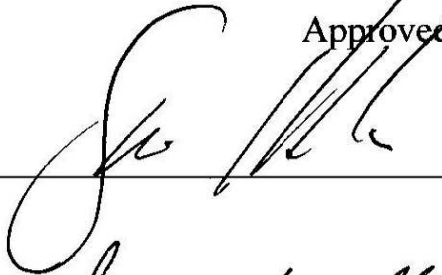


Three Hard Misses to Fifteen Kisses

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“Hearts will never be practical until they can be made unbreakable.”
~*The Wizard of Oz*

One
Monday

The basement was a dustier version of the wreck I'd ignored nine months ago. I stood rooted at the bottom of our basement stairs, transfixed in horror and clutching the cold, chipped, metal banister as I absorbed the monstrosity of what used to be my father's bedroom. *I couldn't sort through this crap with a hired search and rescue team, an unlimited supply of Aderoll, and with my sanity intact even if I made a deal with Al Pacino let alone by the end of the summer, I thought miserably.*

Frank could have labeled each box with his harsh, slashing handwriting, taped their flaps securely with clear packaging tape, and stashed them in his girlfriend's basement when he moved in with her nine years ago. He could have at least stacked them neatly and covered them with a garbage bag in the corner of Mama Margoe's basement instead of leaving them scattered randomly over the cement floor to collect dust—a couple on the rug next to the slanted planks he'd used for book shelves, five in a precarious pile near the bed, one on the desk—so when he died last fall, Margoe's claim that the boxes were, “just fine as they are, for heaven's sake Patricia,” could have been legitimate.

I hadn't rummaged through them when he left. While he'd been with Susan it had felt like an invasion of privacy, as if he might have returned for them or might have needed them or might have realized that he belonged back here with us. I didn't know what else he left behind. It didn't matter now except for the bothersome fact that Frank could still needle me with his absence even while dead. And, Margoe could use the floor space.

I turned my back on the basement, the boxes, Frank's memory, and chaos, marched up the steps to the kitchen, chopped the rusted screen door open with the edge of my palm, and stomped across the yard to Maxine, my stubborn Jeep Wrangler. I was determined to delve into the mess Frank had left behind sometime in the near future no matter what Mama Margoe's opinion was on the matter. I just wouldn't be delving into said mess today. Today would be devoted to dragging Garrett Webber— my indulgent, witty, wheel-grubbing best guy friend— to work, returning the stereo system we'd stolen last summer before our good-natured boss turned on us, and kicking whoever's ass had jammed a hastily folded harassment letter under Maxine's windshield wiper this morning. Everything written in the letter was a ridiculous, bold-faced lie, unless I could catch an STD by kissing, but that would entail swallowing ungodly amounts of saliva. Although Trevor Lyons— my ex-best guy friend and wanna-be boyfriend— had never seduced me into a sexual frenzy, no one could accuse him of being a sloppy kisser.

The obnoxiously blinding sun did a fine job of aggravating me without surprise harassment letters invading my morning. A couple raspberry-Pinnacle and pink lemonades to help numb our return to Dansbury had sounded like heaven when my college roomie and next door neighbor, Cecelia Dougherty, had called last night, but the temporary reprieve from facing my hometown and Mama Margoe hadn't been worth the rays now penetrating my blue, leopard print Dolce&Gabbana knock offs and throbbing through my eyeballs and into my skull. I should have known it wouldn't be "just a couple," especially with Garrett on the rebound and Trev mixing the drinks. That boy had perfected liquor and carbonated drink ratios— not nearly as precise as his drinks to willing women ratio— one of the many things that still hadn't changed in Dansbury since I'd left for Carnegie Mellon four years ago.

I jimmied the key in Maxine's ignition— Strawberry Shortcake dangled from the keychain, her baby doll smile glinting under her red, yarn hair— and after a healthy minute of hushed coaxing and cursing, which culminated in fervent ultimatums, Maxine relented and sputtered to life. Even Maxine, the obstinate, doorless Jeep Wrangler that she was, persevered under the delusion that problems ignored were problems resolved, but that's where the similarities between her and Mama Margoe ended. I'd vowed my undying loyalty to Maxine despite our minor disagreements— sporadic gas level readings, squeaky brakes, and rust— because although she might keel over from any one of her daily ailments, she could probably plow over anything Ford Focus-sized and under, including police barriers if necessary. As long as she could slog her way up and down Buckbur Mountain five days a week so I could lifeguard at Lakeside— the last summer this time, I swear— I wouldn't take drastic action, only complain about what a run-down, scrap metal, death-trap she was. No point in getting a new car when Maxine was still barely running; we girls had to stick together.

I glanced right and left at the houses next door to ours before pulling away from the curb and wondered who'd had the balls to touch Maxine besides Cecilia. Now that I'd found the STD harassment letter fluttering on Maxine's windshield, I felt particularly protective toward her and uncommonly wary toward the neighborhood in general and Cecilia in particular. The engine didn't stall when I eased up off the clutch— miracle of all miracles— and I gassed it to Garrett's house. Lakeside was ten minutes from my house, figuring in unlikely traffic and getting red at both lights. I was leaving early because Garrett was bumming a ride to work. He was late everywhere he went, but if I showed up early, he would rush, and we'd make it up the mountain on time.

Maxine swung a right after Jeremy Snyder's deranged forsythias, passed Mrs. Dougherty's seasonal goose, and finally parked in front of the Webber household. I honked twice and waved at Presley as he barked furiously from his doggie door. Garrett's mom was big on holidays. Even the pretend holidays that schools, churches, and the federal government forget to recognize had a home in Mrs. Webber's heart, so Garrett's house usually matched Mrs. Dougherty's goose. Unfortunately, Mrs. Webber hadn't yet redecorated for Memorial Day. Her wreaths and Australian flags were still hanging in honor of Anzac Day, while the goose was sporting a lacy red bonnet and an American flag-embroidered apron.

I frowned at my watch; we were cutting it close, even for us. Maxine beeped again, sending Presley into another fit of yapping. A moment passed, and Garrett's head poked out his upstairs bedroom window.

"Hey, Patty-Cake," Garret shouted. "No need to beep. I could hear you coming down the block." His golden hair was fanned out like a dandelion on one side and smushed flat on the other as he squinted down at me. "I think Maxine's muffler is on its death throws."

"Hey yourself. What gives? We've got pools to watch, people to save, and skin to tan, and you're lollygagging as usual," I yelled back. "You know that Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear sets his watch five minutes fast."

"Ah, but the punch-in clock is always on time, and that's the one that counts." He slipped on a pair of gold rimmed aviators. "My God, it's bright out! What were we thinking last night?"

"We prayed for thunder, but the weather man heard us and God didn't."

Garrett nodded slowly.

"Are you ready or what?"

"Sorry, I just woke up," he said, yawning.

I rolled my eyes. “Geez Louise, Garrett, could you boost it to ramming speed sometime soon? We’re almost late.”

“Late is a matter of perspective, my dear.”

“Garrett!”

He smiled a little lopsidedly, and those devastating dimples made me smile back even though I wanted to rip his hair out. “Alright, I’m coming down. Just tell Maxine to lay off the horn; Presley can only take so much excitement in the morning.”

Garrett leaned back and shut his window. I turned on the radio to tune in the latest weather report. Presley gave a few more barks, distinctly more pleasant than the machine gun yaps he’d been dishing out to me, and Garrett ambled out of his house, down the rickety porch steps, and after a brief dispute with Maxine’s over-enthusiastic shocks, he sat on her passenger seat.

“*Hola, Chica,*” he said, kissing my cheek. He boinged one of my thick, reddish-brown, sausage curls and watched as it bobbed and trembled. “Your hair is looking exceptionally wild today.”

“Don’t bother trying to butter me up; you were already on my shit list even before you were late. Only massive thunderstorms could cheer me up now.”

“What’s the prognosis?”

“Uber hot with a seventy-five percent chance of torrential downpour.”

Garrett glanced at the clear, blue sky. “So we lifeguard all day with our fingers crossed. Nothing we haven’t done before.”

I didn’t respond. Instead, I let him sweat out the engine-rasping silence as I pulled away from the curb and drove toward Buckbur Mountain. He broke before we reached the first light.

“I’m sorry, Patty-Cake, but J. C. is built like a Greek God now that he plays varsity.”

“Who?”

“Joe Cummings. Brown hair, green eyes, my height. He just got his EMT recert, and he played center in high school. He’s first string running back for Ohio State now. I didn’t think you’d be angry that I left Trev’s place early; Cecelia was still there—”

“Cecelia disappeared with Maxine sometime after ten o’clock. I came back from breaking the seal, and both of you guys and my wheels were gone. I spent the night chatting with Trev, which was lovely until he kissed me.” I got a green at the first light onto Hollander Road, cutting our time to eight minutes tops.

Garrett looked intrigued. “Dude, isn’t he dating Misty ‘Miss Question’ Lewis again? You home wrecker!”

I guided Maxine with my knee and put my hands up. “Don’t look at me. I gave him the same spiel as the last time he kissed me except this time he was drunk, and he didn’t take it as well.”

Garrett alternately eyed my knee and the road nervously. “I’m sure that he—”

I placed my hands back to the wheel. “*And then* Colton Dietrich appeared out of the woodwork to clean up. I’d thought he’d left a while ago— doing God knows what, probably smoking and sexing in the woods— but there he stood, tousled and stubbly and menacing with his broad shoulders stretching his T-shirt and that nostril flared will in his eyes when he’s about to demand something. Trev wasn’t in any condition to notice Colton was even there let alone intervene when Colton grabbed my hand to help me off the couch, and I’d had enough bullshit for the night; I finally just walked home.”

“I’m sorry, Babe.” Garrett squeezed my hand resting on the gear shift. “So I’m gonna take a blind shot in the dark that you didn’t get a chance to return Lakeside’s sound system.”

I glared at him. “If you’re suggesting that I should have done a B and E by myself at three in the morning while I’m half lit and fully pissed than you can go su—”

“I am not suggesting. I’m just stating. The facts would be nice to know before we decide our next POA.”

I took a breath to rewind the anger and unclamp my fingers from around the steering wheel. “Jerr will notice the sound system is missing once he’s within a twenty-foot radius of Lakeside.”

“Yeah, but he won’t do anything about it because—” Garrett wiggled his fore finger over his upper lip and deepened his voice to a slow drawl. ““You’re such good kids, I figured you’d return it.””

I reached over and pushed his shoulder, laughing.

Garrett rubbed the back of his neck. “Did you talk to Mama Margoe yet?”

I shook my head.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I’ve got to talk to her about Frank as it is. I think that’s torture enough.”

“Well, I’ve got leftover tree cutout cookies from Arbor Day and decently good gossip if that makes it a little better.”

“Do the cookies have icing?”

He smiled, smug. “Sprinkles, too.”

“Fork ’em over and let’s hear it.”

He handed me a cookie. “A new family moved in down the block on Hazen Street, creek side.”

“Hmmm,” I murmured, admiring the cookie icing. Mrs. Webber had textured it so that the green icing had pointy leaf imprints and the brown icing had choppy, bark layers. Little red blobs were scattered among the leaves. “What’s with the red polka-dots?”

Garrett snorted. “It’s an apple tree.”

“Of course.” I bit into some bark. The cookie had a slight apple flavor, but I was probably just projecting. “These are scrumptious.”

“It’s almost a shame to ruin such pastry art perfection,” Garrett commented, admiring his pine tree.

“Nah, I’m fulfilling its Arbor Day destiny.”

“Arbor Day what?”

“Arbor Day destiny. Cookies are made to be eaten, and these cookies especially because they wouldn’t even exist without Arbor Day. By eating them, I am fulfilling their very purpose in life.”

Garrett waved his hand dismissively. “Anyway, getting back to the truly scrumptious, the old Moyer eyesore is now the happy abode of the MacCallaghan threesome.”

“Your kind of threesome?” I asked around a mouthful of cookie and leaf icing.

“No, unfortunately. Think more of the offspring if ‘Two and a Half Men’ should ever mate with *Braveheart*. I hear tell they are actual Scotsman, you know, from Scotland. Maybe they’ll replace those God-awful, orange window shutters. That alone would get them in with Harriet Carol within the week.”

“I’m still waiting for Jehiel to paint his new shutters. If he chooses any color besides black, beige, or white, those Old Orchard snoots on Willow Lane will probably lynch him,” I smirked. “I give the MacCallaghans a month. Can I have another cookie?”

He handed me a palm tree this time. “I was generous and gave them two months when J.C. told me.”

I bit into all that soft, sugary goodness and savored the icing and cookie and all the fine, flaky melting that distinguish store bought cookies from those home baked with love and artery-clogging amounts of butter. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say this cookie tasted coconutty.”

“Yup; the flavors of cookie match the species of tree.”

“How many trees did your mom bake?”

“Um,” Garrett buried his head in the plastic container. “I’ve got Walnut trees, Banana trees, Cherry trees, Orange trees, Cocoa trees, Maple trees—”

“Maple trees?”

“Maple syrup flavored.” My expression must have been skeptical because Garrett laughed, flashing dimple. “I’ll give you one of those next.”

“I’ll pass, thanks,” I said, finishing off the palm tree. I cleared my throat. “I got an interesting letter today.”

“A letter?” Garrett frowned. “Mr. Dougherty doesn’t deliver until one o’clockish.”

“It was waiting for me under Maxine’s windshield wiper.” I reached into the back seat to fish around in pink and black polka-heart Popeye and Olive drawstring bag, but Garrett pulled it up front and ruffled through it himself when I started to swerve.

He read it out loud, which added a certain harshness that I hadn’t heard in my head voice. I winced as he said, “I know what you did with him. You’d better get tested because he’s left a

parade of diseased pussies since high school. Maybe next time you'll look before you suck, you stupid, cheep fuck.” Garrett nodded, staring at the letter. “Maxine’s been a naughty, naughty Wrangler,” he teased.

“Apparently.”

“I especially like the rhyming at the end. Gives it that extra oomph you just can’t achieve with straight prose. Almost lyrical.”

I glared at Garrett, keeping eye contact and not letting the dimples distract me.

“You’re not amused,” he said, but his grin widened.

“That’s right. Yuck it up,” I said, frowning harder. “I knew you’d think this was hilarious.”

“How else can you take it? You haven’t had sex in seven years, and some STD-riddled slut is jealous of the action you only wish you were getting. It’s like a street whore accusing a nun of hogging business. It *is* hilarious!”

I sighed heavily and passed through a green at the second light onto Lakeside Street. Clocking in on time was an attainable prospect for once. Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear and his mustache may not have to fret after all.

Garrett cocked an eyebrow. “What reaction would you prefer?”

“Don’t look so damn cocky. Jean-Claude was always deadpan.”

“I wasn’t channeling Jean-Claude. Just the thought of your summer of Anita Blake makes me want to bash my head against the dashboard.”

“Try to resist. Maxine can’t handle the abuse,” I said, shaking my head in awe. “God, I can’t believe that was two years ago.”

“I can. I was fucking bored for three months straight because your eyes barely left the pages long enough to eat and shower. Thank God you’re typically a movie person. I wouldn’t be able to associate with you if you always read that much.”

“That series was delicious. It satisfied needs that I’d wager Arbor Day cookies and those MacCallaghan boys combined couldn’t meet, even if they were rolled together and—”

“Drizzled in maple syrup?”

“I was going for ‘covered in icing’, but whatever floats your boat.”

“You haven’t seen Caleb, Isaac, or Douglas yet, so I wouldn’t get too confident if I were you.”

I rolled my eyes.

Garrett forged on. “I was going for Clark Gable.”

“Well, it needs some serious work, but don’t worry, you can always practice. ‘Tomorrow is another day!’”

“Cheeky. Very cheeky.”

