do feel bad.

Easton's arm brushes mine.

In comfort, I realize.

"Sure," I answer softly. "I'd like that."

I'M SITTING on the kitchen counter with a bowl of ice cream when Easton walks into the kitchen in his usual black sweatpants. Shirtless with wet hair like he just took a shower, he walks over to the fridge and grabs a bottle of water. He leans his back on the doors of it, seemingly not caring about the various magnets and clips that hold drawings and bills up.

"Chocolate chip cookie dough?" he guesses, examining the bowl. It's my usual choice, though sometimes I'll sneak a pint of the peanut butter kind that he loves.

I nod, spooning some of it out. “Felt like an ice cream kind of night.” My family left hours ago after making plans for a celebratory graduation dinner in the coming months. I’d gotten Ainsley ready for bed and watched a few episodes of some random cartoon with her before tucking her in and sneaking down here.

He pushes off the fridge and grabs a spoon from the drainer, walking over and dipping it into my bowl. “Stress eating?”

Rubbing my lips together, I shrug. “I don’t know. I haven’t been that stressed lately. Things have been ... good. But seeing Jesse and hearing them cover up why his wife wasn’t here was hard.”

He quirks a brow. “Why do you think she wasn’t here?”

I pause, looking down at the ice cream I’m swirling into soup. “I think it has to do with Ainsley. They love her, but I found out from somebody that they’re trying to have kids. It’s not working.”

His lips twitch. “Somebody close to the family?” he surmises in a murmured response. He pulls his spoon away and tosses it into the sink like it’s tainted somehow.

Eye twitching, I put the bowl down beside me on the counter. “Yeah, it was Carter. They’re still friends.”

“Friends with your brother.” He huffs out an unamused laugh. “And your teacher. Funny, I don’t remember you mentioning that part.”

“It didn’t matter.”

Now he deadpans. “Don’t bullshit me.”

My lips part. “Look, I’ve known Carter for a long time. He’s a good man.”

“You hated him when you brought him up over the winter,” he points out doubtfully.

This conversation is going nowhere. “I said that I did, but I didn’t. I’ve never truly hated anybody in my life. Nobody but myself. If you were in my shoes, you’d feel the same.”

He mumbles, “Doubtful” under his breath before uncapping his water and taking a swig. He wipes off a droplet from his bottom lip and levels with me. “Does your family know you’re sleeping with him?”

I... Did he just— “What the hell, Easton?” Eyes widening over the blunt question, I stare at his distant expression. “You have no right asking me that question.”

“Isn’t that what friends do?”

“Pry,” I snap.

“Show concern,” he retorts. His dry demeanor throws me for a loop. Where is the guy who stayed up late with me or worried about Ainsley when she’s sick? It’s not the one glowering in front of me. “I think whatever you’ve got going on with him isn’t worth the risk considering his position.”

My jaw ticks as I slide off the counter. “It isn’t like he’s using his power over me. We’ve known each other—”

“Yeah, yeah. For a long time.” He grips the bottle in his hand until it crinkles. “How old is this guy?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because, whether you believe it or not, I am your friend. I *do* care. I’m starting to think a little too fucking much.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means...” His jaw ticks before he shakes his head. “I’m going out. Fuck this. Just be careful, Piper. Guess that’s all I’m saying.”

I glance at the time. “Where are you going? That’s really all you’re going to say to me right now?”

He turns throwing his hands up. “What more is there to say? You’re with your professor acting like your screwed up past makes everything okay with him. He’s a shoulder to cry on.”

Hurt laces through my veins. He knows enough about my past to know he shouldn’t have said that. Just like I shouldn’t have said, “And you were just a dick to ride when shit got too tough to handle.”

His eyes narrow as he backs out. “At least I’m not your professor.”

Scoffing, I grab my bowl. “Fuck you, Easton. Just ... fuck you.”

He calls out, “Been there, done that. Kind of glad I don’t have to experience that kind of crazy anymore, sweetheart.”

My heart breaks a little as I listen to him go upstairs and close his door. I remain in the kitchen eyeing my cell phone itching to call Carter knowing his number is in my contacts now. He insisted I could reach out to him whenever I needed.

Did I need him now?

I want to call him.

To tell him to come over.

But I can’t.

I think of Ainsley sleeping upstairs, and my roommate who’s loudly sifting through his dresser drawers and close my eyes when I listen to him

walk down the stairs and slam the front door closed behind him.

I don't need Carter.

I don't need Easton.

I just need ... peace.

Rinsing my bowl out in the sink, I grab my cell and power it off for the night while I think about East's harsh words. They penetrate my chest in ways I can't ignore. If he says he cares and means it, he shouldn't have walked out.

I refuse to even wonder if he's right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THERE'S A COMFORTABLE SILENCE IN CARTER'S OFFICE AS WE GRADE PAPERS across from each other. The stack is almost finished, which means we're close to being done for the night. As soon as the final paper is marked and set off to the side, we shift roles. It's always a silent transition, but one that seems easy to make.

Tonight is different though. I picked up soup and sandwiches from my favorite café on campus and brought them for dinner. We ate with basic conversation about our days, about homework, about the class we co-teach. He tells me about the following week when my advisor will be observing me taking charge of the classroom. I'll be recorded, assessed, and updated on my progress leading up to the final stretch of my degree.

"You're quiet," he notes softly, pushing the paper away from him. I lift my eyes from my own paper to meet his. "You okay?"

Ever since my fight with Easton the other night, my mind has wrapped around everything he said. I look at Carter and think about my roommate's theory. "I got into an argument with my roommate. I'm just thinking about the stuff we both said."

Carter leans forward. "Want to talk about it? You know I'm here to listen. And you have my number if you need it."

I've had his number for weeks, and not once have I used it. Not because I didn't want to, but because I told myself it'd cross a line. Talking to Carter on campus, making plans with him face to face seems harmless. Innocent. Calling him after dark, desperate for somebody to hear me when I'm at my lowest means something entirely different.

Playing with the red pen in my hand, I lean back and rub my lips together. “Do you think that this is happening between us because of Danny?”

Both his brows raise in surprise. “What?”

I fidget with the sleeve of my shirt. “We’ve been through this before, I know, but part of me worries that maybe what happened in the past is why we’re here.”

He takes a moment to study me before leaning back in his chair. “Was that part of the argument you had with your roommate?”

My lips part ... but nothing comes out.

He nods once. “I think that the past plays a part of why we are where we are, but I don’t think it’s the only reason why this has continued.”

Shoulders easing slightly, I let his answer sink in. It does make me feel a little better, like the self-doubt lingering can’t hurt me anymore over our situation. “My roommate knows a little about my past with Danny, my feelings, and he mentioned that I was clinging to the past using you. Maybe not in so many words, but the insinuation was there.”

He wets his lips. “He, huh?”

I swallow. “Easton.”

His lips turn downward. The way his eyes dull tells me he knows what I’m not saying openly. The truth lingers in the atmosphere between us, thickening the air. “I see.”

“Things with Easton and I are complicated, and—”

“Hey,” he cuts me off, smiling. “I’m not judging you, Piper. You’re a grown woman who can make her own choices. What you’ve done is none of my business.”

My jaw quivers as emotion clings to the inside of my chest, swelling my heart. “Thank you,” I whisper, voice breaking.

“You don’t have to thank me.” He reaches out and threads our fingers together. “I think Danny *is* the reason we’re here, but I don’t think it’s a negative reason.”

“Like we’re supposed to be here?”

He squeezes my hand. “Why don’t you come to my house tomorrow night? I’ll cook us dinner, you can meet Cap. Bring Ainsley if you’d like. I want to spend time with you, hear you laugh, listen to anything you want to talk about.”

I blink back tears. “What if I say the wrong things? What will you think about me then?” My mind conjures images of tattooed skin and a brooding smile. I hear the slam of the front door and the look of utter defeat in blue eyes. It makes me frown. “I was sleeping with somebody to alleviate the pain, Carter. How could you not think even a little differently of me for that?”

“We’re human.” His response is that simple, like it really doesn’t bother him. “You’re forgetting that I’m older than you. And you know what? I love that age isn’t a barrier between us, but you have to remember that you’re not the only one who thought sex was the answer.”

“You too?”

He just shrugs.

“Easton means well,” I theorize. He doesn’t stop me from talking about him, only making my guilt ease that much more until breathing doesn’t hurt so much. “I think we’re friends. But somewhere along the way things got complicated because of...”

“You and me?”

I go to tell him *no* but stop myself. “I’m not sure,” I admit. And I’m not. I don’t think the thoughts going through Easton’s head are exactly what’s happening between Carter and me. Then again, every time my mind goes to that place, the one full of potential feelings and further complications, I peel myself away from it. From Carter. From Easton.

“Dinner sounds amazing,” is what I eventually tell him, pulling myself from the rabbit hole that my roommate is at the bottom of.

He doesn’t mention anything about the change of direction, just smiles. “Great.”

I think about Ainsley and tell myself she’ll meet him soon. She’ll be able to see what a good man he is, how genuine he is, and how well he treats me.

But she won’t find that out tomorrow.

“Great,” I repeat, forcing a smile.

JENNA STAYS over at my house while I go out. She gave me a pep-talk, swatted my butt, and left me with a question I couldn’t answer in the moment.

“Are you going to move forward with your relationship?”

The way her eyes lit up when I didn't answer her made it seem like she knew the reason why I hadn't. And even as life offers me distractions by means of angry drivers and obnoxious hand gestures on the interstate, my thoughts keep circling around her inquiry.

Carter and I have held hands. He's kissed me on the cheek when we're alone. We've hugged for many reasons—because of sadness, for comfort, because we could. I like being wrapped in his arms, that's never been an uncertainty. But our relationship hasn't progressed because of me. The way his eyes flare when we get close tells me he wants something more when our conversations become deeper. About life. Our goals. The past. When we connect, I never let it go farther than it has because of the tug in my chest that I can't decipher as good or bad. Sometimes, his lips will linger on my cheek and his breath will hitch when I turn my head like we're finally going to seal what I've been too scared of.

The more I think about it, the more I want to have that connection with Carter Ford. I want to know what his lips feel like against mine, and what he tastes like. I want to feel his skin and absorb his warmth and know what it's like to be held by him skin to skin. I just want to move on instead of holding back. To try.

But it's fear that has always beat that want away, like I don't deserve anything more because of what I've done with Danny and Easton. I chased them both away, used them in different ways. I used my best friend to try getting him to love me, and I used my roommate to forget that my best friend never could return my feelings. In the process, I lost myself in a mixture of feelings that are too tangled, too interwoven, to decipher anymore. When I see Easton on the off chance he doesn't avoid me when we're both home, I no longer see Daniel McCray. I see dark hair and light eyes, and something trapped in his pursed lips and dark demeanor. I see a human like me, broken to some degree and unsure if the pieces will ever fit back together.

When I think of Carter, I think of security. I think of our youth. I remember old times when the only thing I ever had to be sad about was when the boys didn't include me in whatever they were doing—how Danny would sneak into my downstairs bedroom using the side window and bring me candy to apologize. When I see Carter, I see somebody who knows what he wants and goes after it without hesitation. He's compassionate enough to

help me and caring enough to let me have my time and space to process what we're doing.

Two men.

Two very different situations.

In a lot of ways, I care about them both. It took one night of drinking to cross a line with Easton, and part of me wonders if that's why I haven't let Carter and I do more than we have. If he's like any human, he'll want more as we mold our relationship—kissing, sex. It isn't like I don't want to have sex with him, every part of me screams that I do. I'm just wary that it'll change everything in ways I can no longer control.

Suddenly, Jenna's question becomes second best to the thought of intimacy with the man I've grown close to. I think about his spicy scent and his gentle hands and his warm eyes as they comfort me with a single look. I know that I would enjoy sleeping with him if my mind would take a step back from overanalyzing it.

Just as soon as the thought of us together crosses my mind, heat blossoms between my thighs. I squirm in my seat as my phone chirps that I'm nearing my destination. Gripping the steering wheel, I twist my palms and wonder what Easton would say. Then again, he already thinks I'm sleeping with Carter.

Why should I care?

Eye twitching, I turn into the driveway of a decent-size white and brick house. Parking my car in front of the closed garage like he told me, I examine the black shutters and wooden door leading inside. A cement pathway leads from the driveway to the entrance, and green flowering bushes line the front of the house. From here, I can see the outline of a fenced-in backyard and know it's perfect for his dog, probably a reason why he chose it in the first place. It's quaint and exactly what I'd imagine for Carter.

My phone buzzes after I unplug it from the charger, a text from my best friend displayed on the screen.

Jenna: *Stay the night ;)*

Blinking, I lick my lips and power off my phone so there's no distractions. I know she has things handled at home. Ainsley will be fine, Easton's been staying out later and later, and all that matters in this moment is that I let myself admit what I want.

My face heats.

I want Carter Ford.

Getting out of my car, I wipe off my clammy palms on the front of my blue jeans and take a deep breath before knocking on his front door. A dog barking in the background has me stepping back as Carter scolds him, opening the door.

“Piper,” he greets, his usual warm smile gracing his face. Instead of his typical button down and dress pants, he’s in jeans and a tee shirt. Casual but sexy. He gestures for me to come in, stepping aside so I can pass him. I see his dog, Cap, standing outside the kitchen, his tail wagging hesitantly. “Cap’s a big brute. He acts tough but he’s sweet. You’ll see.”

Carter closes the door and brushes a chaste kiss against my cheek before grabbing ahold of my hand and bringing me into the kitchen. Whatever he’s cooking smells delicious and watching him check the pan positioned in the oven and stir what’s in one of the pots on the stovetop has me biting my bottom lip in awe.

“It smells good,” I compliment quietly.