Justin Hawkins’ wobbly, English falsetto cut through Maxine’s thundering grind. Garrett dug through my bag.

“Side pocket,” I said, holding out my hand.

“Got it,” Garrett said a moment later, and slapped my cell phone into my palm.

Justin Hawkins was professing his belief in love by the time I flipped it open and put the receiver to my ear. My metal gauges clicked against the hard plastic of the cell phone.

“Hi, Patty?”

“Hey, Misty.” I glanced at Garrett. He turned to look out at the passing scenery, but I could see his shoulders shaking.

“How are you? Are you on your way to Lakeside?” Misty’s voice squeaked at the end of each question.

“I’m just fine, and yeah, I’m almost there. Do you—” I clenched my teeth. “Do you need a ride?”

“Why would I need a ride? Do you need a ride?”

“No, *I’m almost there.*”

A breath of silence passed.

I waited it out, refusing to ask a question.

“Sydes isn’t assistant managing this year, right?”

“Unfortunately.”

“What? Is there something wrong with your phone?”

I sighed. “No. It’s just Maxine. She’s not feeling well.”

“Who?”

“My Jeep!” I yelled. “The muffler on my Jeep is shot! Is there something that you wanted to ask me, Misty? I’m nearly at Lakeside.”

“Could you do me a favor?”

“Sure thing.”

“Could you tell Mr. Snyder that I won’t be in this morning? I would have called Sydes, but I guess he didn’t come back to Dansbury this summer?”

“I don’t know what Sydes is doing this summer,” I snapped. “I’ll tell Jerr you won’t be in.”

“Thank you so much, Patty! I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Of course. See you later, Miss—” I swallowed. “Misty.”

I clicked the phone shut and handed it back to Garrett.

Garrett shook his head slowly. “Aw, good ol’ Misty. How I miss her confusion during the winter months.” Garrett folded the harassment note back into a square. “Do you want this back in the bag or in a garbage can? I say keep it and frame it as a testament to your abilities.”

“No, I am not framing anything. I don’t want people thinking I’m part of the diseased pussy parade. You wouldn’t be the least bit unsettled if you’d found this letter waiting for *you* this morning?” I asked, pulling into Lakeside’s parking lot.

“I don’t have a pussy.”

I slanted a glare at him. “I’m being serious.”

Garrett shrugged, but I could see the laugh lines around his eyes loosen and the warmth in those solid, honey-brown eyes dampen even through the aviators. “Maybe, but you don’t know who would write something like this, right?”

“Right.”

“Any girls you know of who want a guy who wants you?”

I shook my head.

“Any guys who want you but think you’re with someone else?”

“No, not that I know of.”

“So you don’t know who to confront about it.”

I frowned, not liking where the philosophy was going. It seemed very Margoe. I’d already parked Maxine, so Garrett only had the time it took for me to unbuckle and wrestle Strawberry Shortcake out of the ignition to wrap up anyway.

“If you can’t do anything, then don’t worry about it. You can’t sweat things that are out of your control.”

“Sure I can.”

Garrett sighed, sounding disgusted. “Alright, you can, but it’ll drive you and everyone in close proximity to you crazy. Namely me.”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

“Thanks a lot,” Garrett grumbled.

I laughed. Maxine’s joints gave a stuttering squeal as I snatched Popeye and Olive from Garrett and jumped out of the Jeep. A few clouds were finally dotting the sky, but nothing ominous enough to get psyched over. Lake Whimple, located down the ravine from Lakeside pool, sometimes gave off a strong, swampy scent, especially on humid afternoons when the air is so thick it nearly condenses its goopy heat in your lungs, so predicting the coming rainfall by the damp smell in the air wasn’t as accurate as it would have been had I smelled the dampness closer to my house. The acrid bite of cool rain on sun-dried pavement was more pungent though, and thanks to classical conditioning, summer showers on most any parking lot squeezed my heart in excitement whether I was getting off guard duty or not.

Unfortunately, the only smell that greeted me this morning was the sweet freshness of newly cut grass, which meant that the night guard had probably stacked the tables, lawn chairs, umbrellas, and lounge chairs on the concrete around the edge of the pool, so Luke Dougherty could mow. Cecilia’s brother had begun his lucrative grass-cutting business after Cory Lyons had retired and enlisted two Augusts ago.

“Do you smell that?” I asked.

Garrett grimaced. “Don’t you just love the smell of chlorine in the morning?”

“I was talking about the grass.” I sighed. “Maybe Jackie took care of unstacking everything already.”

“Fat chance. Did you see her nails last night? She could scoop her Cheerios with those things. I could hop on one and use it as a gondola down the canals of Venice. Her nails were so long that J. C.’s pe—”

I held up a hand, laughing. “Alright, already. I got the point three metaphors ago.”

Garrett swung out of Maxine by her roof and jogged to catch up. We passed by Cecilia’s hybrid, Coraline, Jackie’s convertible Bug, and Mr. Snyder’s Oldsmobile before hopping up the over-sized stone steps to the pool entrance. Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear was waiting at the top, shifting from foot to foot, and taking rapid, tick-like glances at his watch.

“Hi, Mr. Snyder,” I said once we reached the top. I infused my voice with cheer. “How have you been?”

Mr. Snyder wrung his hands, frowning. “Your shift starts at seven-fifteen, and it’s seven-twenty-one.” As Mr. Snyder spoke, and especially when he over-enunciated his t’s, his mustache danced on his upper lip. I tried to look into his eyes instead of staring it.

Garrett ducked behind me, slipped through the gate, and disappeared into the guy’s locker room. Mr. Snyder raised a fore finger. His mouth slacked open to reprimand him, but the locker room door slammed shut before Mr. Snyder could inhale.

I glared at the closed door. “What a weenie,” I muttered.

Mr. Snyder shifted his attention back to me, shaking his head. “You’re a good kid, Patricia, but Misty ain’t showed up yet either. If you’re not gonna show up, you got to call out. I got to know in advance. Trevor had the courtesy to call. Cecilia can’t unstack all the chairs, prep each station, and complete the mornin’ checklist by herself. It’d take too long, and we wouldn’t open on time.”

“Jackie’s here.”

Mr. Snyder blinked, his Beagle-sad, blue eyes doubtful.

“Right.” I grimaced and edged toward the women’s locker room. “Sorry about those six minutes. It won’t happen again, Mr. Snyder.”

He started to raise a finger.

“Misty called me this morning. She told me to tell you that she couldn’t come in today. She doesn’t feel well.”

His mouth fell open as he inhaled.

“I’d better help Cecilia with those chairs. It’s great to see you again, Mr. Snyder.” I side-stepped into the locker room.

“Call me Jerr—”

The door slammed shut.

The locker room hadn’t been hosed since we’d closed for the season last Labor day. Spiders and moths had taken over the corners and most of the ceiling. I shuddered and speed-changed into my guard suit. Garrett was already prepping the stations with rescue tubes, first-aid kits, and umbrellas by the time I burst out of the locker room. Cecelia turned around at the screen door clanging against the concrete wall and smiled. Her arms were loaded with a five-stack of plastic lawn chairs.

“I know that for you it was the spiders, but those moths are gigantic. Buffalo Bill would couldn’t raise bigger moths than the monsters breeding in there.” She nodded toward the locker room, her pixie-cut, red hair gleaming in the morning sunlight. Her bangs were longer and fringed around her eyes in green, yellow, and pink layered stripes. She’d colored the bangs since last night. They were funky and brought out her hazel eyes, but I was still burned over her and Maxine’s disappearing act; compliments were beyond me until further notice. I walked past her,

raised my eye brows in acknowledgement of the locker room's hideous neglect, and picked up the nearest lounge chair.

Lakeside pool was a classic L-shape with three diving boards at twelve feet, a double tube slide at ten feet, and a gradual decline zero degree entry at the end near the Hut. Rear ladder guard-stand stations covered twelve, ten, and five. Two guards usually covered deck duty at the zero degree entry, but without Matt Sydes, our sorely missed head guard from last summer, we'd be one short. The yellow mushroom shadowing the shallow end hadn't been turned on— thank God, but probably not for long— which meant I could still hear the gaggle of white geese squawking and honking as they meandered around the lake. A chain link fence surrounded the pool, locker room, canoe, ping pong table, and the Hut, cutting Lakeside pool off from the overlook, Lake Wimple, and its surrounding woods.

Cecilia came up beside me to retrieve another stack. “Did Mama Margoe notice you come back from the party last night?”

“No.”

“Karen thought we were being ‘irresponsible and childish.’” Cecilia said, cocking her head side to side, imitating her mother in a chirpy, grating tone. “I got a lecture at three in the morning. I'm twenty-two and still getting lectures.”

I slammed down a lounge chair a little more forceful than necessary. “Karen actually cares.”

Cecilia shrugged, the entire stack of chairs in her arms bobbing with her shoulders. “Thanks for letting me wear your purple top last night. I'll wash it for you if you want.”

“Whatever.”

The sounds of flip-flops and clanking, stacked lawn furniture filled the silence between us. Garrett was on the last guard chair station, and God only knew where Jackie was hiding. Cecilia started whistling “Build Me Up Buttercup” around the last four stacks.

When we finished, she threw the final chair down and heaved a sigh. “That would have gone so much faster with the radio.”

“Too bad I couldn’t bring it back to my place after the party like we’d planned, especially since we were supposed to return it before opening inventory this morning, but walking a mile on foot in the middle of the night was bad enough without straining under a three piece sound system.”

Cecilia frowned.

I jerked my thumb towards Garrett, who was just walking past the ping pong table and into the Hut. “I’ll go help with the check list.”

The Hut was a blue, twelve by twenty, wooden shed with white trim. We’d decorated the inside with colored Christmas lights, a plastic palm tree, and rainbow leis strung across the ceiling. Bins brimming with kickboards, noodles, beach balls, diving sticks, and life jackets lined the left wall. The first aid closet, backboard, rotary phone, and refrigerator were against the back wall. To the right was a half and half cork and dry-erase board and a round, plastic table with seven mix-matched foldable beach chairs around it.

I stepped into the Hut. Jackie was sitting on the opposite side of the table, twisting her hair up with a brown octopus claw hair clip. Garrett sat next to her, reviewing the check list.

“I clocked us into the log book when we came in.” Garrett waved his hand toward the first-aid closet and presumably the log-in binder inside.

I plopped down on the red and white striped chair next to Garrett's blue and pink one and gave him a cow bite. "Thanks."

Garrett jerked away with a yelp.

"I was sorry to hear about your dad." Jackie cut in. "I would have given you my condolences earlier, but I didn't see you at the funeral."

I blinked. "I was at college."

Jackie nodded. "Yes, I heard. It must have been such a rough time. Your grandmother had to go to her son's funeral alone."

Garrett placed his hand on the nape of my neck, kneading gently. I swallowed. "I'm sure having you there was a comfort to her." I turned to Garrett. "What's left?"

"Nada. Care to sign for me?" He offered me a pen.

"Sure thing."

Jackie cleared her throat.

Garrett handed me the pen and clipboard. "You should try drinking coffee in the morning, Jackie. It'll help break up all that phlegm."

Jackie narrowed her mascara-lined eyes at him. "The mushroom isn't turned on."

I signed my name on the "witness" line and handed the checklist back to Garrett. "We'll turn it on when the kids ask. It's loud, annoying, and unnecessary at eight in the morning. The pool doesn't even open for another hour."

"Did you vacuum?"

"I thought maybe you had taken care of that while I was unstacking chairs."

Jackie leaned back, pouting. "You didn't do everything on the checklist, so you can't sign off on it."

Garrett tacked the checklist onto the cork board and sat down. “I only checked off the things I did. The night guard can cover the vacuuming and skimmer buckets. It’s really not a big deal.”

“Of course not. You’re always very conscientious of your duties and the mess you leave for others to clean up,” Jackie said, smiling at Garrett. She shot a glare at me before shifting her attention to the acrylic perfection of her nails.

I glanced at Garrett and raised my eyebrows.

Garrett shrugged.

Cecilia walked into the Hut. She snatched a water from the fridge before sitting down next to me. “My God, it’s only eight and the sun’s already brutal.”

“Any more clouds?” Garrett asked.

“Not even cumulus. There’s no way we’re getting out early.”

“The morning is still young,” I said. “Let’s not *ditch* our hopes quite yet.”

Cecilia sighed. “Are you going to keep making those not-so-subtle jabs at me all shift?”

“Yes.”

“Look Patty-Cake, I’m sorry I left early—”

“And took Maxine without me,” I interjected.

“You gave me the keys. It’s not as if I hot wired Maxine behind your back.”

“We shared your clutch because neither of us had pockets,” I stated resolutely. “That does not give you free access to Maxine.”

Cecilia nodded, “I’m sorry I took Maxine without you, but I wasn’t having a good time. What’s the big deal anyway? Garrett was still there—”

“Nope,” Garrett piped in, looking cheerful.

“Where were you?”

I made a flitting motion with my hands. “Off with Joe Cummings.”

Cecilia’s jaw dropped as she turned to Garrett. “You’re shitting me! He is so fucking ripped since he made varsity.”

Garrett winked. “Believe me, I know.”

“The only stomach more defined than Joe Cummings’ that I’ve seen in the flesh would be Jay Winneski from high school, right after he came back from basic training. Do you remember him? He dated Holly Secor in the middle of his senior year, and she used to screech, ‘Good luck, Jayski!’ and blow him really obnoxious kisses from the stands at track meets.”

I laughed. “My God, how could I forget Jay? His tongue was like a jack hammer.”

“What?” Cecilia shrieked. “When the hell did you sample his tongue?”

“Freshman year. After Jay broke things off with Holly, who by the way was hell on concentration at meets even from across the field, he would sometimes come over to discuss between events. He usually just talked to Dean, but one lucky meet in May, fate compelled him to talk to me as Dean’s brother, Billy, stepped into the circle.”

Garrett snorted. “Billy Russiani couldn’t throw a discus between the foul lines if they were set at ninety degrees.”

“Didn’t he take out someone that year?” Cecilia asked.

“Yeah, I’m getting there. Jay and I had our first conversation ever— we’d said hi in the hallway four, maybe five, times all year— but I can’t remember for the life of me what was said. What I do remember was his compelling yellow-green eyes. They were more yellow toward the pupils and had a deep forest green surrounding the chartreuse of his irises. I swear they were identical to the Mad Hatter’s in *Alice in Wonderland*.”

“The cartoon?” Cecilia asked, frowning.

“Yeah, the cartoon.” I rolled my eyes. “Johnny Depp, of course. Anyway, as I was mesmerized by his eyeballs, Billy ricocheted the discus off the cage and into my back.”

Garrett’s laugh burst out in deep, bellowing heaves.

Cecilia frowned. “What does this have to do with his tongue?”

“I’m *getting there*. Since I’d been distracted by Jay when it happened, he’d felt terrible about my back. He got me ice from the trainer, talked to me for the rest of the meet, and eventually offered me a ride home. We were parked in my driveway, sitting awkwardly, when I turned to say thank you at the same time he turned to say good bye. We stared at each other, our noses centimeters apart, his eyes a shock of vivid need, and suddenly his lips sealed over mine. His tongue pressed in and out faster than I could keep up. He didn’t touch me with anything but his lips and tongue and teeth, but I felt the heat of him through to my toes.”

“Holy fuck.” Cecilia gaped. “Why didn’t I know about this? Why didn’t anything come of it?”

I shook my head and shrugged. “He graduated the week after and was shipped to a base somewhere south, Georgia I think.”

Cecilia sighed mournfully. “Bummer.”

“Colton is a damn rough kisser too, but you don’t see me detailing it to the world,” Jackie snapped. She scraped her chair across the wooden floor, shoved it back at the table, and pushed the green start button on the mushroom control panel before stomping out of the Hut.

Silence echoed in Jackie’s wake. I forced out a laugh, but it sounded a little too harsh. “What’s got her bikini in a twist?”

Garrett shook his head. “I don’t know. She seemed perfectly content sitting on her ass until you walked in.”

“I heard that Colton broke up with her,” Cecilia whispered.

I nodded, thinking more about Colton’s general ineptitude with relationships than about his specific ineptitude with Jackie. Tension filled the sudden quiet until Garrett pulled out the Tupperware of Arbor Day cookies from his gym bag. He offered it on the flat of his palm, Vanna White-style, making yum yum noises until we smiled.

“Would you like a maple tree, *sweetheart*?”

“Your Bogey voice is only slightly better than your Clark Gable attempts.”

He raised an eyebrow and popped the lid off the Tupperware container. The cookie he pulled out had dainty strips of maple syrup oozing on its bark.

I wrinkled my nose. “Offering something a second time doesn’t make it suddenly more appealing.”

Garrett smirked, his eyes suddenly mischievous and those damn dimples winking at me from under the glow of Christmas tree lights. “You sure?”

I nodded.

“Not even if we share it?” Garrett stuck half the cookie in his mouth, waiting with the leafy end clamped between his lips.

I hesitated, glancing at the open Hut door. When I turned back, Garrett was a little closer, his eyes soft and honest, lacking the intensity most men have when leaning for a kiss, the intensity Joe Cummings probably enjoyed last night.

I met Garrett half way, opened my mouth around the flaky, maple syrup-drizzled bark, and as my lips brushed softly against his, I bit the cookie in half. The sticky syrup clung between

us as we chewed; I licked the syrup and crumbs from between our lips. The cookie was delicious— no less than expected from Mrs. Webber’s standards— but Arbor Day tree cut out cookies wasn’t the only taste I wanted more of.

“You should be kissed and often, and by someone who knows how,” Garrett whispered.

I shook my head and whispered back, “I’ve been kissed and often, just never by someone who intends to stick around.”

Someone cleared his throat, distinctly more masculine but saturated in just as much intentionally conveyed annoyance as Jackie. I froze and shifted my eyes to the left. Had Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear been the only person standing in the Hut’s doorway, I would have been vaguely embarrassed being caught smooching while on duty, but a slightly menacing, black-haired, muscle-bound beef-cake mildly reminiscent of Rambo armed with a bundle of extension cords over his shoulder instead of a bullet belt and a rescue tube instead a machine gun towered next to him. I choked on the cookie.

Mr. Snyder lifted his finger and shook it at us, looking as angry as the time Misty refused a save because she’d just gotten her hair permed. “Jackie’s vacuuming—” he paused, probably confused by the words “Jackie” and “vacuuming” in a sentence together without a “not” between them— “If you want to join in.”

“I would, except I’ve already prepped the guard stations,” Garrett said rationally, “and Patty-Cake and Cecilia have already unstacked and arranged the lounge chairs while Jackie loafed. It’s our turn to loaf.”

“There is no loafing in guarding,” Aquatic Rambo said in a Scottish burr.

I had to physically bite my lip to restrain myself from blurting an *A League of Their Own* comeback.

Scottish Aquatic Rambo stepped forward and offered his hand to Garrett. “I’m Caleb MacCallaghan, your new head guard.”

Garrett shook Caleb’s hands and said, “Garrett Webber.”

Caleb nodded. He offered his hand to Cecilia next.

“I’m Cecilia Dougherty,” she said, shaking his hand.

He turned to me. His lips twitched up in a nearly imperceptible smile before he took my hand and said, “Patty-Cake, I presume?”

Everyone’s a comedian, I thought, my face burning. His hand was calloused and warm and a little moist, and his pump was as firm as the rest of him looked beneath the white wife beater.

I had to clear my suddenly parched throat. “Patricia Margoe, actually. Patty without the Cake is just fine.”

He did smile then, flashing clean, white teeth briefly— the front two overlapped a bit— before succumbing to his previous stoicism. He stepped back.

“What else needs done before opening?” Garrett asked.

Caleb jerked his head toward the door. “You three can come help me with inventory.”

Caleb set down the extension cords and rescue tube in their respective bins along the right wall before stepping out of the Hut. Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear’s eyes flitted between Garrett and me, his finger shifting between the two of us, not sure who he should point at. After a moment, he just followed Caleb uncertainly. I willed my face to cool down.

“My my my, that is a *man*. They don’t come that way where we come from,” Cecilia whispered.

“Thank God,” I stifled a laugh. “I’d like to change my predication to three months. I deal with Maxine every day; I know a survivor when I see one.” I shook my head. “So much for first impressions.”

“With enough courage, you can do without a reputation.” Garrett winked.

“Would you can Clark Gable already? I’m practically thinking in quotes,” I hissed.

Garrett dimpled at me. “You said I should practice.”

I rolled my eyes.

“This doesn’t bode well,” Cecilia commented.

“What doesn’t bode well?” I asked

“By the looks of him, Caleb will definitely care that the sound system is missing.”

“I guess we’ll just have to ensure he doesn’t notice until we return it then,” I said pointedly.

“I can think of several ways you can ensure he doesn’t notice,” Garrett piped in.

I glared at him

“Well, you don’t exactly have the cleanest record when it comes to head lifeguards.

What’s one more to the list, eh?”

Cecilia sighed. “I said I was sorry.”

“Well, I’ve got a few more stingers stored up, enough to last until tonight, so you’re just gonna have to deal.”

Garrett frowned. “What’s happening tonight?”

I stared at Garrett, not amused. “Are you kidding me? What kind of question is that? Did you not just live the same past five minutes of reality as the rest of us? We are returning the sound system tonight! We can’t afford to wait any longer.”

Garrett shook his head. “You can count me out.”

“What?” I gaped. “Why?”

“Dude, I have a date with J. C.”

“It’s a three-piece sound system. It’s a three-person job.” When Garrett didn’t respond, I whispered savagely, “This is more important than Joe Cummings!”

“I could argue that.” Garrett sighed. “I’d do this for you.”

“Obviously not, because you’re not doing it now.”

“If you had the chance to get laid, and after all this time decided to go for it, I’d cover for you if you needed it.”

“If you were in a jam and actually confronted a problem for once, I’d help you out of it.”

Garrett cupped my cheek, and I opened my eyes to meet his. “I need out, just this once.”

My anger ebbed under Garrett’s reasonable tone and touch and steady gaze, and I sighed in resignation. Garrett had never pretended to want anyone than who he truly desired, but after eight years, that didn’t stop my heart from cringing when it got touched out by a one-night-stand.

“Whatever.” I stood up and stepped toward the door.

“Patty-Ca—”

I didn’t bother turning around. “Let’s just drop it and move on. Scottish Aquatic Rambo is waiting.”

Cecilia laughed softly. Garrett followed silently, looking considerably less cheerful than a few minutes ago.

Two

The inventory sheets Caleb handed us all had different items on them, from “Ace bandages” to “Zip lock baggies.” I was the lucky duck who had “stereo system” on the list, although better me than Caleb, so I checked it off as accounted for, signed my name on the “witness” line— the second document I’d fudged in one day— and returned it back to Caleb once I’d finished checking the other items on the sheet. My name would be mostly golden again after tonight, so the check was only a temporary lie anyway. Caleb’s turquoise eyes met mine as I gave him the inventory checklist. I’d been so focused on his calloused hand and blinding teeth and firm everything that I hadn’t even noticed his eyes in the Hut. They were startling and distracting and slightly suspicious, but that could have been my conscience balking at my lame justifications for lying about the sound system.

Clouds remained scarce the entire day. By the time three-thirty finally rolled around, the temperature had climbed to a hundred and three, only one person had looked vaguely distressed while swimming, and no one out of the thirty-six people in the pool had drowned, thirty-seven if I counted Mr. Russiani, but he hadn’t worked up the nerve to detach his grip from the wall today. Cecilia almost saved what she thought was a passive drowning victim, but the kid was only using a snorkel. Hysterics ensued when Cecilia attempted to confiscate the snorkel, even though number five on the rule board clearly stated in big, bold letters that snorkels, water wings, and anything unapproved by the coastguard was strictly prohibited. The kid’s grandmother demanded to speak to a manager. Mr. Snyder was helpful and compassionate and detailed in the same way that enabled the rest of us to take advantage of him but had the grandmother calm and nodding. He didn’t mention rule number ten, which stated that lifeguards were to enforce all rules according to their judgment, and their judgment was to be strictly adhered to. No one ever read the rule board anyway.

I was guarding the tube slides at ten feet for the third time that day, wondering if Trev was going to blow off second shift after calling out this morning and worrying whether that was my fault, when a hot shot middle schooler with a blond bowl-cut and batman swim trunks did a flip off the end of the slide. When he surfaced, I blew my whistle. He looked up, unabashed.

I shook my head. “No flips off the tube slide. Save it for the diving boards.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Two feet, a spring, and getting time out. No flips off the tube slide. Only warning.”

Bowl-cut Batman nodded reluctantly. Luke Dougherty, Ryan Lyons, and Evan Deitrich had been watching at five feet. They laughed and splashed and ribbed him when he swam over to them. Luke’s twin sister, Lori, sat on the edge of the pool, her purple toenails dangling in the water, and her blond pony tail draped over her left shoulder in a bouncy, frizz-free, spiral curl. She watched the three boys uncertainly. I had no doubt Bowl-cut Batman would find another rule to break before the end of the day, but hopefully Trev would be here by then, my shift would be over, and he would get good use out of his whistle instead of mine.

The slap and thump of flip-flop footsteps approaching caught my attention. I turned my head, hoping to see Trev, but I got an eyeful of sharp turquoise instead. Caleb was standing under my stand, bearing a skimmer pole, a roll of paper towels, and a frown.

“That kid giving you trouble?” he asked.

“Bowl-cut Batman?” I snorted. “We had a temperamental two-year-old with diarrhea run amuck last summer. There were trails to follow through the locker rooms, all over the deck, the grass, the slides, and in the pool until the mother wrestled him into a diaper.” I gestured to where Bowl-cut Batman was dunking Ryan and spitting a stream of pool water at Lori. Luke tackled

him around the shoulders, they both toppled under the water, and Ryan came up for air, sputtering and laughing. “They’re just being kids.”

Caleb nodded, his piercing eyes still riveted on the three boys. “Bowl-cut Batman, huh?”

I shrugged. “I like nifty nicknames.”

“What’s mine?”

“I know your real name, so you don’t get anything nifty. Sorry to disappoint.”

He stared at me.

I shifted in my seat. “Did someone up-chuck recently?”

He raised his eyebrows.

I waffled my hand at his supplies while scanning the pool. “A skimmer pole and a roll of paper towels usually indicates disaster has struck. We have Red Z in the First Aid closet if you need it.”

Caleb looked down at what he was holding for a moment, and when he met my eyes again, his lips were twisted in a reluctant grin. “Perceptive of you, but no; I’m still re-stocking inventory. This is the last of it. After I set this in the shed, I’ll relieve you.”

“The Hut.”

“Come again?” His grin had already seeped away into a scowl.

“We call the shed with all the first aid and guard equipment and pool toys the Hut.”

“Why?”

I shrugged. “Because we dressed it up tiki-style, you know, for fun.”

Caleb unleashed his glare at the Hut as if he didn’t know.

I did another scan of the pool. Luke did a cannonball, which was legal. The other two had climbed out of the pool and were drying off. Bowl-cut Batman's towel matched his swim trunks, which made me smile. "Why are you relieving me? Did Trev call out again?"

"Yes. He's not feeling well," Caleb said, scanning the pool himself.

I made another sweep to double check: all clear. "'I know I fib a good deal. After all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion.' I don't know what Trev's excuse is."

Caleb stared at me.

"Kidding. He was definitely feeling under the weather the last time I saw him."

A splash sounded to my left. I switched my attention from scanning to focus, and my heart clutched. A pair of little arms were waving on the surface of five feet, and Jackie was sitting across the pool, putting tanning oil on her shoulders. I tweeted my whistle twice, did a compact jump from the guard stand with the rescue tube squeezed under my arm pits, and hit the water feet first. The shock of cold water ripped my breath away for a second— too fast a transition after baking in the sun for seven hours— but my head stayed above the water thanks to the rescue tube. I front crawled to the little arms. They were waving more frantically than a second ago. She was only across the short length of the pool, less than ten seconds away. I had six minutes until brain damage according to this year's recert class, but those ten seconds were seven strokes and with each stroke the little arms went from elbows above the water, to forearms, to just her wrists. In less than ten seconds, her fingertips disappeared from the surface; knowing I had six minutes didn't stop my heart from yanking down into my gut.

Two breaths to thirty compressions. Two to fifteen if Jackie helps. One hand if between one and twelve years old. Her hands were waving, so no paralysis, and probably no head injury: regular rear approach submerged active drowning victim save.

I pencil-dove under the water, scooped the little girl around the waist, and brought her up to the surface. The trusty rescue tube held both our weights as she gurgled and coughed and coughed and threw up and coughed and finally inhaled a fresh gasp of air before wailing at the top of her lungs in hiccupy sobs.

I turned her around to face me and rubbed her back. “Aw, it’s alright. You’re okay. Deep breaths. You’ll be just fine.” I took a deep, unsteady breath. *She’ll be fine.*

“Madeline?” A frizzy-haired woman in a black and gold one-piece and a fanny pack clicked around her waist was searching in a panic, a towel balled in her hands. “Madeline!”

I smiled. Keeping Madeline and myself squeezed tight against the rescue tube with my right arm, I waved at her grandmother with my left. “Mrs. Carol!”

She whipped around and looked across the pool, close to tears. Caleb must have pointed at me, because her eyes suddenly dropped down to where we were floating. She covered her heart in relief like a desperate pledge of allegiance, and ran to the edge of the pool, the towel flapping behind her.

I turned the little girl around to face Mrs. Carol. “There! See? Your gran’s coming now.”

Putting all my weight on the rescue tube with my left arm, I shoved it under the water and between my legs. When Mrs. Carol reached the edge and held out her arms for Madeline, I lifted Madeline in the air, and handed her off.

Madeline worked up a fresh batch of tears as Mrs. Carol swaddled her in the towel and squeezed her tight. “Dear God, Madeline! I swear, you want me to have a heart attack.” She turned to me. “Thank you so much, Patricia!”

“No problem,” I said.

Madeline twisted in Harriet Carol's arms and bunched her fingers in a little baby wave. I waved back before turning around and paddling to my stand. Caleb was already sitting in the guard chair and scanning by the time I climbed out of the pool.

"Good save," he said.

"Thanks," I said, re-wrapping the strap around the rescue tube. "We're going to need that skimmer pole and paper towels now."

"Jackie can take care of it."

I looked up, surprised, but he didn't bother looking down at me. He was still scanning. "Good luck with that," I muttered. I squeezed my hair until it wasn't dripping anymore; it bounced back around my face, relentless even against chlorinated water. "I can stay for second shift if we need it. I think Garrett escaped with Cecilia, so we're down three guards as it is."

Caleb shook his head. "You've been on the stand all day. Fill out a rescue sheet, file it in the log book, and head home."

I raised my eye brows. "Jackie's been on the stand all day too."

Caleb glanced at me. "So it would seem."

I stifled a laugh. Apparently Jackie's feeble vacuuming attempt this morning hadn't fooled anyone; the earth could continue spinning on its for axis another day.

Caleb reached a hand out, and I passed him the rescue tube.

"See you tomorrow," I said. "'I'm just going home, grab a shower and shave, give the wife a little pickle-tickle, and I'm on my way.'"

Caleb stared at me.

"Jon Lovitz?"