“I’m making lemon chicken pasta.” He puts the lid onto the pot and turns to me, asking if I want anything to drink. I just shake my head and notice his dog peeking out from the narrow hall off the kitchen. “She won’t bite, Cap. You can come out.”

I fight a smile as his dog pads over to him, looking at me with a tilted head. Wiggling my fingers over the horse-sized creature and then reaching my hand out to let him sniff me, he takes a few steps forward before his tongue darts out. It doesn’t take long before we’re buddies, his body not leaving my side as I pet him while Carter continues to cook.

“How was the drive over?” he asks.

My thoughts still linger from earlier, the back of my neck heating. I fight off the blush that wants to creep into my cheeks and think I manage to do so. “It was fine. Traffic was busy.”

“Weekend traffic is usually heavier.”

Our small talk lasts until he’s putting our food together, sprinkling garnish on top of the two plates of pasta and chicken. My mouth waters at the sight of it, but not as much as when he looks at me and says, “I like you standing in my house.”

Not expecting those words, I swallow down my surprise. His eyes pierce the dressy buttoned maroon blouse I chose to pair with my looser skinny jeans, traveling down my body like he’s memorizing this moment

when I'm in his space. Not his classroom, not his office, and not some public restaurant far enough from campus where people can't ask questions, but close enough to home where it doesn't feel like hiding.

Being in his house feels intimate. Him cooking me dinner feels domesticated. Everything about the way he takes me in as I stand in his personal bubble jumpstarts my heart. We lock eyes when he finally finds his gaze back on my face, and I'm not sure what gets into me. A lot. Nothing at all.

I'm conflicted.

About life.

About love.

About *them*.

I walk over to him and place one of my palms over his beating heart, feeling his body heat radiate into my skin from where it rests on his soft cotton shirt. He looks down at me, his eyes heating as I step closer until he presses a hand into my lower back, pressing us closer together.

He says my name quietly as I stand on my tiptoes and brush my lips against his. It's timid, unsure, barely lasting a few seconds before I draw away and watch his reaction. One of his hands cups my cheek, his thumb caressing my bottom lip, as his other hand finds my hip. When he bends down to meet my lips, there's nothing unsure in the way he kisses me.

His lips are firm yet soft as they explore mine, deepening the kiss when he angles my head to the side. Teasing the seam of my lips with his tongue, I open for him and relish in the taste of his favorite sweet tea. My arms go around his neck as I nip his bottom lip and thread my fingers into his short hair. He makes a sound that I mirror as the hand on my cheek slowly trails down my side until it rests on my other hip, his fingertips kneading at the denim covering me.

I pull him closer, my pelvis arching into his until I feel him harden. He groans and I shiver, goosebumps covering my skin as he kisses me without reserve. Holding me to him, I soak up the feeling. Nobody can catch us, can scold us, can threaten us with punishment for having this moment. I blissfully absorb it all.

His hands.

His tongue.

His lips.

It feels like forever before we pull away, his forehead resting on mine, his lips swollen from my teeth. My eyes are closed as I catch my breath, the air mingling with our short pants. I lick my lips before grazing them softly against his again before he chooses to pull away first.

The look in his eyes is full of heat and lust and I know what he wants. He smiles and brushes the pad of his thumb against my lip. “What was that for?”

I swallow. “I just wanted to.”

My words must affect him because his eyes flare as he gives me a quick peck that barely lingers despite his expression darkening, like he wants it to. He steps away and grabs the plates rather than expecting anything more. It’s because of that consideration, paired with the way my lips tingle and body heats, that I want it so much more. But we don’t rush the dinner he made as we eat at the table and talk about anything we want to.

Jesse.

My parents.

His father.

Mr. Ford has always been a kind man, more so after his wife passed away. Despite his loss, he did everything in his power to raise Carter the way he deserved to be raised. He passed on his values and morals. And every single day of his hard work being a single parent is one I admire ten times more now after hearing the financial struggles they had growing up. His father worked multiple jobs to make ends meet, not that anybody would have known it. He was there for Carter when Carter needed him, going to any function or event for his son. It’s clear to see in the way Carter speaks of his father that he loves him.

In return, I tell him all about Ainsley and her condition, the struggles of school, the strength I see in her, and how much it hurts to see her cry when she thinks I’m not looking. He already knows my love for her is the strongest love I can ever have, and how much I love Danny for giving me that feeling through the little girl he loved most too. The more I talk about her, the more tears well in my eyes.

We’re on the couch with Cap at our feet when I let one of the tears slip past the barrier and stream down my cheek.

He holds my hand in his, resting them on what little space is between us on the cushion. “She’s an amazing little girl, isn’t she?”

“The best,” I whisper, clearing my throat so the raspy tone fades. “She gets it from both of her parents. Willow—did you meet her?” He shakes his head. “Danny told me from the day they met that he knew she was it for him. She came from a rough background and fought for everything she had. I think Ainsley gets a lot of her spirit from her mom.”

He squeezes our hands. “Danny was a lot like that too.” I nod in agreement. “You don’t have to punish yourself like I know you’re doing. What happened to him isn’t your fault, Piper.”

I’ve told myself that hundreds of times over when I reach a low point, and most of the time I believe it. But like Carter has said before, we’re human. And humanity comes with weakness and self-doubt that brings people down the second they’re trapped inside their own mind.

I stare at our hands. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me. While I wasn’t behind the wheel, or the one who created the storm, I was the one who chased him away.”

He stares in confusion.

“I thought I loved him.” I draw in a breath, finally admitting aloud what nobody knows. Not even Jenna. “I thought he finally realized he loved me that night, but it was a moment of weakness for him. And as soon as—” I choke on the words, struggling to catch my breath as more tears fill my eyes. “As soon as he realized what we’d done, he couldn’t even look at me. He said it was a mistake, Carter.”

Sympathy instantly clouds his eyes. “Oh, Piper. I didn’t know.”

Letting go of his hand, I swipe furiously at my cheeks and force myself to breathe. I close my eyes and count to five, opening them only when I’m calmer. “I think about that night all the time. Not because I’d slept with him, but because I knew it was a mistake. It hurt when he told me that, it hurt when he stormed out, but nothing hurts more than knowing he was right. And the worst part? I couldn’t tell him that.”

Before I know it, I’m wrapped in his arms. He cradles me, but no tears come out to stain his soft shirt. He just holds me in silence, letting me seek the comfort I need in his warmth. I wrap my arms around him, squeezing my eyes shut and realizing the weight on my chest is no longer there holding me down.

I breathe deeper. Easier.

When I open my eyes, I pull back and stare at him. His image is clear, his eyes warm and lips neutral. I cup his cheek like he did with me, his

stubble rough under my palm. I explore his face, trace the scar on his skin, and feel the slight laugh lines that tells me he's had a good life. I wonder if I'll have those same lines when I'm older or if it's too late.

But the truth is... "I've had a good life." He lets me touch him without making his own move. "I just wish Danny was still alive to keep enjoying his."

His eyes soften. "I know you do, Piper."

I lick my lips and lean forward into his, resting mine against his mouth without moving. Closing my eyes, I feel his breath and get wrapped in the caress of his essence. "You're a good man, Carter Ford." Each word brushes our lips together, and I search for the feeling I've had only once before.

And it wasn't with Danny.

His intake of breath as I trail my hands down the front of his shirt and dip them under gives my confidence a boost. I feel the planes of his firm stomach and trace the lines of his abdominal muscles until I trail them up, up, up along with his shirt. When my hands rest on the wiry hair of his chest, he opens his eyes and looks at me in question.

"Are you sure?"

I answer him with a kiss, tangling my tongue with his slowly and pulling at the article of clothing I want off him. He breaks loose enough to tug it off in one swift pull before kissing me again, drawing my bottom lip into his mouth and suckling. I move my palms up and down his chest before sliding them down to the waistband of his jeans and dipping my finger inside.

He curses and pulls away. "You first." His voice is raspy as he slowly works at the buttons on the blouse I wear until each one is undone. His large palms trace my curves before peeling the material away and leaving me in my cream bra. His eyes take in the lace covering my small breasts before he moves to kiss my jaw, my neck, and collarbone. Moving one of the straps out of the way so his mouth can continue over my exposed skin, his other hand fumbles with the hooks at the back until they let loose and the garment falls from my body. He moves my discarded clothes to the living room floor, taking in my bare chest the same way I do his.

Prickles of heat nip at the back of my neck as his hands reach out and cup my breasts, weighing them in his hand as he bends down and kisses me again. Our tongues sweep each other's mouths as he plays with my pebbled nipples until I'm moaning and gripping his upper arms.

“Please,” I whisper against his lips.

He flicks his tongue in my mouth and lowers down my body, trailing kisses from the valley between my breasts, down my stomach, nipping just below my belly button, before slowly undoing the button and zipper of my jeans. They’re not tight, so they come off easily as he pulls them down my thighs, his eyes raising before he dips his fingers into the band of my panties asking for silent permission to take them off until I’m bare on his couch.

I nod.

In a matter of seconds, I’m completely exposed. I’m tempted to cover myself with the throw blanket next to me but I see the way lust burns in his eyes as he runs a hand up my stomach and kisses up one of my thighs. His palm gently pushes me down so I’m lying on my back as he spreads my legs out in front of him. My head tips as he gets closer to where I ache, his teeth biting the inside of my leg until they stop just before my slit.

“I want this, Carter.” My breathy words are all he needs before his tongue does a first swipe over the length of me, from clit to entrance, and a gasped breath escapes my lips as I mewl out when he does it again. My fingers go to the top of his head, tangling in his hair as he spreads me and sucks my clit into his mouth.

I curse him, praise him, and feel my insides burn with yearning as his tongue plays with me in every way that my body needs. My thighs open wider for him to adjust his wide shoulders between them as he kneels on the carpet and works me skillfully with his mouth. I hold onto his hair as he licks me with purpose, working my entrance with his tongue until I’m writhing and arching and holding his face where I need him to be.

Legs shaking, I dig my fingertips into his scalp and grind into him as his tongue pushes into me. One of his fingers slides toward where his mouth is, playing with the arousal that he’s created before entering me slowly as his tongue trails back to my clit. My eyes flutter closed as a second finger enters me, pumping, arching, and building me higher and higher. His movements are slow, calculated, and he doesn’t stop until I’m barely able to pant his name in choppy pleas. My hips arch into him, riding out the wave of pleasure coursing through my body as he picks up the pace with his fingers and nips my clit until I can’t hold back.

Moaning his name, he keeps his fingers arched inside me through my orgasm, waiting until I come down before pulling them out and standing up.

He hooks an arm around my waist, puts one behind the back of my legs, and cradles me to him as he takes us through the hallway past his kitchen. I hold onto him, legs numb from the high I'm coming down from, and bury my face into his chest and breathe in his spicy scent while licking and biting his flesh.

He carries us to his bedroom, using his foot to close the door behind him so Cap can't come in. I don't take time to look around the large room or note just how soft his dark bedding is under me when he gently lays me down. All I focus on is the way he confidently strips in front of me, not once looking away from our locked gazes. I'm transfixed by his toned torso and his lean waist. His arms perfectly rounded with muscle from the boxing he does at the Rec Center, his thighs lean and muscular, and his length too impressive to miss as it springs from his tight blue boxer briefs that slide down him until he's naked too.

When he crawls up the bed and hovers over my body, I swallow and position my legs so he can fit between them. He's broader than Easton, more toned from all his workouts. The way he towers over me and studies my expression isn't with the same intensity though, and I'm not sure how to take it.

His eyes are dark with lust, but lighter with something else. Care. Genuine care. And I feel as much when he leans down and kisses me, brushing our lips together in tender kisses as he feels down my body and holds me. Sinking lower onto his forearms, his tongue sweeps my bottom lip until we're exploring each other's mouths again, making out and touching and breathing in the other. I flick my tongue against the roof of his mouth, he nibbles my bottom lip, and his cock hardens against my stomach between us.

Breath hitching, I hold onto his shoulders and look him in the eyes. Our breathing is ragged, wanting, intermingled with the anticipation. I don't tell him I want this again, not with words. Instead, I squeeze his shoulders and kiss him, molding our lips together and holding him to me so his weight shifts on top of my body. I guide my hand to his rock-hard cock and pump him until he shudders. He places a hand over mine, helping me jerk him until he guides himself at my entrance, pauses, and gives me one final glance before his mouth buries itself in the crook of my neck the same time he enters me in one, deep stroke.

I instantly arch into him, feeling him everywhere. I squeeze my arms around his neck and moan when he slowly pulls out and pushes back in. It's not rushed. It's not hard. It's soft, caring, like he wants it to last. He moves over my body and touches my skin and kisses my lips with the kind of need I want to absorb and feel and think about even when the moment is over.

And that's what this is. A moment.

A moment of bliss as his bare cock buries itself inside of me over and over, and one where my hips meet his every thrust eagerly. We feed off each other, our tongues and limbs tangling and grasping and gasping and playing until the familiar flutter in the pit of my stomach returns.

My hands trail down his back, my nails digging in as he shifts his weight and enters me at a deeper angle. I grab his ass and meet his hips, egging him on to push into me harder, deeper, and feel him hit the perfect spot until my eyes roll and black dots fill my vision. He does it again and again, the movement never going as fast as I want but making my body burn all the same.

Sliding one of his arms under me, he lifts my body and thrusts into me while covering one of my nipples with his mouth and suckling it. My eyes stay closed as I take in the sensation of his cock twitching every time I clench around him and his breath blowing on the wet breast he plays with. He holds my hand with his free one, trying to keep me close, and breathes my name onto my lips when they meet mine for a scorching kiss like he's feeding me oxygen.