He returned his attention back to the pool without saying a word.

I should have stuck with Vivian Leigh. At least then when no one knows what the hell I'm saying, I sound classy while saying it. I turned around, took silent satisfaction at the indignation on Jackie's face as she realized I was off duty, and walked to the locker room.

I threw jean shorts on over my guard suit, dodged a moth as I left the locker room, and ran down the stone steps to Maxine. A deep blue BMW was parked next to her, shiny and smug, the only car in the parking lot I wasn't familiar with. Caleb might not have a sense of humor, but at least he could color coordinate.

I patted Maxine's dashboard. "No worries. You might be a couple breaths away from the junk yard, but he wouldn't last five minutes mudding."

Maxine revved only after two turns of the ignition, probably nervous after sitting next to Mr. New and Sporty all day, and I pulled out of Lakeside's parking lot, beginning the short drive down Buckbur Mountain. Trev lived on Hollander Road after the first light. I had five minutes to decide if the awkward factor did or didn't outweigh the importance of checking on his health and patching things up between us, but when I eventually came to his house, Misty's baby blue Mazda was snuggled tight against his Challenger in the driveway. I passed by without stopping. Missing work obviously had nothing to do with the booze or with me, or it had everything to do with it, but either way Misty was probably patching things up just dandy without further interference on my part.

I sped through the yellow at the second light and parked outside my house in eight minutes: not too shabby. Mama Margoe was rocking on the porch swing with her tiptoes, filling out a Mad Lib, and chain smoking Newports. I should have just let Maxine catch the red light, but if last night's festivities accomplished anything, it proved that procrastination couldn't prevent the inevitable. I unjammed Strawberry Shortcake from Maxine's ignition, picked up

Popeye and Olive, took a deep, fortifying breath, and walked up to the wooden porch steps. They groaned threateningly under my weight. Margoe narrowed her eyes at the porch steps over her oval-shaped, fuchsia, rhinestone studded frames and then at my stomach in disapproval.

“Hi, Margoe.” I leaned down to kiss her, but she didn’t stop rocking the swing, so all I got was mostly air, a vague brush of cheek, and a whiff of menthol.

“Your Jeep sounds beat.” Margoe coughed and hacked while she adjusted her glasses to better read the Mad Lib, not sounding much different from Maxine. “Mr. Snyder’s forsythias are certainly gorgeous this season. I could smell them a block away.”

I waved away some of Margoe’s smoke to annoy her. “I hadn’t noticed.”

She tapped the Mad Lib with her pen. “Give me a noun— body part.”

I dropped Popeye and Olive at my feet and sat next to Margoe on the swing. *Abs* came to mind, but I suppressed the impulse. She’d only looked, not commented, and for that she deserved cake. A very thin slice of cake and not chocolate, but she deserved cake non-the-less. “Weenus.”

Mama Margoe looked up, unsure.

“It’s the flabby skin at the back of your elbow.”

She nodded, appeased, and wrote it down. “You’ll never guess what I heard from Mrs. Lewis this morning.”

“It wouldn’t have anything to do with the MacCallaghans moving into Jehiel Moyer’s old place, would it?”

Margoe looked up sharply. “You would know about the Moyer place.”

I rolled my eyes. “Stop jumping to conclusions. Garrett beat you to the punch. Well, technically the original source was Joe Cummings since he told Garrett, but Garrett updated me this morning.”

“Mrs. Webber says that Joe plays varsity now, and he’s an EMT.”

“So I’ve heard. Did *you* know that I work with one of the MacCallaghans?”

“Which one?” she asked, sufficiently distracted from the Mad Lib.

“Caleb: longish black hair, startling turquoise eyes, probably on steroids, and brooding.”

Margoe’s shadowed gray eyes widened.

“I was kidding about the steroids. He’s just really muscular. Probably lots of weight lifting.” I pictured his back muscles shifting and straining against the wife beater as he lifted supplies and checked off boxes in his supply list, and I shrugged. “Maybe steroids.”

She shook her head. “I heard he volunteered for the MCA and did a lot of sailing and diving expeditions until he moved to New York with his brother, Douglas.”

“What’s the MCA?”

“The Maritime and Coast Guard Agency.”

“Oh,” I said, reconsidering his intensity. “Probably not steroids.”

Margoe continued without a hitch. “Harriet Carol said that Douglas lost his wife nine years ago in a horrible fire that burned down their home. They say she died of asphyxiation, the poor thing, but better that than being burned alive, I’ll say. The police ruled it as arson, but they never found the beast. Douglas has spent the rest of his life solving crimes for the one case that mattered and will never be solved.”

I cringed. “Where do you get this information? Douglas MacCallaghan did not spill his guts to Harriet Carol upon his arrival in Dansbury.”

“Harriet Carol is a notoriously accurate source. She says that Douglas was having trouble raising his son in the city, so when Chief Deitrich retired, Douglas applied for the job to relocate

to a more family-friendly environment. Isaac was getting into the wrong crowds, if you know what I mean.” She leaned in closer and whispered, “Mischief.”

I resisted rolling my eyes.

“I’m sure Dansbury will do them a world of good, especially if they repaint those darn shutters.” Margoe leaned back, confident in the town’s ability to straighten out teen miscreants, even hardened teen miscreants from the big, bad city, and satisfied with herself for being a part of it. “How was your drive? We didn’t really get to talk last night; you just sped off after that phone call.”

I shrugged, leaned back, and twirled Strawberry Shortcake around my finger. “Not too bad. There was some construction and a little traffic: nothing out of the ordinary. Something’s wrong with Maxine’s muffler though.”

“I thought your friend’s name was Cecilia.”

“What? No. I mean, yes, she is.” I shook my head. “Maxine is my Jeep. Why would Cecilia have a muffler?”

Margoe bit her lip, concentrating on the next blank and infinitely less interested in the world outside Mad Libs now that the gossip was over. “Why would your Jeep have a name?”

“Car naming is perfectly normal. People having mufflers is not.”

“Some people should be muffled,” Margoe murmured.

I frowned. “Who have you talked to lately that should be muffled?”

Margoe filled in another word and swatted her other hand in the air at me. “No one important. I need a verb.”

“Um,” I said, letting out a sigh. “Drown.”

“No, that’s morbid. Pick something peppier.”

I looked around, thinking, trying to switch out of guard mode. “Swing.”

“That’s a noun.”

“It can be a verb: to swing on a rope. The rope is the noun, and a person is swinging on it.”

Margoe shook her head. “Give me something that’s only a verb.”

“Let me think on it,” I said. I sat up, fingering my keys. “I need to talk to you about something.”

“Jingle!” Margoe said, pointing at Strawberry Shortcake and her keys in triumph. She wrote in the Mad Lib furiously.

“Jingle can be a noun and a verb.”

“But it’s peppy,” Margoe said, tapping my nose with her pen. “How was work?”

“Good,” I said, letting her distract me a little while longer. “Sydes was replaced by someone infinitely more difficult to joke around with. Jackie vacuumed, nearly causing the planets to align, but she was just pretending. I saved Madeline again, and Cecilia and Garrett snuck out early. Trev never showed.”

Mama Margoe paused mid-adverb. “Why does that name sound so familiar?”

“Trev? I’ve known him since kindergarten. ”

“No, Sydes.”

I laughed. “He was our head guard last summer, but guarding wasn’t the only thing he’d lie out in the sun for hours doing.”

Margoe nudged my shoulder. “Oh, that’s right! You went to the beach with him, and came back with that God-awful hickey.”

I jabbed her in the side with my elbow. “The worst one was from that last trip, and it wasn’t really his fault. Sydes was a good guy. He just had a thing for gnawing on necks.”

“How in world was that hickey not his fault? You went back to Carnegie Mellon with that thing still on your neck.”

“It was an accident.” I smiled, remembering. “He had such thick, shaggy blonde hair that when he would kiss my neck, his bangs would tickle my shoulder. I’d throw my head back, laughing, and that’s when he’d strike: when I was vulnerable and my eyes were closed against his tickling, golden curls. The whole experience was very vampiric. His curls would always cover his eyes, and he’d have to jerk his head to the side to swoosh them out of his face. The last beach trip, two weeks before classes started, we were behind one of the dunes at Island Beach State Park, and he was vacuuming the side of my neck when one of those tiny crabs that dig around in the sand scuttled up his swim trunks and pinched him. He yelped and bit me harder than he’d intended. My neck was already raw from the past half hour, and when he pulled away, blood oozed from an imprinted set of teeth marks in my neck, dripped down my collar bone, and ruined my lime green bikini top.”

Margoe stared at me, baffled. “It looked awful, but it didn’t look *that* awful.”

“Probably because he bandaged me up, using all of his hard learned first aid skills on me, so you wouldn’t think it looked that awful.”

Margoe huffed.

“He felt worse than I did. The whole time he rubbed anti-bacterial ointment on it he wouldn’t look at me. I couldn’t help but wince every time he touched it, and every time I winced, Sydes’ head drooped lower and lower until his face was completely hidden by all that thick, curly blond hair. I reached up and brushed the hair back from his face, and our gazes locked. His

eyes were a little shiny. His mouth was pinched in a hard line. He'd been working his way up to drawing blood with the intensity of his hickies, but he hadn't meant to draw blood that time. If he was going to bite me that hard, he wanted it to be deliberate and with me wanting it, being seduced by it, not by mistake. I turned my head and kissed his ointment and blood-smearred fingertips, and he leaned down and kissed the hickey, the gentlest whisper of lips on skin contact he'd ever shown. His hair tickled my shoulder, and when I tipped my head back, laughing slightly, he rubbed his cheek against my cheek, his lips resting against the vibrations of my throat." I sighed wistfully. "He'd been so good at kissing gently. I'd made out with him all summer, and I hadn't even known."

Margoe massaged her forehead with her fingertips. "You went on a few dates with him, didn't you? More than just that last, disastrous hickey incident. Why didn't you two stay together?"

I shrugged. "We were supposed to keep in touch, but he never returned my calls."

She patted my knee. "You'll find another one this summer. You always do, and hopefully the next one won't want to rip out your jugular."

I thought of Caleb, the complete opposite of carefree Sydes, but if he kissed with the same single-minded intensity with which he devoted to lifeguarding, I'd be sunk, jugular or no jugular.

"I need an adjective."

I placed my hand on Margoe's hand. "Could you not Mad Lib for a few more seconds? I need to talk to you about something." I hesitated, not wanting to bring up Frank, especially when I'd just shared about Sydes; I didn't want to ruin the afternoon, but bringing up Frank was going

to ruin an afternoon sometime soon anyway. “I’m, uh, going to go through the basement later this week.”

Mama Margoe pulled away from my hand. She put the pen to her lips and gnawed at the end.

“Is there anything down there that you know you want to keep?” I asked.

She ignored me, still looking down at the Mad Lib.

“If there’s something that you want, you need to go through those boxes, otherwise I’m throwing them out. I know I don’t want anything of his.” I tried to keep my voice steady, but the topic and Mama Margoe’s general avoidance of the basement pissed me off.

“I need an adjective.”

I clenched my hand around the Jeep and house keys until I could feel their grooves and tiny spikes dig into my palm. The breath I took was mostly menthol filled, but it tasted minty on the back of my throat if not fresh. I tried to keep my voice soft and normal, but the ends of my words seemed clipped, even to me. “His stuff has been festering down there for nine months now. I don’t know why you kept it to begin with, but it needs to go.” I paused. When she didn’t say anything, I held my breath and asked, “Do you want to help me?”

Margoe pursed her lips. “Disgruntled, perhaps.”

“What?” I whispered.

“Disgruntled is an adjective, isn’t it?”

“Distant, uncaring, and avoiding are all adjectives!” I snapped. “I need you to listen to me! The basement needs to be cleaned!”

Margoe dismissed everything with a wave of her hand.

I grabbed her wrist, forcing it back onto her lap. “Stop doing that. What I’m saying is important.”

Margoe tried to pull away again, but I wouldn’t let her. “You think it’s important.” She rasped. Her eyes were starting to tear. “The basement is fine the way it is.”

“It looks like one of those hoarder specials on Twenty-Twenty.” I closed my eyes and tried to calm down, but my pulse was throbbing through my ears. “He’s gone. He’d been gone long before he was dead. I don’t understand why we can’t get rid of it all, why we didn’t get rid of it when he didn’t come back for it.”

Her hand trembled under mine. “Your father loved you. He was just practical. We can’t just throw out—”

I looked up, incredulous. “What are you talking about? He was a shit!”

Margoe bit her lip. “That’s not true. He just—”

“You’re delusional. He was a father to *her* kids, not to me.”

“He loved you just as much—”

“He left me here.” I snapped.

Margoe didn’t respond. She looked down at the Mad Lib and pen waiting on her lap, her chin quivering dangerously. I took a deep breath, my heart aching, my hand shaking and stinging because I was clenching it so tightly, but I hated him and her reaction to him. The anger wouldn’t seep away like it did for Garrett. The hate and anger and undeserved grief clogged my throat. I had the sudden urge to twist Margoe’s wrist until it snapped.

I let go of her hand.

Margoe took up the pen.

I picked up my bag, and stood. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to come out the way it sounded. I never minded living with you. I love it here. I minded him not staying.” I opened the screen door and walked into the house. “Let me know if you think of something you want to keep.”

“Patri—”

The door banged closed behind me. I walked through the foyer, passed the stairs, opened the back door, and left on the other side of the house. We used to be able to see the creek from our living room window, but after the ’99 flood, the city council voted to build a dike, which now ran parallel with the creek’s entire length through Dansbury until the woods surrounding Lakeside. I walked up the wooden and earth steps of the dike to its flat top. The view from the dike was always worth the climb no matter the season. Trees lined the far side of the creek, and they turned orange, yellow, and red all the way up Buckbur Mountain in autumn. Icicles dangled from their branches in winter, sparkling in the sun’s reflection from the thin sheen of creek ice, and in the spring, when the entire woods thickened with green foliage, robins and canaries nest in the new growth.

I tried to enjoy the trees and the mountain and the birds and the shimmering hiss of the creek’s current veering around mossy boulders and sand spits; when that didn’t work, I searched through Popeye and Olive for a lighter and a pack of Blacks. I shook out a cigarette— my second this month— and scraped the bottom of the bag for a lighter. I could feel the smooth plastic of my cell, the rough, canvas fabric of my CPR pocket mask kit, the grooves of my keys, and Strawberry Shortcake’s soft, fibery, yarn hair.

“Stupid lighters,” I muttered. “I could squirrel away a five pack, and they’d all escape before I needed a hit.”

I clamped the Black between my lips and rummaged through my bag with both hands, but the lighter had jumped ship along with drier socks, Sacagawea dollars, and Lakeside's sound system as far as Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear was concerned.

Yanking the ties on my backpack closed, I glanced back at the house and contemplated my options. Getting reamed out for smoking would put a damper on my already dampened day, but walking to Pebble Harbor with only the trees, mountains, and birds was cold comfort compared to the burning suck and sugar of just one Black. I rolled my eyes at myself— as if there had even been a choice— dropped Popeye and Olive on the grass, trot hopped down the dike, snuck back into the house, and cushioned the back door shut behind me. Mama Margoe was still swaying on the porch swing, glued to her Mad Lib, oblivious. I tip toed down the hall. The floor creaked under my steps, but Margoe didn't notice. I banked right into the kitchen and out of her direct line of sight.

The prongs of the gas burners on the ancient Formica countertop gleamed at me. I waited a second, listening for the silence of the still swing or the fluttering whoosh of her book closing, but the rhythm of her concentration continued undisturbed. I press-twisted the knob burner, and the snapping ring of blue flame flicked up. I leaned over to eye level with the counter, the Black still clamped between my lips. The flame radiated heat against my face and the sharp, choking stink of gas clamped down my throat to my lungs along with the Black's clover and sugar as I inhaled. The cig caught the flame. I sparked the butt red in a last, short puff before standing straight and clicking the flames off. The steady rock of Margoe's swing still creaked from the front porch, so I cut the corner, slid down the hall, and eased onto the back porch without looking.

I sucked a deep, sweet drag of cloves in the slanting, afternoon heat. Mama Margoe would be pissed if she saw that I still smoked once in a while, so I picked up my draw string bag and walked along the dike toward the old Moyer place and Pebble Harbor, letting the nicotine calm my nerves faster and more efficiently than nature and my own inner dialogue combined, until my house disappeared around a sharp bend in the dike.

Two-thirds of the Black was gone in the three minutes it took me to reach Pebble Harbor. A blond boy wearing a black The Darkness t-shirt was standing on one of the larger boulders toward the middle on the creek, throwing stones at the water and stomping his foot. I walked slower and sucked down the cigarette faster. I finished up, dizzy from the nicotine rush, and minced carefully down the slope to the creek. The boy turned toward me, revealing the Batman logo on his swim trunks and disturbingly familiar turquoise eyes.

“No need to panic,” I said, waving. “I’m not stalking you, just ensuring you don’t give into the over-whelming compulsion to front flip into the rock bed.”

Bowl-cut Batman smiled. “My flips are pretty sweet though right?”

I shook my head. “I can do some pretty sick gainers that would make your head spin, but I do them off the diving board where it’s moderately safe.”

“Bullshit. You can’t do a gainer.” He pronounced “do” with a deep, pronounced “oo,” affirming my dreaded suspicion. He was still smiling though, so maybe this MacCallaghan had a better sense of humor than the last I’d encountered.

“I bet you a summer’s worth of safe diving that I can.”

“No deal. My dives are safe.”

“It only takes one bad jump.”

He snorted derisively. “I bet you’ve never even saved anyone before.”

“On the contrary. I saved my best friend my first day lifeguarding.”

“What did she do, choke on a chicken bone?” he asked snottily.

“Nope. He choked on a hot dog.”

“A hot dog?” He laughed. “How old was he? Five?”

I smiled. “Sixteen at the time. It was both our first days, and his mother was there. She cried and screamed in my face the entire minute I was Heimliching, but she’s baked me cookies ever since to express her gratitude.” I shrugged. “That was a horrible minute, but the cookies even things out.”

“First days always suck.” Bowl-cut Batman MacCallaghan turned around, chucked another rock into the creek, and stomped his foot.

“Are you doing some kind of ritual, or are you just taking out your frustrations on innocent pebbles?”

“I wasn’t frustrated until I started throwing them. They’re supposed to skip. They were skipping just fine on the lake.”

I picked up some flat pebbles on the shore and hopped gently onto the boulder next to his, careful not to slip on my ass into the creek. “The lake is still water, and the creek is moving water.” I handed him the pebbles. “These might work.”

He examined them, doubtful. “What’s the difference.”

I rolled my eyes. “Impatient you are, but help you I can. From the Force a Jedi’s strength flows.”

“What?” He bent over, shoulders shaking, as he laughed.

“Just have a little faith and throw the damn rocks.”

He sunk the first two and stomped his foot.

“Whip it more to the side, and believe it’s going to skip. You have to actually want it to skip instead of wanting to prove me wrong.”

“I *do* want it to skip.” His tongue peeped out of his mouth in concentration. He cocked his arm back, and he whipped it forward from his side like I’d said. It skipped three times before disappearing under the water. “Yes, finally!”

He turned back to me, his eyes wide and excited. I smiled back, helpless not to. Bowl-cut Batman MacCallaghan certainly had a more expansive, turquoise range of expressions compared to his kin.

I held out my hand. “You can call me Patty-Cake.”

“Call me Izzy, especially near Uncle Caleb. Otherwise, Isaac is fine.” He hesitated, then shook my hand firmly. “Can you bake me a cake as fast as you can?”

“No, but I can eat one really fast. As if you have room to talk, *Izzy*. Your jab at your uncle is being a female doctor on a lame cop-off of E.R.”

“‘Grey’s Anatomy’ is not a lame cop-off!” His slender lips disappeared in righteous indignation.

I barely suppressed a smile. “Good taste in music obviously has no bearing on TV taste. Lame cop-off or not, you’re still a female doctor on late night TV.”

“It’s spelled differently, and besides, I’m smart enough to be a doctor. You’re just a baker’s man.”

“Touché,” I said, laughing.

“So can I bum a cig?” Isaac smirked.

I blinked. “Come again?”

“I could smell it when you walked over.”

I shook my head.

Isaac tipped his head down, giving me the full throttle of his devastating eyes, but I'd been fending off the harsh, brooding version the entire day; batting a little eyeball at me wasn't going to get Isaac anywhere.

He sighed. "I promise to only do tricks off the diving board for the rest of the summer."

"No deal," I said. "Never reward before the desired action: classic b-mod."

"Huh?"

"Behavior Modification. Sorry. I was half psych in college."

"What was your other half?"

I smiled. "Film."

Isaac tipped his head to the side. "That's random."

"Not if you're a pop culture junkie who wants stable income."

Isaac pursed his lips. "So I have to do something desirable first, and then I can have one of your cigarettes?"

I sighed. "If you go an entire week without breaking any pool rules, the next time we happen to meet at Pebble Harbor—"

"Where's Pebble Harbor?"

"The next time we happen meet here, and I'm already smoking a cigarette, you can try it."

Isaac scrunched up his face, disgusted. "That's not even half worth it."

"That's all you're going to get." I offered him my pinky.

"Wow. I haven't pinky promised since forth grade," he said dryly.

I tilted my head. "So it's been, what, a year?"

“You’re hilarious.” Isaac wrapped his pinky around mine despite the sarcasm.

I turned around on the boulder slowly, and hopped back to shore. “It was great meeting you, Isaac, but I’ve got to return from whence I escaped.”

“You came here to get away, too?”

“That’s what Pebble Harbor is for,” I said over my shoulder. “Don’t let it fool you. Dansbury has places to hide for a reason.”

“I mostly like it here so far,” Isaac called.

“Lucky you,” I muttered, hiking up the steep dike on all fours and making my way back home to help with dinner.

Three

“Remind me again why we are walking three miles up and down Buckbur Mountain when Maxine would be perfectly willing to give both of us, plus this stupid sound system, a ride instead of rotting in Trev’s driveway?” Cecilia asked, trembling under thirty pounds of speakers and avoiding a rogue log.

The ground was awkward to walk on even without the added weight of the stereo because of its sharp incline and slippery leaves. We stumbled over tree roots, pricker bushes, and fallen tree trunks, and the stereo and speakers made it difficult to shift and correct our balance. I couldn’t see much more than a few yards in front of me before the trees and vegetation became black silhouettes layered against hundreds of even darker silhouettes against the navy-dusk sky. Hiking through the woods wasn’t the safest route up Buckbur Mountain to Lakeside, nor the quickest, but it was the most isolated.

I tried to blow a sweaty curl out of my face, but it stuck fast to my forehead. “Maxine is not exactly the epitome of stealth at the moment. May I remind you that I suggested we use your hybrid, and you responded, and I quote ‘I do not want Coraline to be implicated should this turn sour?’” I glared at her, but Cecilia couldn’t appreciate the full force of my frustration in the woods’ speckled dim. “Maxine was always good enough to risk implication.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry; we definitely should have just taken Coraline.” Cecilia groaned.

I nodded in agreement with the groan. “My arm muscles are marinating in Lactic acid, but we’re almost at Lakeside, and once we stash this baby back in the Hut, its all down hill from there.”

Cecilia laughed. “Literally, thank God.”

“Thank *you*, by the way, for calling ahead, so Trev had the stereo system out on the porch for us. It’s always nice to avoid face to face confrontation.”

“If we hadn’t let Trev borrow this thing for his party, we wouldn’t be here right now.” Cecilia wheezed out between gasps.

“If we hadn’t borrowed this thing for your party last year, we wouldn’t be here right now.”

Cecilia groaned in agony. “Trev was cool about leaving Maxine at his place?”

“He was as accommodating and unquestioning as always.”

“So are you two cool then?”

I tried to shrug, but my shoulders screamed in stereo-burdened protest. “I don’t know. He was like ‘Fine with me’ in the text, but he didn’t mention anything about the kiss or the yelling or me leaving. I’m not going to bring it up if he’s not going to.”

“Maybe he doesn’t remember any of it. Maybe he was blacked out, and he forgot all of last night.”

“Maybe.”

The full moon reflected off of the chain-link fence, and as we approached, I could just make out brief glimmers of shine through the thinning trees. My arms were shaking. The back of my A Change of Pace t-shirt was damp and clinging to my skin. Sneaking the sound system out of Lakeside and down Buckbur Mountain had not been as back-breakingly rigorous an excursion. Granted, I’d had Cecilia’s party in general and Dean Russiani in particular as motivation, and the only incentive driving the current endeavor was banishment from Lakeside, which I wouldn’t mind after making money this summer anyway, and possible imprisonment, which was unlikely considering Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear’s disciplinary action history. He could learn a thing or two from b-mod, not that I’d be offering advice anytime soon. Although with Scottish Aquatic Rambo on the loose, the chances of imprisonment probably increased a healthy couple percents.

I placed the stereo on the grass next to the fence as carefully as I could without pinching my fingers. Cecilia set the speakers next to the stereo before collapsing spread eagle onto her back, panting. “We’re here. We made it. I’m alive. We never have to do that again. Ever.”

I tugged at the collar of my shirt, attempting to achieve some air flow. The parking lot was empty. Crickets were chirping out of cadence with the cicadas’ vibrating hiss; nothing sinister enough to interrupt their racket appeared to have followed us out of the woods. The overlook from Buckbur Mountain of the valley nestling Lake Wimple was breathtaking. The unbroken horizon cupped the moon in Lake Wimple’s serene, liquid velvet reflection. I hadn’t gazed at the lake at night since we’d snuck into Lakeside last year, but appreciating its wonder

was difficult when five hundred dollars worth of sound system equipment was slumped in the grassy dew.

“Please tell me we’re going under,” Cecilia whispered. “I don’t think my arms can pull my own weight over the fence let alone the rest of this crap.” She nudged a speaker with her foot.

I turned away from the view. “Of course we’re going under. Over would be insanity.”

Cecilia choked on a laugh. “As if that hike wasn’t insanity.”

“Well, over would be a new level of insanity, even for us.” I walked to the fence, latched onto a chain-link, and pulled the fence up as far as the posts allowed.

Cecilia wedged the stereo and both speakers under the fence. “They’re in.”

I let go of the fence, and it snapped back in place with a shimmering rattle. The chain-link was rough with rust; I tried to shake out the sting and rub out the imprints from my palm and achy fingers with my thumb.

“Nose goes,” Cecilia hissed, and poked her own nose.

I shook my head. “I went in to borrow it. It’s your turn to replace it.”

“You went in to borrow it, so it’s your duty to replace it.”

“We used it for your party.”

Cecilia smirked. “Which you had a fantastic time at, as I recall.”

“My level of enjoyment doesn’t hold water in determining sound system responsibilities, and besides, Dean Russiani’s well-practiced lips had more impact on the overall satisfaction of my night than the sound system.” I smiled fondly. “He’s given me great deals on Maxine’s parts ever since. Wonderful mechanic.”

Cecilia shook her head in remembered awe. “I’d never seen him so gentle except for that one party for that one slow dance with you. Every other time I’d noticed him, he was beating the pulp out of the poor slob who had knocked down his lunch tray or slugging some bum who he’d heard roughed up that plain Jane, Emily Something-or-Other, or slamming his boot into that kid’s head who had cheated off his test and got them both F’s and a detention. Dean was such a hot-head, he could sniff out a man and a good excuse to fight him in a convent.”

I laughed under my breath, the broken puffs of hissed air like a whispered version of Maxine’s rev. “It’s not like anyone could fault him; everyone he took out had either started it or had it coming. Who in their right mind would slam Dean’s lunch tray to the ground and not expect instant unconsciousness? *Amy Evies* had a split lip for Christ sakes, and both Dean and the cheater probably would have failed anyway because Dean never cared about grades; he cared about the principle of a thing and pride, and above all, being on the right side of a fight, not necessarily the winning side, that was just a given, but the truly, morally, right side.”

“The temper of Sonny Corleone combined with Robin Hood’s fortitude for justice. What a guy.” Cecilia scrunched up her face, thinking. “What was that last song you danced to together? It was morose and acoustic, from that movie where the angel falls in love with Meg Ryan.”

I smiled, remembering exactly what song we’d danced to. I could still feel Dean’s SoCo-slicked tongue moving languid and hot against mine every time I heard Johnny Rzezniak’s smoky voice singing about a fleeting moment of living, breathing heaven in the midst of a world where no one understands the taste of knowing a person, clear but aching around the edges.

Cecilia waved her hand at me, annoyed. “Hint please.”

“I’d give up forever to touch you ’cause I know that you feel me somehow.”

“Iris!”

I held my finger up to my mouth and shushed her. “You should go in because you’re shouting. Geez Louise.”

Cecilia crossed her arms, thinking. “You were late to work today.”

“You snuck out early.”

“I unstacked more chairs than you.”

“I had a save.”

“I called Trev in advance to bypass confrontation.”

“I texted Trev to park Maxine,” I said lamely.

“Not even on Mars does a text out match a call.”

“I know,” I grumbled.

Cecilia lifted the fence for me, pleased with herself.

I bent and army crawled under. The grass was cold and dry against my arms and thighs, and the pointed ends of chain link scratched my back sharply. I gritted my teeth as it dug all the way down, only thwarted by my jean shorts from puncturing my ass. One of the speakers was blocking my way, so I took a second to push it to the side before sliding my legs under.

Just as I was about to tuck my knees and stand, Cecilia mumbled a strained, “Fuck,” followed by a shimmering rattle. Excruciating pain ripped up the side of my calf.

MOTHER FUCKER, I lipped. The pain stole my breath, thank God, because I wanted to scream my throat hoarse and then strangle Cecilia. Although Cecilia couldn’t scream while I strangled her, so that option was still up for grabs.

“Holy shit-fuck! I’m sorry!” Cecilia jerked the fence up, tearing it out of my calf.

I pounded the grass with my fist, struggling for silence.

“Go, Patty. Please. You have to move. I can’t hold it much longer,” Cecilia whispered.

“A warning like that would have been welcome before spearing my left leg with a rusted, metal rod,” I growled. I used my arms to shimmy myself clear of the chain link, desperately trying to keep my calf from brushing the grass and swallowing back the scream when it did. Cecilia let the fence snap back once I was out of range.

“I’m sorry.”

I snapped my eyes at her over my shoulder. Cecilia was hunched forward slightly, covering her nose and mouth with both her hands and blinking rapidly. I rolled over. Dirt clung to the front of my t-shirt and palms and fly, so I could add that to the list of likely pathogens, right under tetanus, contaminating my body. I sat up and carefully turned my leg to inspect the damage Cecilia and her slippery, weakling fingers had inflicted.

A semi-deep, vicious scrape sliced from an inch above and behind my inner ankle to mid-calf. Blood dripped rivulets behind my leg and seeped into the grass. Some of the blood was smeared across my shin. The cut was gaping slightly, like a gruesome, drooling mouth. Had I been a few inches further back, the fence probably would have gouged into the thick meat of my calf muscle. My head swam slightly. I closed my eyes and took a long breath. The cut was stomach-churning enough without indulging in what-ifs.

Cecilia bent down. She gripped the chain-link as if she were trapped behind the fence instead of me and whispered, “You look sick.”

I swallowed. “There’s a decent amount of leakage here.”