And every time he hits that spot leaving me moaning, I think about all the other feelings that should squeeze my chest. I feel desire, the yearning of comfort, but there's something lacking that I search for as his cock drives into me. So, I hold on tighter to his body and rock into him when his hips thrust forward. I listen to the sound our bodies make, and the way our breaths get louder. My pleas become desperate, my mind swarming with thoughts and wishes and hope.

Hope that this is enough.

Hope that this turns into what I want.

Not an escape. Love.

I search for that feeling as his thrusts becomes more demanding, knowing we're both going to come when he slides a hand down my body and plays with my clit. Wrapping my legs around his waist, I grind into him and pant and beg until my body gets what it wants.

Not needs. *Wants*.

That feeling I search for in our intimacy is lost amidst the sweat and scent of good sex. I lose the way my mind tries latching onto to how he holds me, how he moves me into positions that gets me off too. He knows how to work me, how to hold me, and how to kiss me with reason.

But even after he pulls out and presses me against his side, peppering kisses against my temple and hair, I know the feeling isn't there.

No matter how bad I want it to be.

I place a hand on his chest and caress the sweat dotting it, my eyes closing as I listen to his rapid heartbeat beginning to even. His lips stay pressed against the crown of my head, his warm breath soaking into my hair.

"You okay?" he asks.

I choke down my tears. "Yeah."

An hour later after cleaning up in his bathroom, I make an excuse to go home to my best friend and Ainsley. I just pray my roommate isn't there to see the tears that burn my eyes when I make it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I WAKE UP THE NEXT MORNING WITH JENNA AND AINSLEY BOTH STILL sleeping beside me in my bed. My face feels puffy from crying against Jenna's shoulder, my chest heavy from things I don't want to think about before eight in the morning.

A brown pair of eyes meets mine, a little hand reaching out and touching my cheek. I smile at her, already feeling better just knowing she's here with me. I cover her hand with mine, sliding her palm to my mouth to press a kiss against it.

"I love you," I whisper against her hand, smiling as her tired eyes brighten. "I'm feeling like waffles this morning, what do you say?"

From the other side of Ainsley, I hear Jenna grumble, "Too early. Sleep." I bite back my laugh as I let go of Ainsley's hand and kiss her forehead, gesturing for her to get out of bed with me.

We walk downstairs hand in hand, my eyes unintentionally lingering to the open landing above us where Easton's closed door is. I pick Ainsley up and set her on the island counter, giving her a glass of almond milk and grabbing the ingredients we'll need to make breakfast.

I already have a few made by the time Jenna strolls down, bedhead, tired eyes, and dried drool gracing the corner of her mouth. I snicker at her less than stellar appearance, forgetting how much she hates mornings. She spends an hour getting ready, so nobody would guess what kind of zombie she resembles first thing.

"Morning."

"Shut it."

I snort and gesture to the full coffee pot I have yet to indulge in. She grabs a mug from the cabinet and pours herself a cup, getting her usual cream from the fridge and dumping in an ungodly amount of sugar. Her sweet tooth is one I could never match, and I always wondered how she stayed so skinny knowing how much she ate of it. Then again, she also goes to the gym every day which is something I don't do.

"I can feel your judgement," she mumbles, bringing the cup to her lips and standing beside Ainsley. She sets the mug down after taking a sip and ruffles Ainsley's hair until my six-year-old smiles and bats her hand away.

I check the waffle maker before peeling the next one out and setting it onto the plate. "I'm not judging you," I lie.

She mutters under her breath and sits down at the counter, pulling out a stool. "I want to talk about last night."

Freezing, my eyes go to Ainsley. She's playing with Jenna's phone. "Not right now, okay?"

"You were c-r-y-i-n-g."

"Ainsley can spell, you know."

My bestie sighs. "I just want to know that you're okay. You said you were last night, but then you snotted all over my shirt. I'm pretty sure that doesn't equate to being okay."

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I stare at the machine in front of me as it cooks the batter. "I didn't have a bad night. In fact, it was a good night given the circumstances."

"Okay..."

My shoulders slump ever so slightly as my eyes close. Admitting what I'd done was impossible last night. I didn't feel guilty. I didn't regret it. But as soon as I stepped inside, I couldn't hold back the waging emotions battling inside of me. I started sobbing as soon as Jenna asked how it went.

I had sex with Carter.

I had *good* sex with Carter.

My professor.

My old crush.

A family friend.

And despite the fact he was gentle and kind and respectful, I couldn't fathom a response to Jenna's question. *How'd it go?* I felt like Carter Ford was pouring his feelings into me with every kiss, caress, and thrust, but I

couldn't do the same. No matter what kiss I returned, touch I matched, or thrust I met, it wasn't enough.

I wanted it to be.

"I don't think I can love," I whisper, not wanting to say it too loud in fear of who will hear. Ainsley. Easton. Myself.

"Piper," she says softly. I can hear the pity in her tone, and I brush it off as I peel the waffle from the maker. "That's ridiculous. You can love. You love your family, you love Ainsley. What would make you think you can't?"

I keep my back turned to her as I fight with my shaky jaw, grinding down on my teeth to control my emotions. The swell of bitterness rises in my chest, suffocating me slowly until I have to force a breath. "Because I didn't feel it last night when I should have."

For a moment, there's a pause. "Hey, Ains? Mind if I talk to Piper for a minute? You can go buy whatever game you want on my phone and play."

I wince at what a bad idea that is. Ainsley once got ahold of my phone a year ago and purchased over a hundred dollars worth of games. I had to fight to get them refunded. When little feet make their exit out of the room, phone in hand, I blow out a breath knowing what's coming.

"You slept with him."

I simply nod.

Her hand finds my arm. "Okay. That's not a bad thing, right? You've always said that Carter has treated you well. Did he—"

"No!" I already know where she's taking it when I see concern in her eyes. "No, he was great. Really, Jen. But..." I lick my lips and scrub at my eyes, not wanting to cry again. "It was great and I didn't feel anything. I mean I *felt* things, but not what I wanted to feel. You know?"

"Babe, you don't have to fall for the guy after having sex with him," she points out, brows raised. "Love takes time. Don't beat yourself up over not being head over heels or exchanging those kinds of words just because the guy was inside you."

Heat settles into my cheeks. "It's not that. I know I don't have to say that because of what we did. But he's always been so kind to me. Look what he did for me with my student teaching? He saved me from having to wait another semester to finish my degree."

"Do you think you owe him?"

My eyes widen. “No. It’s—” I realize how bad this is coming out, so I recollect myself and take a deep breath. Counting to five, I exhale and look at her. “I felt things before. Things I didn’t feel with him. No spark. No... I don’t know, connection? Not a real one anyway. And I kept searching for one because I knew there had to be something. There just wasn’t.”

“When you say you felt things before...”

Popping my lips, I avoid her brazen stare as she tries wringing an answer out of me. “You know I’m not a virgin. I’ve had sex before.”

She smacks my arm. “Piper!”

I rub the spot she hit and frown. “Ow. That actually hurt, She Hulk. I’m getting you food, no need to physically harm me.”

“Tell me who!”

I bite down on the inside of my cheek, counting the waffles on the plate to see if I have enough. Choosing to be safe, I pour the last of the batter in the machine and rinse out the bowl while it cooks. “I really don’t think it matters, Jenna.”

Her hand comes out and stops me from rinsing the ladle in my hand. “Oh my God. It’s Easton.” She hisses out his name, eyes widening but bright with accusation.

I don’t confirm it or deny it. “It doesn’t matter, okay? I—”

“Stop right there. You had s-e-x with a hottie last night and came home crying.” She stares me in the eye. “That means that you’re hung up on somebody else, so it matters. Be real with me. I’m your best friend. Are you in love with Easton?”

Are you in— Why does my heart suddenly feel like I’ve been running? It beats wildly in my throat as I repeat those words. Well, just one of them.

Love. Am I in love with Easton?

“I don’t see how I could be,” is what I say.

“Oh my God,” she repeats, this time in awe. I’m not sure what she’s thinking, but I’m sure it can’t be good. “You’re in love with that sex on a stick. I should have seen this coming.”

“What does that mean?”

She actually claps her hands like this is the best news she’s heard in forever. “Piper, I’m going to level with you, okay? After Danny, I didn’t know what would happen to you. You closed yourself off and sunk into this deep pit that I couldn’t get you out of. You pretended you were fine because of Ainsley, but the world could see you weren’t. And that night when I

forced you to get drunk off your ass here was the first time you let your guard down.”

Some good that did.

That was the first night I slept with Easton. Jenna had sobered up hours later and drove herself home. Easton and I kept drinking, kept staring, kept getting closer. Before I knew it, his mouth was on mine and my hands were on his body and we were naked and in a very compromising position in my bed. We’d had sex three times that night, all rushed and rough but never sloppy. Despite the amount of alcohol I drank, I remember every single detail.

“You became somebody who was living again because of him,” she continues, squeezing my hand that I didn’t realize she’d taken into hers. “Then when you admitted that you guys were doing the casual sex thing, I could tell it was helping you. You were brighter, happier. It wasn’t until a couple months ago that shifted, and I don’t know how many times I ignored the signs. Whenever I’d come over, you two would stare at each other when the other person wasn’t looking. You’d blush if he accidentally touched you. It was like you were trying to pretend nothing had gone down even though a lot already had.

“Piper, think about it. Have you introduced Ainsley and Carter yet? Have you had him over for dinner or even considered it? I know you have his number, but have you used it? You have to wonder why that is. It’s not because you’re scared or because he’s your professor or even because your family knows him. I doubt it even has to do with the age gap you said is there because you’ve told me time and time again you haven’t even thought about it when you’re with him. So, what’s really holding you back?”

But it’s not what’s holding me back that she’s trying to pry out of me. It’s *who*. And that realization is a sucker punch to the gut that I feel everywhere.

Her features soften when mine become hyperaware of every answer to her questions. I haven’t brought up Carter coming inside even when he’s picked me up and dropped me off. I’ve never been ready to introduce him to Ainsley because a part of me knew there was something worth waiting for—a realization.

My eyes water as I look at her. “Fuck, Jenna. W-What am I going to do?”

“Easton never came home last night,” she tells me openly. “If this is what you want, you need to talk to him. You both have clearly been with other people, so if you want to just be with him...”

Dread fills my veins. “But how do I even know he wants to be with me? We’ve fought too many times. He said awful things to me.”

“Whoa.” Her eyes narrow. “You have been holding out on me, girl. First, I’m going to need you to give me every detail. But not before we eat, because I really will go She Hulk if I don’t have something with this coffee.”

Her joking doesn’t make me feel any better. It just locks me in my state of haze as I think about Easton. *Again.*

How many times have I thought about him when I shouldn’t have? Subconsciously, I’ve been comparing Carter to him—to what we had. And if he really feels the way he does about me when we argued, then I stand no chance. There’s a chance that I’ll experience heartbreak all over again.

This time because of Easton Wyatt.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I'M FINISHING MY EXAM WHEN I REALIZE I'M THE ONLY ONE LEFT IN THE room. Carter's eyes go to me more often now that nobody else can see. My first day of being recorded while teaching was yesterday. I showed up ten minutes before class to set up and prepare for the lesson. It gave little opening for Carter and me to talk.

I know he's thinking about it, what happened to us. He texted me the following day and asked how I was. My one-word response left him calling. I answered and had a fifteen-minute conversation with him about how Cap was doing and how great supper was and how much fun I had before telling him I made plans with Ainsley.

But he looks at me now like he knows there's something more to it. He's a smart man. I wouldn't be surprised if my face is covered in guilt and sorrow. I may not even need to say the words for him to know if I just meet his eyes.

Easton stayed out for the weekend, leaving me stewing in my contemplation. I didn't text him because I didn't want to have that conversation over the phone. But I realized after Sunday came and went that he wasn't coming back anytime soon.

Jenna told me to rip off the Band-Aid. But I'd be ripping off two, and flesh would come with it.

When I finish my test, I slowly pack my things and prepare myself. I slip my bag over my shoulder and make the walk up to his desk, gripping the bag strap in my hand.

"Please look at me, Piper."

I give myself a moment, blink, and then tip my chin up to meet him with a frail smile. He accepts my paper and sets it down with the others, quickly ignoring it. "I'm pretty sure I passed," I offer weakly.

He stands, walking around his desk and sitting on the edge of it beside me. Reaching out, he brushes our hands together, linking our pinky fingers for a moment before drawing back. A subtle touch, quick, painless.

It doesn't feel painless.

"Talk to me," he says. It's a soft demand, one that tells me to reach for the Band-Aid. "I can see it in your eyes, Piper."

I let out a tiny breath. "See what?"

"You weren't ready."

My heart hurts. "I..." I close my eyes for a moment and push past the swirl of thoughts that flood my mind.

I'm drowning. Drowning in my indecision and pain, wondering if I'll survive if I submerge myself under the murky waters of my conscious. I want freedom from the pain that shoots through me like a drug in my bloodstream. I need clarity.

Just once.

Swallowing hard, I open my eyes. There are no tears that greet my ducts or a sharp breath that escapes my lips like I can no longer breathe. I asked for a temporary freedom and was given it enough to have this moment.

"I'm sorry." Two little words with such a large meaning are out in the open between us. His eyes dull slightly, but his lips pull up into a knowing smile. I see his hurt, but I see something else too.

Understanding.

"You don't have to apologize," he tells me simply, reaching out and squeezing my hand. It tugs on my heartstrings but not as much as when he adds, "Make sure he treats you well, Piper. You deserve that even if you think you don't."

I stare without blinking, taking in his acceptance and wondering if he'd always known. He'd had hope, but he wasn't holding onto it like I'd done for so long. "When you kiss me," I say in a cautious whisper, "what do you feel?"

He looks to the hall for a quick moment before leaning forward and brushing his lips against my cheek. "I'm not sure it matters what I feel, Piper. What's important is what you do, and I'll never pressure you to

pretend that you feel more than you do. I mean it. You deserve to know what happiness feels like.”

Drawing my bottom lip into my mouth when he pulls away, I feel the ghost touch of his lips on my cheek. “Have you felt that? Happiness?”

He smiles. “Once upon a time.” *But not now.* “I want to be clear with you about something. I like spending time with you, hearing your thoughts, and listening to your laugh. I love seeing how much you care about Ainsley, and how you hold onto memories of Danny. I’m happy, Piper, and was happy with you. But I’ll be just fine. Just like you will be.”

I want to ask him how he knows, how he sounds so sure. I don’t though. Keeping the questions at bay, I give him a terse nod and take a deep breath. We’re not breaking up because we never really dated. He’s right. We had fun together in each other’s company. It was a friendship that got mixed up in the possibility of something more.

It was just never going to be enough.

“You’re graduating in a few weeks,” he notes, changing the topic like we’re not just ending something.

I manage to nod, a little taken aback. “I have a ticket for you. If you want it, of course. My family said they’d love to see you. Jesse will be there...” Rubbing my arm, I curse myself for even bringing it up—the ticket, my family.

“I’m not going to tell them.”

My eyes pop up to his.

He shakes his head. “What happened can stay between us. I’m fine with that. Jesse, your parents, they’ll never know. And as long as you’re comfortable with me going, I’d love to. It’s been great getting to know you, Piper. I have no doubt in my mind you’ll go far.”

A new kind of emotion takes over, thickening my throat. Gratitude. “In case I’ve never told you, I admire you. You gave me a chance even when I was rude to you. I wouldn’t be graduating if you hadn’t.”

“You’re a natural teacher.”

“I had help,” I say, an easy smile finally gracing my lips. “And thank you for...” For what? For understanding? For not telling my family? For keeping us a secret? I settle with, “everything.”

He pushes himself up and stuffs his hands into his pockets. “I told you I’ve got your back, and I mean it. This doesn’t change anything, Piper.

You're going to graduate and go on to do amazing things, and I'll be there no matter what form. Friend. Family acquaintance. Former professor."

"You're too nice, Professor Ford."

He chuckles at my teasing. It feels good to hear the sound, like I won't walk out of the room feeling like my body is sinking lower and lower. "I'm just there for people I care about."

"I'm sorry I couldn't have..."

"Hey," he breathes the words quietly, "I don't want you to apologize for being honest with me. That's all I could ever ask for."

I wonder if he's thinking about his ex-fiancée when his eyes seem to distance themselves like he's lost in thought. Was their choice to stay together draining? Did he consider that being dishonest?

"Okay," I finally say, though there's caution in my tone like I'm afraid to turn around and leave. I know we'll both survive, that this isn't the end of the world. I've experienced far worse tragedies than potentially hurting somebody's feelings.

But that doesn't mean I don't care.

"Piper," he says as I walk toward the door. I pause for a moment before turning, brushing hair behind my ear. "Take a deep breath and remember that your past doesn't define you. You're meant to live and love. Danny would have wanted that for you. No matter what might have happened between you two."

He doesn't know how much I needed those words. Then again, he's Carter Ford. Maybe he knew exactly how much I needed to hear them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I STOP BY THE INKED LOTUS WITH A SLEEPING AINSLEY IN THE BACK SEAT. Evie said she had a rough day and shut down, refusing to sign to anybody. I have yet to get anything out of her about what happened, but I have a feeling it has to do with kids in her class based on the way she kept her eyes down the entire time I walked with her out to the car at pick up.

We do what Danny always said calmed her down. Drove. Around town, on back roads, everywhere until her head dipped and lids grew heavier. It was ten minutes ago when she fell asleep, dozing off with soft snores. I'm not sure I knew where I was heading until the shop lights lit up the dark night. There's a parking spot right out front that I instantly take, noticing Jay outside the store smoking. He must notice the vehicle because he puts out the cigarette against the building and then stomps it into the pavement with his shoe before walking over.

My window rolls down as he approaches it. "I thought that was you, Red." I quickly press my finger to my lips and gesture toward the back seat where Ainsley is strapped in her booster seat.

"Hey, Jay."

He glances at me, leaning against the sill of the open window. "He's not in right now. Had errands to run or something."

"Oh." My brows furrow as I find myself nodding. Jay watches me for a moment, something crossing his expression. "Well, I thought I'd just stop by. I haven't seen him in a while."

I doubt he really cares, but he nods like he does. He's always been nice to me, respectful whenever I see him. He's a flirt but stopped trying with

me a long time ago. “We’ve been pretty swamped here lately. A lot of late nights.”

He’s covering for his friend. I get it. “You don’t have to lie, Jay. Listen, it was a bad idea to come here. Just forget about even mentioning us dropping by. I don’t know why I thought it was a smart thing to do.”

“Piper.” It’s the first time he’s ever used my name. It sounds foreign coming from him. “I wasn’t covering for him. Business has picked up, that’s all.”

But when I catch sight of the blinds moving slightly from the front window, I know who’s watching us. I also know the car peeking out from around the building is the same one that should be “running errands” right now.

I swallow my pride when Jay notices what caught my attention and clear my throat when he curses. “Like I said, sorry I showed up. I need to get Ainsley home. It was stupid to have come.”

“Come on, Red—”

I put my hands up. “You’re being a good friend to him, Jay. He needs that. He and I certainly can’t be, so it’s good he has you.”

He presses his lips together for a moment, eyes glistening in contemplation. “He needs you too if it makes you feel any better. But you two are the most stubborn a-holes I’ve ever met.”

Snorting unattractively, I shake my head at the ridiculous sentiment. “He made it clear he doesn’t need me. Look at how many people he sleeps with. It’s not like he even waited before we stopped...” Face flushing, I brush it off. “I’m just tired. Ignore me.”

“No, wait.” He keeps ahold of the car so I can’t drive away like I’m itching to do. My palm twitches on the gearshift but doesn’t move it into drive. “What do you mean all the people he’s slept with? Trust me, Red, he’s not sleeping with anybody.”

I blink. “What? No, that’s impossible. Even before things got ... tense with us, he’d either come home later than normal or not until the next day.”

He just shakes his head adamantly. “I’m telling you he hasn’t been sleeping with anybody. I’d know. The ass has been cramping my style. There’s a permanent indent in my couch because of him.”

All I can do is stare.

Jay’s brows go up. “I swear I’m telling you the truth. The nights he got home later was probably my fault. We all know I like drinking a little too

much, and more than that, I like making stupid decisions while I drink. Easton tends to go with me to the bar when he knows I'm in a mood that way I don't drink and drive or start more fist fights."

"More?"

He winces. "I'm usually a happy drunk, but I have my moments. It doesn't matter. The guy has been sleeping on my couch for a while. It started after you two got into it about something. He wouldn't say what and I knew better than to pry. I'm going to be real with you, Red. My friend is screwed up over you."

I gape.

He just nods.

My shoulders drop. "He acted like..."

"Like a piece of the male anatomy?" I appreciate that he's trying to keep it clean in front of Ainsley. "I'm sure. People usually act up when the chicks they're into seek out other guys."

I have nothing to say to that.

He shrugs casually, like this is just another conversation to him. "You're his girl. I shouldn't say that because he'll kick my you know what, but it's true. He talks about you all the time, even now. And whatever happened between you two that left him drinking on my couch and making baked goods at three in the morning made me gain about twenty pounds, so thanks for that."

Normally, I'd find that funny. My lips refuse to waver with an oncoming smile or any form of amusement though. "He's really been staying with you?"

He leans closer. "Do you want to see my dessert collection at home? I can't have anybody else over in fear that they think I got domesticated or some shi—er, crap. It's like Betty Crocker threw up all over the place."

Just to be sure, I press. "And he's never slept with anybody?"

He sighs, wiping a palm down the side of his face. I get it, I'm being annoying with the twenty questions. I just can't wrap my head around him not sleeping with anybody. I know he has the opportunities to, even witnessed the numbers slipped into his hand or the looks he'd get when we were out shopping. "No. You were the only one, Red. Swear on what little remains of my masculinity."

"Baking doesn't make you less masculine," I point out.

"No but smelling like sugar does."

I don't say anything right away. "I never wanted to hurt him, Jay. I never wanted to hurt anyone."

"I know you didn't."

My eyes go back to the building, but the blinds never move again. I take a deep breath and look in the rearview at Ainsley. Her chest still rises and falls in a slow rhythm, peaceful in her slumber. "I should really go home. Tell him..." Tell him what? That I'm sorry? "I don't know. Maybe don't say anything at all."

Amusement lightens his face. "Trust me, the minute I step inside he'll be hounding me for answers. Even pissed off, he worries about you. Even asks about that one." He nods his chin toward the back.

My chest fills. "She asks about him too."

That isn't a lie either.

The first time she signed "*When is Easton coming home?*" I felt a deep ping in my heart that radiated pain down my whole body. Then she'd ask again. I could never give her a sure answer. So, I'd lie and tell her soon.

I just hope that won't stay a lie for long.

"Bye, Jay."

He pats the car and smiles. "Bye, Red. If you need any more piercings... Well, best go to the brute in there. A-hole wasn't too happy with me for touching his girl."

His girl. The thought covers my skin in goosebumps as I put the car into reverse. He backs away and gives me a wink and a wave, back to his old self. As I back out of the parking spot and pull away from the curb, the front door opens, and I see a familiar face in the rearview mirror.

He doesn't wave.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I KNOW SOMETHING IS WRONG WHEN I WALK INTO THE SCHOOL AND Principal Harris and Evie are talking together amongst themselves. As soon as I spot Ainsley sitting in Harris's office, my lips twitch with oncoming anger like the day I left. Once Evie looks up and sees me, she offers a small smile.

"What's going on?" I demand, not even trying to be nice. I like Evie, she's a good person and a great teacher. Without her, I wouldn't have thought to take sign language or quit here and find something that makes me happier.

It's Principal Harris who speaks. "We've had some complications with some girls in class harassing Ainsley. Ms. Burke brought it to my attention and we're handling it."

I point to the room. "Care to explain why my kid is the one isolated then? Where are the girls responsible? What have they been saying?"

Evie reaches out and squeezes my hand in comfort, her typical default. "I promise that they're being taken care of. Ainsley has been okay, we just wanted to speak with her."

My teeth grind. "Aren't girls supposed to wait to start being catty? Why the hell are they starting early?"

"Ms. Montgomery—"

I hold my finger out at Harris. "No. With all due respect, I don't want to hear what you have to say. I want to know what they've been telling her. She hasn't been herself lately and I haven't been able to get anything out of her."

To nobody's surprise, Principal Harris arches her brows and crosses her arms over her chest. "That seems like a problem. Are there concerns at home we should know about? If she won't talk to you, how is she going to communicate with anybody else?"

My lips part at her inquiry.

Evie turns to her boss. "I mean no disrespect, Angie, but that's inappropriate."

"No," I tell Evie, not bothering to look away from the devil's spawn standing in front of me. "You want to know what's been going on at home, *Angie*? That beautiful, smart, kind-hearted little girl in there has been struggling. She has had more awful things happen to her in her lifetime than most people I know. She's grieving her father, her voice, and her chance at normalcy. I bet that's what the girls pick on her about, right? It's because she's different than them. They think because she doesn't talk that she's somehow beneath them. That kind of attitude will only get worse if you don't stop it now.

"And before you say anything about how I must be an awful parent for not forcing her to talk, know this. Ainsley is just like her father. If she doesn't want to talk, she won't. If she doesn't want to tell me what happened, she won't. Instead, she'll hold in everything that's happened until she breaks. She'll latch onto me and never let go until there are no more tears left to cry, and during that period you bet your ass that I wish I could hear her voice when I tell her that everything will be okay. That life won't be this hard all the time. The worst part of this entire situation is that I can't make a promise like that when all she's known is grief.

"So, answer me this. Who the fuck do you think you are for judging me? Or for trying to dictate that precious girl's life? You're supposed to be a role model here, somebody who gives a shit. Be honest with yourself, Angie. You hate your job and you hate being around difficult situations. If I'm completely wrong, then prove it. Do something about the kids responsible for bullying my little girl before they get worse. Because, I assure you, they will."

I turn on my heel and walk away from the gaping expression of the woman I'm proud I didn't smack. No matter how tempting that is, it won't do anybody any good. So, I walk into Harris's office and kneel in front of Ainsley.

Her eyes are wide as she stares at me, then fill with tears as she launches herself into my arms. I breathe in the lavender of her shampoo and wrap my arms around her in a tight hug. “You heard all of that, huh?”

I should apologize for swearing, for making a scene. If I were a good parent, I’d tell her not to swear or repeat those words. But I don’t. I just hold her, let her squeeze me, until we both pull away.

“I’m sorry you’ve been having a hard time in school, Nugget.” I brush hair behind her ear. She reaches out and places a palm against my cheek, her lips parting ever so slightly and making my heart burst in my chest.

But then she closes her mouth.

I smile. “No matter what they say to you, be true to yourself. That’s all your father could ever want, okay?”

She signs, *Okay*.

I kiss her cheek. “I think we should get ice cream. How does that sound? Chocolate chip cookie dough for me and brownie bits for you.”

Her eyes brighten. I offer her my hand as we walk out of the small side office and stop in front of a red-faced Principal Harris and a wavering-lipped Evie. I smile at them both, though it’s harder to hold when I lock eyes with the older woman. “If you ever speak to my daughter alone without calling me first, there will be hell to pay. Do you understand me?”

Harris’s jaw ticks, but she nods.

“Great. Have a wonderful day.”

I feel her scathing glare on the back of my head and don’t bother looking. People like her aren’t worth my time to be pissed over, and there’s no way the gossipers that encompass the office secretaries won’t have our conversation all over school by tomorrow morning. Angie Harris hates her reputation being tainted.