“How can you be squeamish after some of the accidents we’ve managed over the years?”

I shook my head. “Give me little kids with scraped knees and bloody noses, parents with compound fractures, and teens with puncture wounds any day. I manage other people’s emergencies just fine, thank you.”

“You are ten yards away from a first aid kit. Treat your leg like it’s someone else’s, stop the bleeding, clean it, bandage it, dump the sound system in the Hut, and get out.” Cecilia spoke slowly and distinctly. “I’ll be in the wind. If anyone comes, I’ll give an owl hoot. Pigeon call for the coast clearing. Human cursing for getting caught.” She said in her composed-lifeguard-under-great-duress voice. We stayed calm even when the blood was spurting because all we had to do was apply pressure and hold down the fort until real medical personnel arrived, except Cecilia and I were alone— we’d better be alone— and planned on staying that way.

I wobbled to my feet, turned around, and limped to the hut. Blood soaked into my sock and clamped sickeningly around my ankle. The canoe looked longer than usual in the dark as I approached. It rested against the side of the Hut, polished and underused. Its paddles had been tossed inside haphazardly. Their flat edges gleamed in the moonlight. I stopped next to the canoe, leaned into the Hut’s doorway without stepping inside, and flicked the light on. Even Misty would notice blood smears on the floor, so I walked into the Hut as quickly and smoothly as the zinging, throbbing pain would allow, stuffed my arms full of antiseptic wipes, peroxide, gauze pads, medical tape, antibacterial ointment, and a gauze roll, and walked back to the grass before I dripped anything incriminating onto the wooden floor. Cecilia was already gone. I eased the door shut behind me, not wanting a beacon attracting anyone passing by Lakeside Street. The sliver of light peeking out from the Hut’s doorway was enough to work by.

I tried to sit gracefully while only using my right leg, but my leg buckled about halfway; I plopped down sideways onto the grass. My hands shook as I tore open three of the gauze pad

packets. They were the size of my hand and about an inch longer than the entire cut. Stealing myself against the pain, I layered gauze onto the cut and applied pressure with the heel of my palm. Blood saturated the gauze instantly. When I pulled my hand away, the gauze tried to suction to my palm. I opened three more gauze packets, tearing them with my teeth, and layered them on top of the bloody gauze. When I applied more pressure, the blood soaked into that layer as well, but it only oozed completely through in the center. I kept the pressure tight, layered another cushion of gauze, and wrapped and taped the gauze roll around my leg to keep everything in place. Blood speckled through the third layer of gauze, but that would have to suffice; I'd worry about disinfecting myself after putting away the sound system.

The night was still pleasantly vibrating with insect song as I bent to pick up the stereo and toted the speaker into the Hut. My entire leg was pounding. It felt as if the leg itself was squeezing and relaxing and contracting and twitching, pumping blood out of my body instead of through it. I set the speaker on the table and made three more trips, one for each speaker and one to bring the first aid stuff back inside. By the time I finished limping back and forth, the outer layer of gauze was seeping, once again dripping down my leg in thick, windy paths, pooling between my ankle and already tacky sock despite the pressure, tape, and gauze.

I sat on the edge of one of the metal and plastic chairs in the Hut, its scrape against the floor jarring in the still, night silence. Just as my fingers had pinched the tape to undo the useless, sopping mass of gauze, a ridiculous, human hoot echoed from the woods.

I froze. My heart slammed, and I catapulted out of the chair, jammed all the wipes and wrappers and peroxide and tape into my pockets, and dove for the lights. At the last moment, my fingers twitched in agonized indecision over the switch. I doubted whether I should douse the lights. The darkness would help hide me, but if the person Cecilia was hooting about was already

through the locker rooms or had walked around the fence, they would see the light go off. Someone might be suspicious of a light, but the closing guard could accidentally leave the light on; a light in the Hut theoretically didn't guarantee a hoodlum inside. A light going off in the Hut, on the other hand, almost guaranteed a hoodlum inside.

I turned around, the light still blazing, and limp-tiptoed behind the first-aid closet. The wall was dusty and cobwebby. Something small and menacing scurried through a crack in the wall as I wedged myself into hiding. I shuddered. The soft crunch of soled feet on grass stole up my spine and tingled the back of my skull. I listened for the whining creak of the Hut's door opening and my impending doom, but the footsteps continued to crunch. They paced from my right to my left to right and back to left as if pacing behind the hut and— I crossed my fingers— outside the fence.

The footsteps stopped.

My heartbeat pulsed through my ears. I bit my lip. I held my breath, and when my lungs were heaving, I eased the air out slowly, my throat clogged with horror scenarios: Caleb tackling me to the ground with pink slips in hand, police officers chucking me into one of Danbury's stinky, bacteria-ridden, underused prison cells overnight without proper medical attention, getting my leg amputated from gangrene because of the lack of antiseptic to combat the tetanus and dirt and jail cell diseases, calling Mama Margoe in the morning and being chipper while explaining successful sound system theft, my failed attempt at sound system return, and needing money for a prosthetic now that I was unemployed, so she would only notice my tone and not the words and return to contemplating adjectives. I closed my eyes.

A footstep crunched. My heart clenched. They stepped faster than before and grew softer until they were no longer discernable over the thuds of my pulse. I let my breath out in a whoosh

and sucked in air before I collapsed. A minute passed. The footsteps didn't return. The crickets and cicadas gradually resumed their chirping and hissing. Another minute passed. The pulse in my ears calmed and transferred back down into my calf. I shifted all my weight to my right foot.

A reasonable facsimile of a pigeon call purred through the insect background.

I hobbled out from behind the first-aid closet and wiped sweat from my forehead as it dripped down my temple. This mission was taking longer than it should, nothing was going right, and I hadn't wanted to be here to begin with. *It would have gone smoothly with Garrett's help*, I thought. Cecilia's top-rate lookout skills had just saved my ass, but I was still feeling temperamental about the leg gouging. *She hadn't wanted to be here either*, I reminded myself. *I'd insisted that returning the sound system was necessary*. Sharing the blame was just dandy in theory, but I could feel the slow burn of resentment creeping into my gut despite the self-talk.

My knees almost buckled. I swayed against the first-aid closet, suddenly and desperately wanting to fast forward another couple hours, past sneaking out of Lakeside, hiking all the way to Trev's house, and driving home, to lying unconscious in my soft, crisp sheets. I could clean my leg at home— I refused to contemplate how long and how many more gauze pads it would take until I could actually get the blood to coagulate— but I couldn't skimp on returning the supplies before I left.

I opened the closet doors, unloaded the supplies from my pockets, and jammed them back onto the plastic shelves. My hands were still shaking. When I shoved the peroxide next to the bottle of alcohol, the alcohol nudged the pocket masks which toppled into the log-in binder. The binder tipped precariously on the edge of the shelf, and a loose-leaf paper resting on it slid off and fell in great, sweeping plunges to the floor. I caught the binder and carefully bent to pick up the sheet of paper. As I was stuffing it back into the binder's sleeve, I noticed that it had all of

our names, the hours we worked, and how much money we were making. I frowned. Mr. Snyder didn't normally keep the pay chart with the log-in binder.

Garrett, Cecilia, and I had eights written next to our names from today. Trev, Jackie, and Misty had extra hours from last week, but we were all earning eight dollars an hour, which averaged to about a six hundred and forty dollar paycheck before taxes. Misty and Jackie had six hundred and twenty at the bottom of their columns, Trev had five hundred and eighty, and Caleb had three thousand, six hundred and forty. I paused, thinking that maybe I'd lost more blood than the considerable amount I thought I'd lost and was hallucinating, but when I squinted closer, the extra digit didn't disappear. He had a ten next to his name where the rest of us had eights—head lifeguard came with a raise— but the extra three thousand didn't come from a lousy extra two dollars an hour. I'd eat my whistle if the pool was raking in that kind of money. A town double Danbury's population couldn't even support that kind of salary, not on Mr. Snyder's entry fees.

I stuffed the paper back into the binder and shoved the binder onto the shelf, vowing to solve the mysterious pool fairy contributing to Caleb's pay chart in the near future, a future in which I'd indulged in hours of blissful sleep and all 5.6 liters of my blood were accounted for. I closed the first-aid closet, flicked off the light, limped out of the Hut, shut the door behind me, looked up, and stopped short. I blinked, long and slow, but that didn't change who was standing behind the fence.

Cecilia was waiting where she had been standing before I'd gone into the Hut, and Trev was next to her, leaning on the chain link, his fingers hooked into its hollow, metal diamonds. He was half a foot taller than Cecilia, a couple inches taller than me, but when his green-tipped hair was gelled in thick, pointy spikes, he looked closer to six feet. His hair wasn't spiked now; it

hung smooth and straight above his eyebrows, over his ears, and shaggy around his neck. The tag on his yellow t-shirt was peeping out the front, flattened against his Adam's apple.

“The night may be young, but we've aged years waiting for you.” He waved his hand, urging me forward.

I walked closer and hooked my fingers near his in the chain link between us, trying to look casual but mostly using it for balance.

Trev gaped at my bloody leg. “Jesus Christ, Patty!”

“Hold the fence for me, would you? I need out before catastrophe strikes again.”

“Catastrophe wouldn't strike if you didn't go plunging into it,” Trev said wearily, but he lifted the fence for me none-the-less.

I flattened myself on the grass and crawled under the fence. “Try not to let go. I don't want my head whomped off.”

“I'm really sorry,” Cecilia whispered.

When I cleared the fence, Trev released the chain-link, and he gripped my waist. He yanked me up, twisting my leg as he turned me to face him. I clenched my teeth to hold back a scream. My leg gave as he set me down, stinging and throbbing from the twist, and Trev wrapped his arms tight around me. He pressed my head down to his shoulder and my body flat against his.

“You know Patty, it's stunts like this that ruin a person's good name,” he whispered, petting my hair. “You drive me crazy.”

“People's good names only get ruined if they're caught doing stunts like this. My name remains untainted.” I patted his back tentatively. “You're smothering me.”

He grazed his hands smoothly up my sides and upper arms to my shoulders. I shivered. He gripped my biceps firmly. “What are you doing on the mountain? Didn’t you get enough hours at Lakeside for the day?”

“Nah, just making up for the hours you skipped.” I lifted my arm to swipe a curl out of my face and casually dislodged his grip. “Besides, it seemed like such a beautiful night for a leisurely stroll. I’ve always admired the view of the lake from atop Buckbur Mountain, haven’t you?”

“Don’t be flippant.” Trev wiped a hand through his hair and parts of it stuck together in spiky clumps from leftover gel, so he looked like a frazzled, punk, porcupine. “Tell me you hadn’t intended to walk all the way down Hollander Road by yourself.”

“No. I was planning on walking down Hollander Road with Cecilia.”

“Do you want to get run over by a speeding hick?”

I stared at him, nonplussed.

“Obviously you don’t really give a damn,” he muttered.

“You forgot the ‘Frankly, my dear.’”

The vein in Trev’s forehead throbbed. “Do not quote at me right now.”

I turned to Cecilia and jerked my thumb at Trev. “Was this who the hoot was for?”

“I was already here by then,” Trev said. “There was a cop. He probably saw the light on in the Hut.”

I was talking to Cecilia, I thought, but I tried to tuck my hair behind an ear and kept my complaints to myself instead because Trev was staring at me with such frustration and concern and blatant adoration that I felt awkward even looking at him let alone speaking.

“Let’s just hope it was Officer Lewis. He couldn’t detect his way out of a paper bag,” Cecilia muttered.

“Nothing like Misty’s older brother, Grégoire,” I commented.

Cecilia frowned. “Who?”

“I mean Ray. Grégoire was his alter ego.”

“Ah, yes,” Cecilia said, smiling. “Grégoire.”

Trev shook his head. “It wasn’t Officer Lewis.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“I didn’t recognize him.”

Cecilia and I stared at Trev, and the silence between us slowly mounted into appalled horror.

“We’re fucking surrounded!” I whispered savagely.

Trev stepped back, his eyes blinking wide.

“How could you not recognize him?” Cecilia asked. “We know everyone.”

I laughed. The ending huffs drew out into a grating, stuttering sob. “That would be a negative.”

Cecilia turned to me, looking skeptical. “Who the hell don’t we know? The last person to move here was Garrett, and that was eight years—” Cecilia’s voice trailed off as the light dawned, and her scrunched face smoothed into undeniable dread. “MacCallaghan.”

I nodded. “Have you met the oldest MacCallaghan?”

Cecilia shook her head. “I didn’t even know Caleb’s brother was a cop.”

“He’s the new chief of police.”

Trev was frowning. “I didn’t even know there were two MacCallaghans.”

I glanced scathingly at Trev. “Actually, there’s three, but Douglas’ son seems like a, um—” I wanted to say “hoodlum,” but Trev got testy when I brought up the social separation between the yuppie offspring and the rest of us creek kids. He’d always had a line to balance too, so I coughed and said, “the outdoorsy type.” I turned back to Cecilia. “He fits right in, but if Douglas is anything like Caleb, we might actually be in trouble.”

“And well you should be! The two of you can’t just traipse through the woods alone this late at night. It’s dangerous. I can’t even look at your leg, Patty,” Trev said, staring at my leg. “When will you realize that between laws and common sense, there are just certain things you can’t do?”

I turned to Trev, grinding out a smile. “Laws and common sense are simply restricted potential.”

Trev nodded warily. “Potential disaster.”

“Did you come out of instinct, or was there a higher being involved?”

Cecilia ducked her head. “I may have had something to do with that.”

I shifted my gaze slowly and menacingly at Cecilia, my resentment simmering. “May have?”

“I called him after you went into the Hut. What was I supposed to do, carry you down the mountain?”

“You were supposed to hold the fence,” I hissed.

“Is there a problem with me being here?” Trev asked.

I sighed, feeling torn. “I didn’t think you’d want to be involved.”

Trev crossed his arms over his chest, his biceps flexing and filling out the sleeve of his t-shirt. “You and Cecilia are stranded here without Maxine. Cops are sniffing you out. You’re

wounded and need a doctor.” He shook his head reproachfully. “I’ll ignore the rest if you let me help.”

“A doctor isn’t necessary.”

Trev stared at me.

“I just need to get home, sanitize it, and rewrap it. No biggie.”

He gestured to the limp, heavy, clotted wad of gauze and tape dangling uselessly from my leg. “Looks like you did a real swell job the first time.”

I clenched my hands into fists. The smart sting of bruises on my palm from squeezing my keys earlier today doused some of my frustration. “I’m not arguing with you. I’m tired and angry and in pain, so I’m very grateful that you’re here, but I need your help, not your criticism of what you think I need.”

“What do you think you need?” Trev asked evenly.

“Maxine and a ride home.”

He stepped closer, not enough to touch but enough that I had to resist the urge to step back. “You don’t have to go through it all on your own. I can be there for you if you’d let me.”

I glanced at Cecilia. She was gazing intently at a nearby tree branch. I turned back to Trev. His face was imploring and so openly hopeful I felt panicked. “I’m not ‘going through’ anything. Slapping a Band-aid on my leg is not exactly a two-person job.”

“You know that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“This isn’t the time for that conversation.”

“It’s never the time for that conversation.”

We’ve had that conversation three times, including just last night. I sighed. “Please, Trev, just—”

He touched my face, smoothing his coarse thumb across my jaw line. “Let me—”

I grabbed his hand away from my face and entwined my fingers with his to soften the blow. “Please. Take me home.”

He hesitated and searched the depths of my eyes. I tried to convey pleading, healthy anticipation without flinching. I don’t know what he saw because if truly saw me, he’d know how much the burden of keeping his heart whole— a heart I’ve always cared for but never wanted— chafed the friendship we’d enjoyed a long, nearly forgotten, time ago. His hand convulsed in mine, as if the decision between what I wanted and what he thought I needed was too much to bear. He finally nodded.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“I don’t like any of this. If I’m willing to be here and willing to help and willing to ignore everything that’s illegal, I think that you should be willing to accept the help I’m offering, not some half-ass version of it.”