Too bad for her, I don’t care.

WALKING out of my advisor’s office with a big smile on my face, I head across the quad to a familiar brick three-story building that houses the office I’ve acquainted myself with well. The smile doesn’t fade even when a couple jocks bump into me without saying sorry or a girl gives me a dirty look when I realized too late that she’s behind me before letting go of the hallway door.

All I can focus on is the straight A's in each one of my classes leading up to finals this week. Even though I had to miss some over the semester to tend to Ainsley, or my own selfish needs, or the placement fiasco, I worked my ass off for what I've received and know as long as I can study that I'll walk away with a 4.0 by the time finals are finished.

When I near the staff offices and walk down the corridor where Carter's room is at the end on its own, I hear two familiar voices and stop outside the door.

"...fault. Don't you think it's a little unfair to blame her for this?"

My brows pinch over Carter's question. The tone of his voice is firm, disbelieving. But it's my brother's voice that breaks through that has me pressing my back against the wall and debating on leaving before they can catch me eavesdropping.

"We're not blaming her, man."

"It seems like—"

"You don't have a right to judge," Ren says harshly. "We love you and love her, but it's hard for me. For *us*. Neither of us expects you to understand because you and Elizabeth never wanted kids."

I hold my breath when Carter responds in a cool tone I haven't heard him use before. "How the hell would you know what we did or didn't want? I get that you're upset, Ren, but *you* have no right coming into *my* office and going off on *me* about shit you don't understand."

"Elizabeth said..." Ren pauses, suddenly sounding unsure. "I'm sorry, Carter. Liz told me that you guys didn't agree about having a family which is why you two separated."

There's a long, tense moment where nobody says anything. I wish I could make my presence known and see what Carter's expression must be, but I remain still where I am.

"Did she now?"

"Carter..."

"Whatever. Liz is gone and her reasonings were clearly not ones she wanted to share. For the record, I did want kids. It was her who didn't. Whatever preconceived notions you have in your head right now, get rid of them. They don't even justify why you're being a bitch to Piper."

The sound of my name rings warning alarms in my ears. Biting down on my bottom lip, I shift slightly without making any noise and wait for Ren or my brother to reply.

It's Jesse who says, "She's not intentionally—"

"Oh, come on. Jesse, you both treat your sister like crap. You never talk to her and barely ask about her. She thinks you don't love her so she stopped reaching out."

"That's..." My brother is at a loss for words for the first time. "I just had dinner with her a few weeks back. We're fine. She knows I love her, Carter. And you can't call my wife a bitch."

I'm grateful for Carter now more than ever when he defends me again. It's more than I can ask from my own blood. *Half* blood. I think Jesse cares about that distinction. "I simply stated that she's being bitchy toward your sister. Piper knows something is up between you guys and she thinks she's the center of it. She didn't ask for the situation she's in. You can't fault her for anything. Be logical human beings."

"This whole thing is getting out of hand," Jesse states, a chair scarping back. "We were in the area and wanted to stop by to say hi. So, hi. We should get going though."

"That's it?"

"What else is there, Carter?"

"You're not going to see your sister?"

"She's busy."

"How do you know?" Carter throws back.

It's Ren who replies, "I know you must think I'm an awful person for avoiding her and Ainsley, but I'm not. I'm just a woman who's desperate to have what she does. Watching her with Ainsley hurts. You have no idea what seeing those two does to me."

"Wow." One word. One short little word from Professor Ford and I know Ren is about to learn a lot that she clearly doesn't know already. My anger builds with all the things I want to tell her, to yell at her, but I press my lips tight together and wait for Carter to do that for me. "I never took you for the selfish type, Ren. If you gave your sister-in-law a chance, you'd see how hard she's had it. Imagine being her age and being told that not only is your best friend dead, but you're now legally responsible for his daughter. Put yourself in her shoes when she found out that same daughter no longer verbally speaks—how hard that must have been for Piper to go through doctors and therapists to try getting her to say even one word, to cry over the loss of Danny, *anything*. Do you know she would have been

done with school by now if she didn't have Ainsley? Her life got thrown upside down because of Danny's death. And through it all, she survived.

"I've been able to witness an amazing woman in Piper that you two clearly don't see because you're too busy being stuck in your own problems. I don't know how you can deal with yourselves being jealous and petty toward somebody who's family. If she were my sister, I would make sure to at least check in on her to see how she's coping. Have you even bothered to do that much?"

"I went to the fucking funeral," my brother growls. "That's more than you can say, asshole."

"You're right." Carter's voice is even. "I know how much that upset Piper and how rude it was to not even send flowers to Mable. She told me off because she had every right to. And you know what? I'm glad she did. Maybe she should do the same to you, but I know she won't. She's hurt that her own big brother won't give her the time of day, so she distances herself in order to give you the space you've made it clear you want. No wonder she thinks you don't love her."

"Listen here—"

"Jess," Ren says quietly. "He's not wrong. We've been caught up in trying to have kids that we neglected a lot of people, but Piper the most. She is your sister."

A heavy sigh sounds in the room. "It's not that I don't love her, okay? But our pasts are different. Our mothers are different. Piper and I just... We're nothing alike. We have nothing to talk about. Danny was our safe topic."

"So, what?" Carter doubts. "You can still talk about him. Or, you know, make basic conversation. Ask how she's doing. See how school is. You always hold back, Jesse. That isn't fair to her. She's trying."

Nothing. My brother stays silent. Shaking my head, I turn on my heel in defeat before he decides to speak up again. "Like I said, it's not that I don't love her. She's my sister. We'll just never be close."

Hurt squeezes my chest as I absorb that. He says he loves me, but I don't believe him. Maybe he's right, we're too different. Our age. Our backgrounds. We may not have a lot in common, but I know I could hold a conversation with him if he really wanted to try.

Carter mirrors that thought. "It's a shame you're willing to walk away from her, man. She's a good person, a hard worker, and a great mother to

Danny's little girl. Your personal problems shouldn't get in the way of finally getting to know her after all these years."

All Jesse says is, "Yeah, well..."

I don't expect him to walk out of the room until it's too late. My glazed eyes meet his, his widening in shock as I grip my bag and stare at his pale face. "Shit. Piper—"

I hold up my hand. "You've said all you had to say, Jesse. But don't you dare lie to me and say that you love me. You just feel obligated to because we have Dad's blood running through our veins." Rubbing my lips together, I dig through my bag and see Ren come out of the room from the corner of my eye. I pull out two tickets, passing one to them each. "Come to the commencement ceremony or don't. At this point, I really don't care. I've had enough of half-assed love in my lifetime. I don't need yours."

Ren frowns as Jesse's eyes dull. I'm surprised to see hurt. It's almost as if he does care in some way. Or maybe he just hates knowing I called him on his bullshit. Either way, I meant what I said. I'm done.

Carter walks out and stands behind them, sympathy edged into his features. I ignore him and look at my brother and his wife, suddenly wishing I'd just gone home. Anywhere but here to share the good news. "Before you act like the other half of my blood that we don't share is bad, you should probably remember who gave you a roof over your head and food in your stomach. You can say that we're different and have nothing in common that connects us, but we both come from a good home with good values. My mom might not be yours, but she's never treated you like that. You were never grateful for that and it showed. And for what it's worth, I'm sorry that you lost your mother and sister. But I know what it's like to lose somebody. We could have leaned on each other. Connected that way. Grieved. Mourned. Instead, you chose to make me an outcast in your life."

I look to Ren. "And you. I'm sorry that you're struggling to have kids. You can hate me all you want, make excuses as to why you can't come to dinner that I got up way too early to make, and avoid me at all costs. In fact, throw away that ticket before you leave campus if that's what you want. But you don't know me, so you can't make any assumptions about how easy I must have it to be a twenty-something-year-old mother who had to drop everything. I wasn't prepared. I made sacrifices. I've cried myself to sleep and tortured my liver with alcohol when shit got tough. But Carter is right. I

survived. Danny counted on me to make sure his baby girl has a good life, and I can't have toxic people in it if this is how they act."

She blinks back tears as I step away. I have nothing more to say to them. If I even try opening my mouth again, I'll break. I can feel the beginning of tears well in my eyes, and I refuse to let them see me fall apart. Not here. Not now.

I turn on my heel and ignore Carter calling out my name. He defended me and I'm thankful for that. Nothing will make how my brother feels about me any better though.

When I lock myself in my car, I ignore the burning tears that want to fall. I focus on how beautiful the day is, how the snow is gone, the sun is out, and the temperature is warm enough to wear long sleeves outside without a jacket.

There are no more snow squalls.

No more ice.

It's a good day despite my brother.

When I park my car in my driveway at home, a crushing weight rests on my chest. I struggle to breathe when the sound of fresh air from the open car windows and loud noise of passing traffic aren't there to distract me any longer. It hurts. To breathe. To not think. To not cry.

I walk in the door and stop dead in my tracks when I see Easton at the bottom of the stairs. Through teary eyes that I can no longer hold off, I see his expression morph from surprise to concern in a heartbeat when he sees my face.

Not anger. Not accusation. Just worry.

But not having the energy to hash out the turmoil boiling me alive from everything that's happened, I gently brush past him and enter my room, locking the door behind me.

I hear his footsteps.

I hear the knock.

But I don't answer.

I text my parents.

Me: *Are you still picking up Ainsley and bringing her to your house for the night?*

Mom: *Yes. We'll have her back to you tomorrow afternoon. Your father bought her new movies to watch.*

Me: *Thank you*

Shutting off my phone, I toe out of my shoes and strip down until I'm just in my underwear before crawling under my blankets. I let the first tear fall into my pillow and soak into the worn cotton, falling asleep as the rest follow suit in endless streams.

When I get up the next morning, I open my door to find Easton's slumped form sleeping against the wall right outside. His long legs are spread out in front of him, his arms crossed loosely on his chest, and his lips parted as he snores softly without knowing I'm staring.

My throat closes from the swarm of emotion as I watch the man who's ignored me for weeks sleep there like my protector, and that's when I know for sure.

God, I've always known.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE COFFEE MUG IN MY HAND STEAMS AS I STARE AT THE BLACK LIQUID filling it to the rim. I'm so focused on it that I don't hear anybody walk into the room until a husky voice says my name.

Blinking up at my roommate, I see him watching me with pinched brows where I sit at the island. A raw bagel sits on the counter in front of me that he trails his focus to. "You haven't had your coffee yet." He walks over and grabs the bagel, splitting it in half and popping it into the toaster. Picking up the butter in silent question, I nod my head and watch him grab a knife from the drawer to spread it with.

"You slept outside my room," I answer quietly, setting my cup down without taking a sip. It's not too hot. It's the exact temperature I always drink it, but I can't think about caffeine when I keep remembering the way his body slept feet away from me in the cold hallway.

His back stays turned to me as he waits for the toaster to pop up with my breakfast. He grabs a plate from the cabinet and sets it in front of him. "You were upset."

Rubbing my lips together, I will him to look at me. He doesn't. He grabs the bagel as soon as it comes up and butters both sides, taking his time. When he brings the plate over to me, he tips his chin and grabs the carton of eggs from the fridge.

"Is that all you're eating?" he asks.

Are we really not going to talk about what happened? Ignoring the food and drink ready to be consumed, I lean back on my stool. "You called me crazy."

He stops what he's doing, staring at the eggs that are opened by the stove. "I shouldn't have said that."

"I'm not crazy."

"I know." Grabbing a frying pan, he places it over the burner and flicks the knob on. Once a couple eggs are broken in it and begin sizzling, he loosens a sigh. "Jay hates it when I bake. He barely even cooks for himself. Guy buys premade food and neglects his kitchen."

Hands twitching in my lap, I try thinking of how to start the kind of conversation worth having with him. "I don't want to talk about Jay right now, Easton. Can't we talk about what happened?"

He flips the eggs, not saying anything right away. I wait for him to be the one to respond, letting my food grow cold as he waits for his breakfast to finish cooking. It isn't until he's seated across from me when he meets my eyes and I notice how tired he looks. Something tells me it's from more than just poor sleep outside my room. "I didn't sleep with anybody, Piper."

My appetite becomes nonexistent, even for coffee. "That's what Jay said too."

"I'm not lying. He wasn't either."

I shrug. "It's really none of my business what you do with people, Easton. We didn't make any rules when we started sleeping together. It would have made things easier in case you wanted to—"

"I didn't want to," he cuts me off. He grips the fork in one hand and rubs the back of his hand with another. "Look, I'm not good at this. The talking thing. The feelings thing. Maybe you're right. Maybe we should have talked about things when we started having sex regularly, but I didn't think it mattered."

I cringe.

He grumbles. "I mean I didn't think you were interested in anybody else. I sure as hell haven't been. Yeah, I get why you think I was hooking up with chicks on the side, but I wasn't. It was only ever you, Piper. It's only you."

Lips parting, I fumble to formulate a response to that. *It's only you.* Present tense. As in, he still thinks that. "What exactly are you trying to tell me? Jenna said... and Jay..." I shake my head and rub my temples. "You never acted like you wanted more with me. You'd leave every single night and you were hot and cold about, well, everything. You barely talk to me,

you never want to have conversations about your past, it's like you never wanted me to know you as anything more than your roommate."

He grinds his teeth. "That isn't true."

I throw back, "It's not?"

"I..." Straightening, he sets his fork down and blows out a breath. "I got you flowers."

Confusion sweeps through me. "What? When did you...?" My words die down when I look at the empty vase by the sink where my Valentine flowers were. I swallow. "You said they weren't from you. That you had no idea what I was talking about when you sent them."

"I lied."

Scoffing, I process those two words. "I don't even know what to say right now. Why would you lie about that?"

He stares at his eggs. "Piper, I already admitted I'm not good at this."

"Try," I grind out.

His shoulders tense as he looks up at me through thick lashes. "We started out having sex because we were using each other. You wanted an escape, so did I. But then it stopped being about distracting myself. I thought you were feeling the same way until you said the flowers were probably from Professor Lover Boy."

I throw my hands up. "Because you said they weren't from you. Which, by the way, I felt so stupid for assuming." I take a moment and absorb what he called Carter. "Did you really just refer to him as Professor Lover Boy?"

He ignores my question. "I didn't know you were even talking to anybody else. Like you said, we never agreed to be exclusive. I figured if you were interested in somebody else, who the hell was I to stop you?"

"You were rude to me about him," I accuse coolly, crossing my arms. "You made awful comments that weren't even accurate at the time. I get that you probably think I'm easy for being fine with casual sex and for getting involved with my professor, but it wasn't like that. *I'm* not like that."

His eyes darken instantly. "I never called you that. You're not easy."

"No, I'm just a taste of crazy. Right?"

His nostrils flare. "I was out of line and I'm sorry. If I didn't care so much, I wouldn't even think twice about you sleeping around. But I do. I fucking care a lot and it tortures me knowing you're going out and having fun with somebody who isn't me." He slaps a palm against his chest. "I

want to take you on dates. I want to make you laugh. I want to be there for you when you're upset. Me. Not him. Not anybody else."

All I can do is stare as he lowers his hand, now forming a closed fist, to his lap and shakes his head. His breathing evens out as he stares at his food. Both of our breakfasts are left untouched as we hash this out.

"I have a lot of problems," he tells me so quietly, so brokenly, that I can barely hear him speak. "They stem from being in the system my whole life. I'll always have them. I'm not good at talking because it became survival for me not to. Not talking meant not being beaten. It meant being left alone. I come from a place where expressing yourself isn't common. Telling you that I want to be with you, only you, is something I can't just say out loud. So, I had to let you walk away. I said horrible shit to you that I can't take back. All I can ask is that you give me a chance."

It's hard to swallow as we lock eyes. His are dark and pleading and defeated, like he's already determined what my answer is. "Get to know me before you decide I'm too damaged. I know I'm not as polished as him, but I can support you in any way you need. Be there for you and Ainsley." In a grumbled tone, he admits, "Dudette has grown on me. Used to being around kids, but none quite like her."

Running my palms down the leggings I slid on this morning, I take a deep breath. "Carter isn't as polished as you think."

His eye twitches.

"And I'm not with him anymore." That gets his attention. I wet my lips and lean my arms on the edge of the counter. "I'm not saying you had a right to butt into my business with him, but you weren't wrong. I think I wanted to feel close to my past like maybe it would be enough to keep Danny close. I was afraid of losing that."

My throat closes up as I battle off tears. I knew what I was starting with Easton the second time I invited him into my bed. I used his body to forget the pain until the line we drew was buried under muddied water. But I don't want to forget. I want to remember—Danny, our past, all the memories even if they're bad. In the depths of my mind, Carter would get me that. But it would take something else from me.

Something Easton already has.

"You're kind of an asshole," I tell him. His lips purse. "But I want to know why that is. I want to get to know you. Learn about your past. Your homes. How you met Jay. What got you interested in going into business

together. I was never going to be happy like I want to be with Carter. I just thought I could. He's not you though, and I'm sorry if I hurt you by not realizing that sooner."

For a moment, he just stares. He doesn't even blink, just sits with his eggs no longer steaming and his face no longer red from anger. Then, he moves.

He's in front of me, cupping my face in his palms and looking at me in disbelief. "Yeah?"

I smile. "Yeah."

"Thank fuck." His lips come crashing down on mine, the sensation taking over my body as he sweeps his tongue in my mouth the first chance he gets. I sigh into the kiss as he pulls me up from the stool and grabs my thighs to wind my legs around his waist. He sets me down on the edge of the counter, barely missing the food behind me.

Our lips never pull away. They slide over each other seamlessly, gently, but with a raw hunger that feeds the feeling I've been searching for—the one that fills my chest and limbs and mind. One of my hands wraps around the back of his head, the other palming the rapid beat of his heart. I breathe him in because I can, no longer feeling like I'm drowning.

He grabs me again and sets me on my feet, his hands trailing down my sides until he flips me around and bends me over the counter so my stomach rests against the edge. "I need to be inside you." His palms trace my body, kneading my skin as he rolls his hard cock against my ass. I close my eyes when I feel his lips graze my neck, trailing upward to my ear. "I need you to be honest with me."

I swallow, nodding as his breath radiates off my cheek.

"Did you sleep with him?"

Closing my eyes, I count to three. "Yes."

His lips press against my cheek. "Okay."

To my surprise, he spins me around again until we're face to face. "Okay?"

"We weren't together, Piper," he points out, his thumb touching every inch of my face that it can. "I'm not going to fault you for being with him. But just know that I'm not going to fuck you against this counter because you mean more than that. You may have been with him, but I'm about to show you he's the last guy you'll ever need who isn't me. Understood?"

My mouth is dry as I nod.

He kisses me in a sultry way, letting his lips and tongue and teeth linger until I'm lost in him. Barely pulling back, he whispers, "I'm going to love you so much, baby girl."

The clothes we wear are shed one article at a time as he carries me upstairs. Instead of taking us to my room, he veers to the right and leads us into his. My back hits his bed, nothing but my panties left on my otherwise naked body. He kisses my breasts with fervor, drawing one pebbled nipple in at a time and making circular motions between my legs with his fingers just above my clothed clit until I'm writhing in his touch.

Pulling him back up to kiss me, he settles above my body and dominates my mouth. I arch my pelvis to meet his hard cock, now peeking out from the waistband of his boxers. Rubbing against him, I mewl into his mouth from the friction. He pulls back, his hot breath on my lips, and smirks at me. "What do you want, Piper?"

I don't even hesitate. "You."

Taking one of his hands, I set his palm against my chest and guide it down my body. I don't let go as I cup both our hands over my heated core, wanting him to touch me there. He kisses me slowly, deeply, as his hand moves over me in torturously slow movements until I'm moaning into his mouth. He moves aside the material that separates his finger from my center, playing with the arousal that's waiting for him beneath.

I arch into him as he enters me with a finger, keeping my hand on top of his to help him set the pace. He doesn't need any guidance. He never has. Easton Wyatt knows what he's doing.

"East," I whisper, drawing back and forcing my eyes to stay on his even as he adds a second finger and works me.

He brushes his lips against mine once, again, until he hovers them just out of reach. "I need to say something, and I want you to hear me out, okay?"

I just nod.

"I love you. I love Ainsley. I love the nights we watch TV and eat junk food together, even if it's awful musicals or ridiculous reality shows—"

Teary eyed, I laugh. "You love those reality shows."

He smirks. "I love making dinner with you, *for* you, and seeing your face light up when you get gift cards for office supplies." He fits a third finger inside of me and curves them to hit the perfect spot until I see double. "I fucking love everything about us, even the bad shit. The bad shit

keeps us real. It keeps us fighting and making up because we know this is worth it. You are more than just sex, Piper. You. Are. It.”

I cup his face and lock eyes with him as he thrusts into me again and again, my vision blurry from the tears welling in my eyes. “You’ll never know how much I love that you and Ainsley get along and how you gave her a nickname and cook for us when I can’t. I don’t want to fight, Easton. I just want you.”

His eyes darken as he kisses me, the words activating something primal in him as he withdraws his fingers and slides my panties down my legs until they’re somewhere on his floor. I protest the loss of his touch before he stands up and drops his boxers, his erection hard and ready as he climbs back over me and positions himself between my open thighs. Suddenly, his fingers aren’t what I’m missing at all.

“I love you,” I whisper, kissing him gently. I feel him probe my entrance, his hands finding mine and holding them at our sides as he slowly enters me. Inch by delicious inch I feel him stretch me and make himself at home. We kiss as he moves back and pushes in, not rushing our lips or tongue or hips.

He does exactly what he says.

He loves me.

He loves my body and touches every piece of skin he can get his hands and mouth on until the only thing I can think about is him—the way he thrusts unhurried, how he interlocks our hands. His hold is soothing, his kisses claiming, and his love consuming.

My chest fills with a burst of light as he locks our lips and thrusts so deep that I spasm around him, never letting go. I grab ahold of his hands and wrap my legs around his waist and lose myself in this man completely.

But I know, when the moment is over, I’ll find myself just as quickly. In his arms. In his bed. Surrounded by everything he’s willing to tell me. And when he spills himself inside of me, he buries his face in the crook of my neck and whispers three words.

“I love you.” His nose trails across my cheek until our lips lock, and my arms wrap around his neck. “How long do we have until Ainsley is back?”

I grin against his lips. “Hours.”

He hums. “I’ll make it work.”

Laughing when he pulls himself up, he grabs ahold of my sides and flips me over, positioning me on my hands and knees. In one quick thrust,

he's inside me again. I drop my head back and moan, arching my spine and meeting his hips every time he drives into me.

He reaches around me and plays with my clit, already sated from my orgasm before. I bite my arm when his free hand comes up and pinches one of my nipples between his fingers. He only plays with it for a moment before the same fingers reach my mouth. "Suck."

Not sure what he's going to do, I wrap my lips around the two digits he offers me and suck them into my mouth. His cock twitches inside of me but never falters from the rhythm. He groans as he draws his fingers out and moves them back to my clit. His lips trail down my back, nipping and licking as his thrusts became harder, faster.

The sound of our skin smacking against each other turns me on more, knowing our mixed cum from the first time is coating us both. He pinches my clit, circling it with his thumb before using his free hand to hold my hips as he bends over me and enters me faster.

"This time will be quick," he says into my shoulder blades, kissing me there. "But then I'll go slow, mark you. You're mine, Piper. You'll feel me and only me for the rest of the day."

My eyes roll in the back of my head as he puts all his weight on the back of me and pinches my clit until we both come again. His teeth bite down onto my shoulder, causing me to jerk with him still inside of me. I can feel his warmth trickling down my thighs and know I need to clean up, but don't get a chance before he's moving my head and kissing me again.

After another hour and a half of sex, I'm sore and sated and sweaty in his sheets. His body wraps around me as he kisses the back of my neck from the spooned position that we're laying in. I close my eyes and listen to his breathing, letting it calm my own down until our heartbeats sync.

He's right. I feel him everywhere.

I smile.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I SIT ON THE EDGE OF A BENCH BY A LARGE FOUNTAIN AND WATCH MABLE kneel over her section of the community garden, smiling at how peaceful she is. When she saw me, I knew what kind of day it would be. She looked through me like I was a stranger. She didn't have to call me somebody else's name for me to know the polite distance in her eyes meant she wasn't lucid.

It's getting worse, which is why Ainsley's seen less of her. I'll bring her for half an hour before taking her home when a glaze finds Mable's eyes. But today I needed to see her, even when the nurse on the phone told me she wasn't feeling well.

Nurse Douglas has been one of the main nurses tending to Mable besides Glenda. She sits down next to me and smiles. "Is everything okay, Piper?"

For once, I nod and mean it. "Yeah, everything is great. Except Mable not remembering me. She's getting worse, isn't she? It seems like she's less lucid these days."

Her lips don't hesitate to waver downward, the frown evident on her face. "I won't lie to you, we're concerned. Some patients slip at slower rates than others and Mable hasn't been one of those cases."

Rubbing my lips together, I bob my head up and down and watch the woman in question tend to the plant in front of her. "How can somebody remember how to plant and care for a flower but not remember her own family? It just doesn't make any sense."

Douglas's hand comes down on mine, patting it. "People subconsciously attach themselves to things from the past. It's their way of

holding on to pieces of their old selves. Hers is gardening. We have some who paint and play the piano. It's not uncommon. It can be difficult to accept though."

Mable leans back on her knees and appreciates her work with a bright smile on her face. It makes me happy that she's doing what she loves. I can't be upset at her for not remembering Danny or Ainsley. It's not her fault.

"I'm graduating this weekend," I announce, sighing. "I really wanted everybody to be there. My parents. My brother. Mable." I look from the older woman to the younger nurse. "I know she can't come though. It would have just been nice to see her face in the crowd and know she's watching me."

Sympathy has Douglas squeezing my hand in hers.

"She always used to tell me that I would go places because of my strength but I never believed her," I admit quietly. "I remember my senior year of high school when she asked if I was going to college. I told her where I was planning to attend but hadn't decided what I'd do with the History major I chose." I find myself laughing lightly, shaking my head. "Mable told me that I'd make a wonderful professor someday. She said I had what it takes to be in front of a classroom with a no-nonsense attitude while I taught what I was passionate about. I didn't believe her, even laughed it off. Me a professor? Nah. Then she told me in true Mable form that maybe her premonition got mixed up and I'd just end up with a professor in the future."

I'd forgotten about that until this moment. Mable always got "feelings" about things. Most of those never came to fruition. Secretly, I think anybody who knew about them were glad. Danny would bring up whatever weird thing she said she predicted and blew it off, but the one time she was right was when she'd told Danny and me to be careful driving back to our homes after we visited her. She said she'd gotten a bad feeling about the upcoming storm. That'd been a week before Danny's accident. Before his death.

Making a face, I force the thought away and ask, "Do you believe in those sorts of things? That people can predict what happens? She hasn't been right most of the time, even if I may go down the professor track."

"I don't know if I believe in some supernatural ability to know when things happen, but there are some people who are hyperaware of situations.

Especially if there's logic tied to them."

I can't help but laugh. "Sorry. I know this isn't funny, but Mable isn't exactly the hyperaware kind. Maybe she used to be, but that's not her anymore. Most of the time she doesn't even know who I am. It's like she's a totally different woman."

"I know it feels that way, but she's still Mable. She's still the woman you know and love, just a little lost at times."