“Driving me home is not a ‘half-ass version.’ It’s the help that I want.”

“I don’t have to be here.” Trev stepped back, shaking his head slowly. “I’m not always going to be here.”

I bit my lip. “I didn’t ask you to come.”

“I know. You never do.” He turned around. Trev’s back was so knotted that his t-shirt shifted slightly as his muscles tensed. “We’d better get going before another cop wanders up here. I parked Maxine a block away.”

Trev started walking toward the stone steps that led down to the parking lot. Cecilia and I followed. No one spoke on our way to Maxine. Trev stayed ahead of us the entire block, and Cecilia lagged behind to match my limping pace. She let me take shotgun, so I wouldn’t have to

climb over the chair to get into the back seat. I winced at Maxine's belching howl when Trev turned over the ignition, her mufflerless hacks harsher in the insect droning silence than in the bustle of day. We coasted down Buckbur Mountain, getting green at both lights. Trev stopped at Cecilia's house first.

"Thanks for the ride, Trev," she said.

I bent forward with the seat, so she could climb over and hop down onto her driveway. She hesitated between me and her house, unsure. I took a deep breath. The resentment was still there and had unsettling potential, but the love was still there too.

"I never got the chance to tell you how cute your new bangs are," I said, leaning down. "They look great on you."

She smiled in relief, and we touched cheeks and made kissy noises. "Thanks."

"No worries," I whispered. "Mission accomplished. We're out and no one died, was permanently maimed, or got caught. Cake for us."

"Your leg is maimed."

I grinned. "That's why I added 'permanently.'"

"Chocolate cake for us," Cecilia said, nodding.

She turned and snuck back into her house. Trev coaxed Maxine onto Hazen Street, and parked at my house. He cut the engine, and we stared ahead out the windshield, doused by the sudden silence without Maxine's lumbering racket to fill the tension. I picked at my thumb nail. Trev didn't move.

"How was your last semester?" I asked.

Trev shook his head ruefully. "Are you seriously asking me about school?"

I shrugged. “We haven’t seen each other in nine months, and last night doesn’t count because we didn’t really talk. We just argued. Kind of like we are now. I want to know how you are. I want to catch up, but all you ever want to do is talk about us. There is no us if we can’t even talk to each other.”

Trev was quiet for a while. I breathed in the cool, floral, starlit night and decided to wait him out. It wasn’t too long before he unbuckled his belt and slumped in the seat. “Last year went really well. I have to stay an extra semester because I fell a few credits short, but I don’t mind.” His smirked. “What’s dropping a class or two to make sure I finished the final cuts on *The It Gal* for the New York International Independent Film and Video Festival.”

“Oh my God!” I jumped in my seat to face Trev full on. “You got *The It Gal* into the New York Film Festival.”

He blew onto his nails and shined them on his shirt. “Did you expect anything less?”

Unthinking, I leaned over the console and threw my arms around his neck.

“Congratulations. Of course I knew you’d get in. That film was brilliant, but knowing you’ll eventually get in and actually getting in are completely different.”

I drew back and Trev leaned forward and suddenly his face was a blur in front of mine. Our lips grazed. He breathed haltingly, tilted his head, and angled deeper. I drew back sharply.

“What?” Trev asked, and he actually had the nerve to look confused.

“What do you mean ‘what?’” I snapped. “Why do you always have to make everything into something? Why do you always have to ruin it?”

“Why would making a thing something ruin it?” Trev snapped back.

I sighed. “How are you going to get back to your house if you plan to leave Maxine here?”

Trev fingered the seams on the steering wheel. “I only live a couple miles up the mountain. Walking home isn’t the issue.”

“Well—” I hesitated, torn between wanting to actually talk and wanting to just get the hell in bed. The silence stretched out. “Thank you for the ride.” I looked up to meet his beating gaze. “I really appreciate everything you’re doing and everything you’re restraining yourself from doing.”

He turned to look out the windshield again. “Misty wouldn’t make me walk home.”

I frowned. “I could have driven Maxine and dropped you off if that’s what you wanted.”

“That’s not what I wanted.”

A second of suspended tension passed before I realized what Trev was implying. I pounded the dashboard with the flat of my palm. “Damn it, Trev, you’ve got to put a cork in it! I can’t take it!”

Trev looked taken aback. “What are you taking about?”

“You push and you push and push for it all the time.”

“That’s not all I want.”

“I know exactly what you want. You want everything, but I can’t give it to you.”

“It doesn’t have to be like Colton. I’ll be gentle. It can be however you want it to be.”

“I don’t know what I want, but I know I don’t want what you want,” I said, my voice thick and wet.

“What do I want?” Trev looked more confused than affronted now that I was struggling not to cry.

“You want to go on dates and be steady and hold hands and have sex in Maxine on lunch breaks and slap my butt in public and get married and buy the empty couple acres of Old

Orchard on Willow Lane across from Jackie and Misty and have three kids and grow old and die together.”

His mouth opened and closed, stunned. “We don’t have to have three.”

“We’ve been friends since kindergarten. We were best friends until around high school when you started pushing, and you haven’t stopped since. I’ve always known exactly what you want. I just don’t want the same thing.”

“What’s wrong with what I want?” Trev asked, distinctly more affronted.

“Absolutely nothing, except that you’ve cookie-cutted me into your wants without considering mine.” I tried not to blink, so the tears wouldn’t spill over. “I’m not staying in Dansbury. That’s not the life I want.”

“I can be whatever you want.”

I don’t want you, I thought and said, “What about Misty and what she wants?”

“This isn’t about her.”

“It’s about knowing people and not being selfish.”

Trev crossed his arms. “You absolutely refuse to compromise. That’s being selfish.”

“Maybe, but I can’t compromise my happiness for yours because in the end, you’d be miserable too.”

“I’d never be miserable with you.”

I threw my hands in the air, exasperated beyond anger. “You’re with me right now, and you’re miserable.”

“Because I’m not *with* you.”

I closed my eyes. “I’m calling it a night,” I said, massaging the frown between my eyebrows. I braced myself against the dashboard and doorframe to lower my legs gently to the ground. “Thanks again.”

“Pat—”

“Goodnight, Trev.”

I limped to my front door. The porch light was on, a swarm of gnats and moths whirled crazily around it, so when I turned around, I could just make out Trev kicking the loose stones from the pavement as he walked up Hazen Street. His hands were jammed in his jean pockets as he ambled home. His shoulders slumped. I used to watch him from my bedroom window when he’d walk home after a day of flying kites or exploring the woods or swimming in the creek. Before Garrett had moved in next to Cecilia and before I’d lost my virginity and before Trev had kissed me, we’d been friends without the gnawing hopes and expectations, and he’d walked home happy to kick the stones after a day with me.

Four
Tuesday

Maxine was empty, which was impossible because I’d filled her to nearly overflowing after the drive from Pittsburg, but her thin, orange gas gauge needle glared back at me as it pointed accusingly at E. On the off chance that her gas gauge was broken again, I screwed my eyes shut and twisted the ignition. The engine cranked healthily and continued to crank healthily without a catch.

“Shit!” I slammed my hand hard against the steering wheel. “I love you, Maxine, you know I do, but I will trade your rusted ass in for a 2009 if you don’t get your act together. I’d never let fourteen years come between us, but you actually need to start.”

I turned the key again, but the starter still refused to catch. “Work, damn it!” I twisted the key three more times out of desperation before giving up and draping myself over the steering wheel dejectedly, her leather cool against my cheek. Strawberry Shortcake swayed from her chain, mocking me with her button nose and her hands on her hips. She hitched up her skirt to carry a bundle of berries in her apron, flashing white panty hose. Without lifting my head, I reached over to the passenger seat and rooted around in Popeye and Olive for my cell phone.

Garrett answered on the third ring. “We’ve got a problem.”

“You’re telling me,” I scoffed. “Maxine’s running low on mojo.”

Garrett paused. “You just filled her up the other day.”

“I know. Can a Jeep sprout a fuel leak from an angry muffler?”

“Beats me.”

The sun broke through one of three fluffy, billowing, incompetent clouds. “Tell me you don’t need a ride to work,” I said, my depression plummeting.

“I’m already at work.”

I frowned. “Then what’s your problem?”

“Tell me you’re not still hemorrhaging,” Garrett said, sounding put-upon.

“It’s just a flesh wound.”

“Spare me. The massive blood stain behind the first-aid closet says otherwise.”

I sat up, my chest constricting with dread. “Fuck.”

“My sentiments exactly. And I repeat: are you still bleeding out?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Patty-Ca—”

“Seriously. It’s amazing what an hour of pressure and two packs of gauze pads can accomplish. I may need to change the dressing and gauze halfway through my shift and pop another half dozen Ibuprofens, but for all intents and purposes the cut from *dropping an electric knife while I was slicing a particular stubborn slab of pot roast* is currently on the mend.”

“That’s really lame.”

“I was shaving my leg with a straight razor?”

Garrett snorted. “Stubborn pot roast it is.”

I sighed. “Who’s showed so far? Will I be noticed?”

“Two down and no call ins. Jerr will notice.”

“Misty and Trev?”

“Jackie and Trev. I’ll tell Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear that you’ll be late before he strains his forefinger. What should we do about the stain?”

“Distract Scottish Aquatic Rambo and bleach the damn thing. If you can’t do it on the sly by the time I get up the mountain, I’ll take care of it.”

“Roger that.”

I snapped my cell closed, yanked Strawberry Shortcake out of the ignition, stuck her in my back pocket, and hopped out of Maxine, determined not to limp. The gas cap was accounted for and tightly screwed shut. Walking to her front, I lifted Maxine’s hood to check the engine. The top of the engine near the spark plugs, fuel pump, and fuel filter were all gasoline free. I clenched my hands into fists. Something had to be broken somewhere because twenty-five dollars worth of regular, unleaded gasoline should still be sloshing around in her tank. Dropping to the ground, I wormed my way under Maxine until my face was even with her fuel tank. Everything looked worn and damaged from this angle, but none of the hoses were cracked.

Nothing was dripping gas onto the pavement. Nothing was leaking, but the engine wouldn't catch. Had the starter cranked slower, I'd have thought that my battery was dead and the gas gauge was just broken. I remained on my back on the pavement, unsure what I'd missed.

"Your leg is bleeding," said a disembodied, Scottish accent.

I wiggled my way out from under Maxine. Caleb towered over six feet above me. His white t-shirt strained across his firm chest muscles. Yesterday's wife beater had been the safer bet. Wife beaters had more stretch; the T-shirt looked about ready to split with one powerful flex. I swallowed and tried to suck in some much needed oxygen at the same time. My throat seized. I cleared my throat in an attempt to avoid a coughing fit and still coughed.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"I just breathed the wrong way."

"I was referring to your leg."

I looked down at my bandage, and true to his word, the gauze was a little spotted. "Oh, that's just a scratch. I'm actually more worried about Maxine."

Caleb nodded. "I heard she was thirsty."

I jerked my gaze back to him, surprised that he'd kept up with the conversation without needing the basics of car naming explained. His red swim trunks were baggy. My eyes happened to glance up his thick, tanned thigh and inside the suit before settling on his offered hand, but a pair of blue and white plaid boxers was more effective than a fig leaf. My face heated anyway. I grasped onto his hand, and Caleb pulled me to my feet.

"You know Maxine?" I asked.

“We’ve never formally been introduced, but from the context clues I’ve gathered from conversation with Garrett, she is your Jeep Wrangler,” Caleb said. His voice wobbled suspiciously, like swallowed hiccups.

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re laughing at me.”

He shrugged. “Personified or not, the engine won’t catch without gas, so I brought these from the supply room.” He kicked one of two five gallon red gas cans.

I stared at the gas cans, dumbfounded. “You came all the way down Buckbur Mountain just to fill up my gas tank?”

“I had good reason to believe that you probably wouldn’t leave Maxine in her time of need, so consider it more a service to the community. By bringing you gas, I get you on the stand, and the general populous gets you instead of Misty watching their children flail about in the water.” Caleb shuddered slightly.

“Misty may be a little vapid, but she’s competent as long as she hasn’t had a recent hair appointment.”

“Black lowlights. She’s relegated herself to scrubbing tiles,” Caleb said, sounding incredulous.

I winced. “Yeah, that happens sometimes, but she always does a decent job. They need to be scrubbed once in a while anyway.”

“That’s what a pool attendant is for.”

I looked around in a mock search for said pool attendant. “Dozens have just been popping out of unseen crevices like rabbits lately.”

Caleb’s jaw tightened. “They will be once I hire them.”

“Jerr—” I coughed. “Mr. Snyder can’t afford to higher more workers for his pool.”

“Then it’s a good thing you’re not head guard, so you don’t have to worry about financial problems.”

I nodded, attempting to keep my face neutral when I wanted to spit. “Good thing.”

Caleb shifted his eyes to Maxine and then settled back on me. “Have you checked for a leak?”

I blinked, thrown by the absurdity of the question. “Of course.”

Caleb raised his eyebrows. “Why ‘of course?’”

I rubbed out a scratch on her gleaming, forest green hood fondly. “Maxine is my baby, and I know how to take care of her.”

Caleb stepped closer, his arm extended, and slid his hand over the split, tan, leather of her passenger seat. His fingers were long and thick. The hairs on his knuckles were bleached from sitting out in the sun. I remembered how warm and moist and rough they’d felt wrapped around my hand and imagined how warm and moist they could be from being rough other places.

“Good thing you don’t have an actual baby,” he said, and I forgot about his fingers.

I jerked my eyes to his face, which wasn’t much different from the capable thrill of his hands, but the sting of his comment doused some of the appeal. “Just because I know how to take care of her doesn’t mean I can afford it. She can live through a tree branch stabbing her leather, a broken muffler, scratches, rust, and squeaky brakes without immediate attention. If I took her to the mechanic after every little bump and bruise, I wouldn’t have the cash to replace the battery if that were to crap out, like not being able to afford a heart transplant for your kid because of indulging in yearly physicals. Getting her leather refurbished might make life better, but a battery is necessary to living. I’m not a bad car-owner. I’m just a poor car-owner, so I do what’s necessary for survival. Maxine understands that we girls have to stick together.”

Caleb let his hand drop from the seat and crossed his arms. His chest muscles didn't burst through when they flexed.

Sturdy shirt, I thought.

"Stick together against what?" he asked.

I lifted my chin. "Arrogant, well-to-do men and their snooty, well-to-do sports cars."

"Who says I'm 'well-to-do?'"

I let my eyes go wide and innocent. "Who says I was referring to you?"

Caleb turned toward his BMW gleaming in the morning sunshine behind us. He shot me a pointed look, his expression tense and unyielding. He bent to pick up one of the gas tanks, and suddenly his facial muscles weren't the only ones tensed and unyielding. I ogled his ass for the half a second it took for him to stand straight again but restrained myself from indulging in a poke to compare its firmness to his chest and proving once again— from Eve and her apple, Helen and her Paris, Scarlet and her Ashley, to Anita and her Jean-Claude— the mindless distraction of the forbidden. I turned around to unscrew Maxine's gas cap before my imagination did a hit and run over common courtesy and reminded myself that according to the history of literature, and as a result pop-culture, indulging in the moment only leads to banishment, death, turmoil, and gaining the mistrust of your coworkers.

"Why didn't Jeremy offer you the head lifeguard position?" Caleb asked, pouring much needed nourishment into Maxine's tank.

I stuttered, regrouping from fiction. "What? Why?"