I press my lips together.

"I'm sorry she can't be at your graduation," she adds sincerely. "If there were a way to make it work, I would. There's just too much of a risk with how she's been behaving lately. The doctor would like to do an examination with her soon."

My eyes widen. "An examination?"

"It's just to test her cognitive skills."

Blowing out a breath, my shoulders loosen as I watch Mable move on to a different flower. "How has she been with everyday life? I know some patients with dementia struggle to do basic things. Is she...?"

When Douglas hesitates, I know I need to be worried. "Mable has been having problems doing certain tasks. In the past few weeks, we've had to help her go to the bathroom and bathe because she can't remember how to do it. Like I said, the state of her mind is slipping at a faster rate than normal. She can still eat on her own and we're monitoring her very closely to make sure she's taken care of. I planned on telling you before you left. I just wanted you to get some time in with her before I broke the news."

My lips weigh down. "What does that mean for her in the long term? If she loses the ability to function..."

"We'll monitor her more closely," she assures quickly. "She's in good hands here, Piper. I promise we're taking care of her."

I know they are, but that doesn't lessen the anxiety building in the pit of my stomach. "I just don't know how I'll handle it if there comes a day where I have to see feeding tubes in her because she doesn't know how to eat by herself. I read that some people starve themselves to death because they don't know how to live."

"Hey." Her hand squeezes mine tightly, drawing me out of my mind. "We are not going to let that happen. We have patients here who are far worse off than Mable, and they're still doing fine. And even if it comes to a feeding tube, at least she'll still be alive."

I close my eyes knowing she's right. "I'm sorry for freaking out. I've just been having a hard time lately and things are finally working out for me. But then there's Mable..."

"You shouldn't compare your situations. Mable may be struggling but she's happy, Piper. We both know she wants that for you too, so don't worry about her. That's our job. Enjoy your life and all the little things. Leave the rest for us, we can handle it. Can you do that for me?"

I give her a small smile. "I can try."

She pats my hand and stands. "That's all I can ask then. You're doing well, though? I know the last few times you were here you seemed a little upset, but there's something in your eyes that makes me think it's better."

My cheeks heat. "I'm doing better than I have in a long time."

A knowing smile graces her face. "It's a boy, isn't it? I know that look. I've had it on my face too."

The blush deepens. "Yeah, it's a boy."

"Good for you, sweetie. I've watched you dedicate yourself to Mable and her granddaughter and hoped you'd find somebody to share your time with. Is he good to you?"

My throat thickens as I look up at her, lips wavering as I think about him. "Even better. He's good to both of us."

Her eyes warm. "I'm happy for you."

"Thank you."

She gives me one last look before walking back into the building, leaving me with Mable as she focuses on her garden. Dirt coats her light purple pants and the beige gloves on her hands. She seems to be content in the dirt and mulch, surrounded by life. Just watching her eases an anxiety in my chest even though this woman isn't the same one who could bake the best cookies from memory alone. She never looked at recipes once or even measured the ingredients. She'd just pour everything into a bowl and the outcome would be the same every time.

"*Muscle memory, dear,*" she told me once. I always told her I wish I had that ability, but no matter how much she tried teaching me her favorite recipes I'd always mess them up. Danny never did though. He was a natural, just like his grandmother.

Thinking about him no longer hurts. Not the good memories anyway. Even on the off moments I think about our last night, I refuse to let it pierce

my heart. We made a choice that can't be taken back. There were consequences that can't be changed. He couldn't move on.

But I can.

Standing up, I hesitantly walk over to Mable and put my hands in the big pocket of the sweatshirt I stole from Easton this morning. "Hi, Mable. I know you don't remember me, but I just wanted to say it was good seeing you. And..." I take a deep breath and watch her pat down the dirt around her freshly planted flower. "I've been thinking a lot about Danny, who you probably don't remember either, but he was a great guy. Somebody we both cared for deeply. Anyway, I've been thinking a lot about the past and everything that's happened between us, and I think I finally found peace. Happiness, even. I know you've told me that I'd find it with somebody someday, but I never believed you because I was too caught up in Danny, but you were right. I just wanted you to know."

I lick my lips and watch her hands pause from her project before looking up at me slowly, the brimmed hat she wears shielding her eyes from the sun we're graced with today. "I know, dear. You two were always meant to love other people."

I gape at her.

Did she...? "Mable?"

She blinks.

I step closer. "I found the guy I could spend forever with. I really have. I think Danny would be happy with my choice."

She smiles, but it falters. "Good, good."

That's it. The moment, the microscopic moment of clarity, is gone. But I take it as a victory because at least she remembered even if only for a second. It's all I can ask knowing her condition is progressing.

"I love you," I tell her softly, backing up.

She tilts her head. "You're a very sweet girl to say that to an old woman like me." I manage to smile before saying goodbye, nodding at the nurse who's watching us letting her know I'm heading out. When I pass Douglas in the hall heading to the front doors, she brushes my arm as I pass her and gives me a warm smile.

"She'll be okay, Piper," she calls after me lightly. And I know she will. I trust everybody that works here who's encouraged me throughout every visit. They let me have a birthday party for Ainsley and helped me calm down Mable when she had an episode and forgot us.

The people who work here are strong. They have to be to witness what happens to the patients. I don't envy them, but I do respect them and what they do for families like mine.

When I make it outside, I see Easton sitting in the driver's seat and glancing up at me from the sketchpad resting on the steering wheel. He closes it and sets it aside when I climb in and buckle. "You could have come in, you know."

He shakes his head, leaning forward to give me a quick peck on the lips. "Another time, Piper. You needed to talk to her alone."

He's right. Again.

"Did it go okay?"

"She remembered me for a second."

"That's good."

I lean back in the seat and study his profile as he backs out of the parking space and pulls out of the lot. "Yeah. It is."

He glances at me for a moment before focusing back on the road. "Want to grab something to eat before we pick up Ainsley? I think I saw a diner on the way here."

"You like diners?"

He smirks at me. "I like food."

"A diner sounds nice." I look out the window for a second, watching some colorful houses pass us by. "What made you start baking? Did you always like doing it? You're a good cook too. You must practice."

One of his shoulders lifts. "I cooked a lot for myself growing up. Sometimes I'd cook for my foster siblings if I was in a house with them. I couldn't just feed them Ramen all the time, so I picked up a thing or two and got better at it."

"And the baking?" I pry.

He pulls into a diner just down the road from the nursing home. It's a cute little establishment tucked back on its own. When I look at him, I see his cheeks stained pink. "I'd watch a lot of baking shows on TV. Liked what I saw and would mess around in the kitchen once I saved up and got my own place. I never wanted to do it when I lived in a home because a lot of times the foster parents didn't like you using their stuff or making a mess. Like I said, I was pretty lucky with who I was placed with. Didn't mean I wanted to test them." He doesn't give me a chance to answer before he

unbuckles and tips his chin toward the diner. "Come on, we can talk more inside. I have a feeling you have more questions."

I grin. "You'd be right."

He chuckles and leads us in, his hand wrapped in mine as we're told to find a seat wherever we want. East picks a table in the back corner, away from other people. We sit across from each other and thank the waitress that comes and gives us menus and asks for our drink orders.

When we're alone, I ignore the laminated menu in front of me. "Foster care sounds like it taught you a lot. Cooking, baking. Did you draw too? You've mentioned having sketchbooks filled with drawings from over the years."

He glances up from the menu. "Yeah. My foster dad got me a sketchbook when he saw me using scrap paper from old school notebooks. He wasn't a bad guy. Maybe a little distant but left us alone for the most part."

"How many homes were you in?"

The waitress comes back with our drinks, two waters, before asking if we need more time to decide. We both nod. I watch her walk away as Easton looks back to the menu. "Four. Would have been three but the elderly woman I stayed with for a while passed away."

I frown. "That's so sad."

He shrugs.

I give him a break to look over what they serve, deciding on a chicken sandwich and fries. We're quiet until the waitress comes back and takes our order, grabbing the menus and leaving us be.

Sipping my water, I watch him stare at me before I decide to say anything again. "I struggled figuring out what I wanted to do for a while. Did you always know you wanted to be an artist?"

He nods. "Tattoos tell stories and I've always wanted to use my art to do that." His eyes go to his sleeve. "Each tattoo I have has a story behind it. I never want to make a permanent mark that doesn't mean something to me. After I got out of the system, I met Jay. I'd sold some drawings here and there to save up to get a cheap apartment a few hours away, got commissioned for doing a few tattoo designs. Jay saw some of the stuff I drew and asked if I was interested doing a little interning at a shop he worked at. I was poor and not stupid enough to pass it up. He gave me a

chance, gave me a nicer place to stay when I told him where I lived, and the rest is history.”

“You guys are close, huh?”

“He’s practically my brother.”

That makes me smile. “That’s kind of how I am with Jenna. She’s been there for me through thick and thin, even when I pushed her away. She wouldn’t let me.”

“You two met in college, right?”

I tell him all about the orientation we met in, how she knew from that day we were destined to be friends. Me? I was shy and awkward and wondering why somebody as confident as her even bothered. I stayed in the corner and never talked to anybody. Then we shared some Gen Eds together and we got closer. She insisted it was fate and I bought into it, knowing I could use a friend on campus since Danny went to a different college. I told her all about him, about my feelings, about his girlfriend at the time. She bought me ice cream when their relationship developed and alcohol when they got engaged. And after his death? She slept at my apartment every single night, holding me together when I wanted to fall apart. I told her everything except the reason he stormed out.

It hurt too much to admit, to tell her I was responsible. I know she would have told me I was being stupid, scolded me, and I couldn’t hear that. I know now that I was wrong for holding onto that guilt for so long.

We’re halfway through lunch when I study his ink. My eyes trail over the beautiful flowers. “Did you draw all of the tattoos on you?”

“Jay did some,” he admits. “But I did most of them.” He points to the ones he did, trailing his fingers over one of the roses.

“Why the flowers?” He seems attached to the one he’s touching, maybe not even realizing that he’s doing it.

He sits back in his chair, blinking down at his arm before meeting my gaze. “Roses were my mother’s favorite flower.” My eyes widen at his reply. “I lied to you before. I did find my parents. My father left my mother shortly after they abandoned me. He was shot and killed in a hit and run not long ago. My mother found me about five years ago and reached out asking if I’d be interested in meeting. Jay drove me to the place we agreed on and stayed in the car while I spoke with her. She was dying of breast cancer. Said it was karma for what she’d done. I didn’t talk to her for more than an

hour, but I learned a lot. She loved roses. She enjoyed baking. She dreamt of being an artist but never made it happen. She seemed proud of me.”

Sadness fills me as he trails off to look at something behind me. “It sounds like you two have a lot in common.”

“Had. She died shortly after we met.”

“I’m sorry, Easton.”

“I don’t think it was karma,” he says, blinking and clearing the sullen look filling his eyes. He wets his lips. “But I didn’t tell her that. I let her think it was. I’ve thought a lot about how that might have made a difference somehow in how she felt, like she got closure. I was pissed off though.”

“You had a right to be.”

He rubs his arm. “I shouldn’t have treated her like that. She was my mother, after all. It’s why I drew the rose and had Jay help me with the details. It’s my way of saying sorry. Of remembering her.”

“That’s very sweet of you.”

Once again, he shrugs.

“What about the skull?” I ask, resting my elbow on the table and my chin in my palm.

His grin is sly. “The death of innocence.”

My brows arch. “Deep.”

“More like demented.”

I shake my head. “You’re far from it.”

He meets my eyes. “I don’t always feel like it. What I did to my mother still gets to me. I’m moody, in case you haven’t noticed. I shut down easily and react without thinking sometimes. I’m not an easy person to like.”

“Maybe not,” I agree. I reach out and touch his hand. “But you’re an easy person to love. Even if you weren’t, I’d still do it.”

His lips part.

“Like you said, we’ll fight and make up. It’s what couples do. Nothing is easy about being with the person you’re meant for. We’re only human. Demented or not.” Though no matter what he believes, I’ll never think of him as that.

He doesn’t have to answer me.

I’ve learned from Ainsley that love is more than a spoken word.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

ADJUSTING MY CURLED RED HAIR OVER MY SHOULDERS AND FIXING MY CAP, I smile at my reflection in the mirror and move off to the side while other graduates finish preparing themselves for commencement. I'm flattening out my white gown when I notice Carter standing by the back wall watching me.

I smile and wave, walking over to him in heels that Jenna made me wear with my new black dress Mom helped her pick out for me. He assesses me with nothing more than a friendly smile, bumping my arm with his. "Big day today. You look lovely."

"Thanks." I glance at the room of women behind me, all eagerly talking amongst themselves. "It seems like a long time coming."

"You've gone far," he comments. "I saw your family in the audience. Jesse saved me a seat next to him and Ren."

My eyes widen. "They're both here?"

He nods once, sliding his hands in his usual dress pants. "They're right next to your parents and Ainsley. Though Ainsley was on somebody else's lap." His lips twitch upward in a knowing way. "Dark hair, tattoos, younger guy. He and Ainsley are out there making faces at each other."

Easton. "I'm surprised she's not sitting on Jesse's lap. She's got a huge crush on my brother. He totally feeds into it. He doesn't think I know, but he brings her candy when he visits. It's not often, but it's their tradition."

Carter laughs. "I'll make sure to bring up their future nuptials to him when I take my seat. I just wanted to check in on you and say congratulations."

I smile. "I appreciate it."

“It’s him, right? The guy out there?”

“Yeah, that’s Easton.”

“He’s good with her.”

I rub my arm. “You’re really okay with how everything happened? I know you didn’t have to come, so I’m glad you did. And you defended me to my brother, which I really do appreciate. I know I didn’t say so when we saw each other after, but it meant a lot. And talking about Easton just seems...”

“A little weird?” he offers casually.

“Kind of.”

He shakes his head, seemingly not bothered at all about it. “I defended you because they had no right talking about you the way they were, and I’m supportive of this Easton guy because I can see he’s good to you and for you. There’s a light in your eyes that was lacking before, Piper. I’ll never be upset over that, even if I didn’t get the girl.”

“But you will.”

“One day,” he agrees.

“One day.”

He gestures toward the door. “I should head out. Your brother told me he’d give up my seat to the highest bidder if I didn’t come back at a reasonable time.”

“You must have gotten good seats if he thinks he can make money off them,” I muse. “You better go before Jesse does sell your seats. I’m picturing an auction. I wouldn’t put it past him. You should have seen what he did during my high school graduation.”

His brows arch. “What did he do?”

“He blew an airhorn and started howling when they called my name.” I laugh, brushing hair behind my ear. “It was embarrassing but it felt like the first time we were siblings. Then Danny joined in and I wanted to murder them.”

“Do you think he’ll cause a scene today?”

I doubt he will. I wasn’t even sure he and Ren would come, so I have no clue what to expect from them. Whatever it is, it’ll be interesting. Though, I wouldn’t mind if he were quiet. Just showing up means something to me.

When we say our goodbyes, we’re given a five-minute warning before lining up. I take a deep breath and smile to myself knowing I’m moments away from moving forward with my life.

Walking across stage once my name is called, I stop dead in my tracks when I hear my friends and family yell. But it's not my older brother's loud cheers or my father's even louder clapping. It's a high-pitched scream that comes from the same section. There, perched on Easton's shoulders, is Ainsley.

And. She. Cheers.

Tears instantly flood my face as I watch her scream and smile and clap, all while Easton holds onto her so she doesn't fall. Both my parents watch me with proud expressions as I snap myself out of the shock and finish my walk.

Instead of going back to my seat, I run over to where my family sits. Ainsley wraps her arms around my neck, latching onto my body as soon as I'm in reach. I squeeze her to me like I can absorb the sound she made.

She doesn't say another word.

And I'm okay with that.

She signs, *I love you*.

I kiss her cheek, her forehead, her hair, everywhere before whispering, "I love you too."

Her eyes go from me to Easton, where she signs something that I can't quite make out because of the angle I hold her.

But he does something I don't expect.

He signs back.

He. Signs. Back.

It's my father who wraps me in a hug when I finally make it back into the crowd of family and friends watching the graduating class. He kisses the side of my head and congratulates me, flicking my nose and calling me a brat. I beam at him over the name I haven't heard him call me in forever.

"Proud of you," he says against the top of my head, finally letting me go.

"Thanks, Dad."

Jesse walks over to me and ruffles my hair like he used to when I was younger. Like old times, I swat his hand away as he draws me in for a quick hug. It's a nice gesture, but awkward. We haven't spoken since the incident on campus. I didn't know what to say, and evidently neither did he. I'm used to it though, so I never let my mind ponder it.

Ren comes up to me and smiles. "I'm really happy for you, Piper. You've done so many amazing things and accomplished a lot despite the circumstances." Her smile falters for a moment before she adds, "And I'm truly sorry for how I've acted. You didn't deserve it."

I glance between her and my brother, knowing everybody else is waiting for a response from me too. Carter stands off to the side, hands in his pockets, interested in what I'll say. He's asked me once since the tense conversation if I've reached out to either of them, but I admitted I couldn't be the one to invest energy into building a relationship I wasn't sure they wanted. Thankfully, he understood.

"Thank you, Ren. For what it's worth, I know you and my brother will make great parents. You're the kind of people who are meant to have kids."

She pulls me into a hug, her arms gentle around me. Quietly, she whispers, "Even though you didn't plan for it, you are too. I wouldn't have been able to do what you did. Part of me has always been jealous of how you handled it."

I snort as she pulls away. "There's nothing to be jealous over. I'm a mess. If it weren't for my family and friends, I wouldn't have managed."

"Your family is amazing."

"They are."

We smile and step back from each other, Ainsley and Easton walking over before Carter can say anything. Ainsley wraps her arms around my legs and stares up at me as Easton hooks an arm around my back and tugs me into him. His lips caress my ear. "Your father informed me he owns an old paintball gun of your brother's and that it hurts more than a real bullet."

I laugh and look at Dad, who's grinning at me from beside Mom like he knows what I'm being told. They both watch us knowingly as I reach up and wrap my arms around his neck. "He already likes you. You're safe."

He kisses my cheek and pulls back, shooting me a wink before wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "Good. Can't say I want to know what it's like to be shot by a paintball gun."

Jesse pipes up, eyes sparkling. "Want to know what it'd be like to get shot by a real one?"

Ren rolls her eyes and leans into my brother, letting him tug her against his side before draping an arm over her shoulder. "Good thing you're both awful shots then, huh?"

"Hey!" the men say simultaneously.

There's a tug on my dress, causing me to glance down at Ainsley. She moves her hands, wanting me to kneel closer to her.

"What's up, Nugget?"

Her bottom lip gets drawn into her mouth. When it pops out, her lips open like she's going to say something but doesn't. She tries again, then furrows her brows in frustration.

I swipe hair out of her face. "It's okay. I don't expect you to say anything. You being here with me is all I need."

Her hand goes to my cheek for a moment before she signs, *I think Daddy is here.*

I blink. "What?"

She looks up to the sky.

I do the same, seeing the sun and the cloudless sky. They were outside any chance the weather was nice. I always envied how tan they got from being out for even an hour playing. When I meet her eyes again, I nod. I sign, *I think he's here too.*

She smiles at me.

I stand and take her hand and follow my family toward the parking lot. Easton keeps his steps in line with mine, his eyes going back to Carter where he walks by my father. They talk in low murmurs about who knows what, but I focus on how guarded East's eyes are.

"He's a good guy," I tell him, watching his nose flare slightly. "I know you're probably not the biggest fan of him, but he is."

He hefts out a sigh before nodding. "I know he is, Piper. Doesn't mean I can't glare at the guy knowing where his hands have been."

I glare in caution, knowing my family has yet to discover what he's referring to. I know Carter will keep his word about staying quiet. Neither of us benefits from them knowing anything happened.

He presses a kiss against my temple as my brother walks over, one of his hands shoved into his black jeans. He's dressed up compared to his normal grease-stained denim and Dickies shirt. "I was wondering if we could talk for a second?" His eyes go between Easton and me, his brows going up in wait. "It won't take long."

I nod and watch Easton take Ainsley's hand while I walk off to the side with Jesse by my side. For a moment, we're quiet. Not knowing what to say, I cross my arms on my chest and rock back on my heels. My eyes trail back to where Ainsley and Easton communicate, their hands moving fast.

Easton knows sign language. He *learned*. It thickens my throat and squeezes my chest and makes everything feel lighter. The man I love is speaking with the little girl I love in a way she doesn't feel pressured or ashamed.

It makes me love him that much more.

"I do love you," he says. I meet his eyes, which are full of sorrow and hesitancy. "I know I'm shitty at showing it, but I'm not lying. Things have been tough with Ren and I took sides even though I shouldn't have. I hate seeing her upset and I knew watching you and Ainsley was hard for her. That doesn't excuse the way I treated you, the way either of us did."

"Honestly, Jesse, it's okay."

He shakes his head adamantly. "It's not though. You always do that. You make light of situations and see the best in people even when we don't deserve it. It's one of the things I love about you, but it worries me too. I don't want to see you get hurt because you care."

I manage to shrug. "I won't lie and say I haven't been hurt by the way you've acted toward me over the years, but it isn't like I don't understand. If I were in Ren's shoes, I'd feel the same way."

He rubs his jaw. "It doesn't justify me brushing you off in the past. You said that I have a lot to thank your mother for, and you're right. Dad and your mom gave me a home when I needed one, and I did everything not to be there because it didn't feel like one. Not without my mom and sister. You remind me of Hanna. A lot like her. Sometimes I wonder what she'd be like if she hadn't ended it. If she'd be like you. Hard working, determined. We didn't have the best role model in our mother and Hanna was a lot like her. In some ways, I resented her for it.

"I couldn't control Hanna or help her. Even if I'd known what she was planning, I doubt it would have made a difference. That probably pisses me off the most, you know? It was easier to keep you at a distance because I didn't want to think about Hanna or how badly I screwed up being her brother. Carter is right though. You don't deserve the treatment you've been given, and I can see why you've wondered if I love you or not. But I do. You're my sister and I love you."

My heart swells slightly in my chest. "I know it may seem unbelievable right now, but you're not responsible for your sister's death. Trust me, I know what it's like to hold onto blame. It's draining though. She was sick and she wanted an out. But I know Hanna loved you. I remember all the

times you guys would visit Dad and she'd be protective of you even though she was younger. Maybe it's cliché to hear, but she'd want you to move on and stop blaming yourself for what she did."

He looks away for a moment, staring off at the departing crowd coming from the field where commencement was held. "I know, Piper. It just doesn't seem like it'll get easier. Missing her. Wondering about her."

I reach for his hand. "You'll always do that stuff. But it will get better. Maybe not the pain of knowing they're gone, but the feeling that weighs us down like we could have stopped it. Nobody can stop what's meant to be, even if we think it's cruel."

"Like Danny?"

I nod. "When you went to the funeral with me, it meant the world. I couldn't have possibly told you then how much I needed you, it was just like you knew. It isn't like I thought you hated me, Jesse. I just wasn't sure what we were going to be when you pulled away after that."

"It was another person dying too soon."

I got that better than anyone. The look in his eyes that day was morbidly empty. Like he was there but not. He never cried, just stayed pale as the service went on. Still, he was there for me, patting my hand, asking if I was okay.

That day, he was my brother.

A man who was struggling.

A man who was remembering.

We both suffered loss.

"Are we okay?" he asks quietly, looking like he sincerely doesn't know what I'll answer with.

I think we've experienced too much loss to willingly lose any form of a relationship, even a strained one. "Of course we are. You're my brother."

He nods and gestures for us to head back to our waiting family. "You know," he says as we walk side by side. "Carter is a good guy. If he were younger, I'd tell you to go for it. You two would have been good together."

Pressing my lips together, I clear my throat and glance at the man in question whose talking with my parents still. "Maybe in a different lifetime."

His chuckle is light. "Yeah, maybe."

Easton reaches out for me as soon as I near him, and when our fingers connect everything in me eases. My mind, my heart, my racing thoughts.

With him, I rise from the depths I've been drowning in for all these years and feel like I can breathe again. No longer afraid of what lingers in the murkiness, I step into the clear water and let all the pain wash away.

EPILOGUE

AINSLEY

MY LEGS SWING BACK and forth from the plastic blue chair in the office as I listen to Piper, my mother, speak in hushed murmurs with the younger secretary. Her face is full of determination, the kind that's fierce. Easton, my father for all intents and purposes, says that fierceness is why he loves her so much—why he married her.

I think about the man with pretty pictures inked all over his arm and smile to myself. Easton may not be my real father, but he's taken me in like mine would have wanted. Just like Piper. We've been together for as long as I can remember because I don't know my own mother. Sometimes, I can't even remember what my father looks like or sounds like even though I had three years with him before he died. Nothing ever surfaces when Piper tells me stories of their friendship or of me and him when I was little.

I wonder if that's how it's supposed to be, like maybe all I'm meant to remember is Piper's and Easton's love for me. I've never let myself feel sad from the lack of memories of my real parents, because Piper and Easton have never felt like anything but the real thing. I'm lucky to have them, to see their love, their happiness.

When you're a wallflower with no voice, people seem to think you can't hear too. I know that Joel Iverson's mom likes to drink a lot and that his father is gone because the teachers always gossip about how sad his home life is when they think nobody can hear them. Or how Maisy Hayes lives

with her grandparents because her mom and dad are always traveling for some big important jobs they have.

People have it worse than me. My parents are dead, but I have new ones who love me a lot. It's why my mother is here, trying to get a meeting with the new principal since the last one was fired. Principal Harris was never fit for the job, but nobody knows anything about the new person taking over. She wants to fix that.

The side door of the office opens, and a blonde woman and boy walk in. Her hand is on his shoulder, his head pointed toward the tile floor in avoidance. My head tilts as I take him in, seeing the nervousness radiate off him.

New kid.

There's no doubt in my mind that he's the woman's biological son. They have the same shade hair and similar facial features. She's protective as she speaks with the other graying secretary who mans the visitor sign-in sheet like a hawk, her hand rubbing the back of his shoulders in comfort.

My eyes catch something over his ear, perched on his skull surrounded by his hair. Narrowing my eyes, I study the object in uncertainty. I break my gaze when I see the boy shift, his weight moving from one foot to another as our mothers talk.

He catches my gaze, but I don't look away. I keep swinging my legs and listening to my mother speak to his in familiarity. Maybe they're not new because they know each other, and surprise floods my body when I hear my biological father's name mentioned.

The boy walks over to me without hesitation while our mothers reacquaint themselves. It's hard to listen to them and pay attention to the boy who stops just a few inches away. Interest fills his eyes as he greets me with a quiet hello. My lips part and I tell myself to force out the two little letters it would take to show him I'm not being mean, but no words escape my lips. In defeat, I close them and look down at my lap for a moment.

His shoes appear in my line of vision, my gaze lingering upward to see him standing closer as his hands raise. I gape as he signs to me, his hands moving skillfully.

He signs, *I'm Milo*.

I know in that same instant that he and I are going to be best friends. And based on the way our mothers look at us in awe, they can tell something shifted drastically.

Because now I won't be alone.
And neither will Milo.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B. Celeste's obsession with all things forbidden and taboo enabled her to pave a path into a new world of raw, real, emotional romance.

Her debut novel is *The Truth about Heartbreak*.