"Lots of reasons. You know everyone. The guards mostly like you, except for Jackie, but she doesn't seem to like much that doesn't involve self-beautification. You know how the pool is managed, and you're alert, precise, and calm."

“Thank you,” I said, taken aback. “But I meant why do you want to know?”

“Because I want to know why I’m even here?”

“To protect unsuspecting parents against Misty’s attention span?”

Caleb leveled his gaze on me. “Even with a staff filled with Cecilians and Garretts, I wouldn’t need to be here.”

“You gathered all that in one day?”

“First impressions do seem to form within that time period, Patty-Without-The-Cake.”

I blushed so fast I almost crawled back under Maxine. “Mr. Snyder did offer me the position when he realized Sydes wasn’t returning, but I didn’t accept.”

“Why not? You might have been able to get Maxine yearly physicals.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, those extra two bucks would really put me in the green.”

“Making Maxine’s life a little better isn’t worth the extra responsibility?”

“That wasn’t it,” I said, shrugging. “I didn’t think I was coming back this summer. I had a job lined up as a counselor at a summer camp that specializes in children with learning disabilities, attention deficit disorders, and behavior disorders, so I was really excited about finding a job in my major before thinking about grad school.”

“And?”

I looked at the sky, but absolutely no hope of a decent lightning strike was in sight. “Frank died shortly after I left for the fall semester, so I came back for one last summer to help my grandmother clean out his crap from the basement since she’s recently developed pack rat tendencies.”

“Who was Frank?”

“My father.”

Caleb was quiet for a long, awkward moment.

I kicked a stone at Maxine's front tire.

"I'm sorry about his death," he said, finally.

"I didn't really lose anything that wasn't already gone."

He paused. "Then I'm sorry about the camp."

"Yeah," I said, blinking fast. "Me, too."

"How did he die?"

"Nothing impressive. He hydroplaned into the big oak tree between Colton and Trev's house on Hollander Road and catapulted through the wind shield headfirst into the tree trunk. The creek can flood pretty badly during storms, even with the dike."

Caleb tilted his head, looking empathetic and confused. "Were you expecting something impressive?"

I shook my head. "Just another dumb ass move on his part: not wearing his seat belt. The crash wasn't even that bad, minus the head trauma, which could have been avoided. The tree fared better than he did."

He turned back to Maxine. She'd finished the first gas tank.

"So you're from Scotland, aye?" I asked, diverting the conversation to something infinitely less saturated in inner turmoil.

Caleb grinned slightly, but it only held for a moment. "Originally, but I've been in the states for quite some time now. We actually just moved from New York."

"How much time qualifies as 'quite some?'"

He started on the second gas tank. "We moved from Scotland nine years ago."

"Where do you like it better: Scotland or the States?" I asked.

“Scotland, but you’ll ne’r hear a Scot say otherwise.”

I laughed, enjoying Caleb’s over-dramatized accent as much as his muscles. “Then why did you move?”

“I don’t care to speak of it,” he said, and he stunned me with the solemn depths of those devastating turquoise eyes. I stopped suddenly, realizing exactly who was making me laugh: humorless, uptight, inventory checking, Scottish Aquatic Rambo with the questionable extra pay check. His muscles and hands and accent and phony sympathy had bamboozled me into comfortable conversation, the snake, but even as I berated myself, I was simultaneously drawn back to the warmth of all that tanned, masculine beauty, helpless to feel anything less than lukewarm toward him while he fed Maxine so efficiently. Although tipping a gas can’s spout into a fuel tank wasn’t rocket science, it was thoughtful, helpful, and at that very moment, exactly what she needed. I shook my head in an attempt to refocus from the riptide of mistrust, appreciation, and desire.

“Is something the matter?” Caleb asked.

I shook my head. “Contemplating the percent possibility that the gas evaporated out of Maxine’s gas tank.”

“That would be zero,” he said slowly, as if to the mentally unstable. “You did not buy her gas.”

“Yes, I did,” I said firmly.

Caleb gestured to Maxine with what could have passed as an inefficient karate chop.

“Obviously not.”

I sighed with great, though not infinite, patience. “Gas is necessary for survival. I would never skimp on gas. I didn’t get the gas gauge, the muffler, or the leather repaired for the specific purpose of not skimping on gas.”

Caleb still looked doubtful.

“Garrett and Cecilia were there too. I haven’t talked to Cecilia yet, but Garrett remembered my gas purchase without a direct prompt, such as ‘Did I buy gas the other day?’ I simply mentioned that I had none, and he remembered me exchanging money for Maxine’s gas. The question is where the hell did it go?”

Caleb nodded reluctantly. “Could you have used more gas than you realized?”

“From two trips up and down Buckbur Mountain? I think not.”

Caleb paused. “Two?”

I contemplated throwing myself under someone else’s car, preferably one that was moving. “Well, yeah. Once for work, and twice to check up on Trev. He was sick, remember?”

Caleb frowned. “How could I forget? I was reminded this morning. The twenty-four hour bug has unfortunately morphed into the forty-eight hour bug. Why didn’t you just stop at his place on the way home from work?”

“I wanted to bring him soup.” *Just peachy. Now I have to inform Trev that he’d eaten soup yesterday.*

“He doesn’t have soup that you could have made at his house?”

I shrugged. “Does this matter?”

Caleb shrugged. “Not in the least.”

I waited for our noses to extend through the air between us and touch, but reality held strong.

Caleb turned back to Maxine. “If you definitely bought gas against a shadow of a doubt—”

“Beyond an atom of a shadow of a doubt.”

“*and* if you only drove forty miles, the only other possibility I can think of, besides evaporation,” he rolled his eyes, “is that someone siphoned Maxine’s gas.”

I made a face at him, disgusted. “Who would siphon Maxine’s gas? Dansbury is a small, family oriented, bumble-fuck town. People do not siphon.”

Caleb shook his head. “Someone must have siphoned. It only takes one. Anyone put Maxine on their hit list recently?”

“Of course not,” I said automatically, and then I remembered yesterday’s surprise harassment letter.

“What?”

I closed my mouth and shook my head quickly. “Nothing.”

“Bullshit. You just thought of something.”

“The yuppies outside of Hazen Street do not personify,” I said, unsettled both at the letter rearing its ugly head and Caleb’s acuity.

“They may not have it out for Maxine, but they may have it out for her driver. If you think I’m letting this go—”

“I’ll just take this thing and finish up on my own if that’s alright with you,” I said, stepping closer and reaching for the gas tank as Caleb stepped closer, bearing over me to block my reach with his height and sheer intimidation. We collided, caught off balance by the other’s sudden movement, and his right leg brushed the inside of my left calf. Raw, unexpected pain flamed up my leg. I hissed sharply and staggered back a step. Caleb caught me around the waist

one-handed and steadied me against his side. The other hand still emptied gas into Maxine. His hold was solid but not crushing like Trev's; I could step away if I wanted, but I could feel the heat of his hand around my hip, the heat of his arm across my back, the heat of his shoulder against my face, and the heat in me skyrocket. He smelled like wood smoke and sun block. I breathed slowly until the pain lessened. I fisted the t-shirt at his peck to stave off the smell and the pain and a scream of frustration. His grip tightened. I saw goose bumps pucker over his neck, and I had an overwhelming, insane urge to bite them.

“I doona think only a scratch would hurt so badly,” Caleb murmured, his voice thickened by sarcasm and something infinitely more predatorial.

I detached my hand from his shirt and forced myself to pull away. He held me for one hope-filled moment before his arm dropped back to his side, and I was left to balance in faint, fading pain and rampaging lust all on my own.

I dug Strawberry Shortcake out of my pocket.

“Interesting key ring,” Caleb commented.

“Yeah, well, we have the same dessert in our name, so we're practically family.” I snapped on the gas cap. “Thank you very much for the gas.”

Caleb dug into his suit pocket and pulled out his key chain with a yuppie automatic lock button for his well-to-do, yuppie sports car. “Stop the siphoner or remember to buy gas, but either way, you need to be on time for work from now on.”

I sighed in resignation. Scottish Aquatic Rambo had returned full force. ““They drew first blood, not me,”” I muttered.

He stared blankly.

“Sylvester Stallone?”

Caleb clicked a button to unlocked his BMW and turned to leave.

“Oh please,” I half shouted, exasperated by his complete unwillingness to even attempt to break his face with a smile. “Like Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear will actually do anything beside shake his finger at me if I’m late.”

Caleb stopped and slowly pivoted to face me. His hands clenched at his sides. “He cares. Although Jeremy may not be stern with the guards, I also care, and I will take swift action against any of you who continue to take advantage of his good nature.” He shook his head, scowling. “What is my nifty nickname?”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re being ridiculous.”

He stared at me, waiting.

“I already told you. I know your real name, so you don’t get a nifty—”

“You know Jeremy’s name, but he has a nifty nickname. Lying is not charming. The only illusion is how you perceive yourself.” He turned and walked to his BMW.

“You don’t understand,” I called after him. “It was from a movie.”

Caleb got inside, shot me one last parting sneer, and slammed the door without saying a word.

I walked around Maxine’s rear and hopped into the driver’s side. “You’d think I’d learn, Maxine,” I said, jamming the key into her ignition. “Maybe he’d appreciate the effort if I quoted European films, like *Love Actually* or *Braveheart*. Mel Gibson is American, but he can do a wicked accent too.”

Even though I’d just watched Caleb pour ten gallons of gas into Maxine for the past fifteen minutes, I still closed my eyes when I twisted the key, desperate for her rev to catch, and when it did, surprised relief swept through my body, leaving me weak with gratitude. I patted her

dashboard. “Keep it up, and maybe I’ll be able to save for the gas gauge or the seat or the muffler— whatever’s cheaper. If you lose anymore gas, I’ll be late to work, get fired, and then I’ll be forced to sell you for parts to buy something reliable. It would kill me to dismember you, so *don’t lose anymore gas.*”

When I finally drove up to Lakeside, changed into my guard suit, and walked to the Hut, Misty was giving the ping pong table a rub down with a soapy rag. She glanced up as I passed, looking tragic and concerned as she bent at the waist with her butt perked up. Her long blond bangs covered one eyeliner-rimmed eye, and her longer black hair swooshed in rhythm to her circular scrubbing like an emo, Precious Moments, pinup girl.

“Patty?”

I paused, my hand half raised to open the Hut door. “Hi, Misty.”

“Did everything go alright with Mr. MacCallaghan?”

I nodded. “Maxine just needed some gas.”

“You can get that at a gas station, you know?”

“I know.”

Misty’s face brightened with sudden, fervent excitement. “Do you want to see my new tattoo?”

“Uh.”

Misty pulled aside her bikini top to bare the outer half of her right breast. She spared me the sight of her nipple, but the amount of flesh she exposed was probably equivalent to one of my entire breasts. A purple butterfly with pink-tipped wings rested on the plump curve next to her nipple, and its shimmering path of orange and red stars and blue-green dust trailed up her breast, squiggled over her chest, and ended in a faded point over her collar bone.

I stared, transfixed by how delicate and pretty and ethereal the smoky, winding trail was as it led temptingly to the strategically placed butterfly.

“Do you like it?” Misty trembled with anticipation, and the butterfly swayed.

I swallowed. “It’s gorgeous.”

Misty beamed. “Dean’s sister, Emilie, did it for a hundred on account of me having the biggest natural breasts she’s ever seen in real life even though Dean quoted me one-fifty, but do you really think they’re that big? They just look that way because I can’t gain two pounds even drinking three protein shakes a day on top of regular meals.” Misty shook her head in travail as she stretched her bikini top back over the expanse of skin and butterfly. “I’ve got to get back up to one ten else they won’t let me try out for volleyball next year; isn’t that ridiculous? I only have one semester left.”

“I’m sure they’ll let you try out no matter what. If you still play like you did in high school, you’re the best spike they’ve got.” I hooked my thumbs on Olive and Popeye’s drawstrings. “How’s Trev feeling?”

Misty leaned forward, testing the resilience of her lifeguard bikini top against the mighty pressure of double D cups and gravity. “Can I talk to you about something personal?”

“Sure,” I said, thinking *why are you telling me secrets when you have Jackie?*

“You’ve known Trevor for nearly twenty years now, right?” Misty whispered as if Trev might overhear from his room a half mile away. “Don’t you two have a little history?”

“Very little.”

She bit her lip in what would have been indecision on a less provocative woman, but Misty just looked depraved. “Over all those years did he ever kiss you?”

I glanced to the guard stands where Garrett and Cecilia were stationed. They were scanning half-heartedly, looking respectively impatient and tense. Caleb was standing in the middle of the zero degree entry, his expression disapproving as he waited for me to sign in and replace Garrett for rotation. I sighed. At twelve feet, Jackie was determined to appear uninterested, but she kept dropping her whistle, knocking over her water bottle, and fiddling with her flip flops, giving herself plenty of reasons to inadvertently spy instead of focusing on the twenty potential drowning victims in her zone.

“I’m sorry, is this too personal?”

I turned back to Misty, resigned, but her expression was suddenly so intense— her wide, dark eyes bored into mine and the hand clutching the dirty rag trembled from her weight and tension— that the need to settle her distress calmed my own irritation. I set down Popeye and Olive in the grass.

“Should I not have asked?”

“No, it’s fine that you asked.” I tucked my hair behind my ear, but it sprang out, bouncing back against my cheek. “Trev kissed me once, the summer before high school.”

“How was he for you?” Misty said softly.

I shrugged, attempting nonchalance. “A kiss is a kiss.”

Misty shook her head fervently. “Don’t you think I’ve overheard your stories, Patty? Cecilia and Garrett ask you about your kisses all the time. You must have, what, hundreds of them stored up in vivid, permanently imbedded detail?”

“Not hundreds,” I whispered. “Only eleven.”

“And you remember them all?”

I nodded warily. “Sure. The ones that count.”

“Did Trevor count?”

“Yes.”

“Well, now *I’m* asking you: please, tell me about Trevor’s kiss?”

I sighed heartily, attempting to tuck hair behind both ears, but neither strand cooperated.

“Trev’s kiss isn’t that great of a story.”

“Please, tell me? Tell me the way you tell the others?”

I wasn’t sure if she meant ‘others’ as in other kisses or as a pronoun for Cecilia and Garrett, but either way, I knew what she wanted. “Well, like you said, Trev and I have known each other for twenty years.”

Misty nodded, captivated, and I hadn’t even done anything exciting yet, not that it was about to get exciting.

“We were best friends through elementary and middle school. We’d swim in the creek in the summer, sit on the bus together during the school year, make snowmen and go sledding, and fly kites as soon as the snow melted. Besides the days I got together with Cecilia, Trev and I basically hung out every free moment of every day for nine years straight.”

Misty pushed out her lips in a frowning, lopsided pucker, looking confused. “Do you two even hang out anymore?”

“No.” I thought of last night and felt guilty. But that had been against my will; it didn’t count.

“Why?”

I held up a hand. “I’m getting there.”

Misty smiled suddenly, her white teeth a shock against her blood-glossed lips.

“What?” I asked.

“Don’t you always have to say that to Garrett and Cecilia?”

I laughed. “I have to say that to everyone. No one enjoys suspense. Anyway, that summer before high school, Garrett moved here from Claremont, and I started splitting my free time between him and Trev. A week before school started, Trev and I were sitting in the grass, quietly eating the last scoops of Mama Margoe’s Panda Paws ice cream on chocolate-rimmed waffle cones and watching the patterned blips of lightning bug flashes against the heavy, rushing creek rapids and damp, orange sky when—”

“How do you remember exactly what you were eating? Didn’t this occur eight summers ago?”

“Food is very important in general, but the ice cream is integral for this story in particular; Panda Paws is my favorite, and Margoe only buys it once a year. Do you want to hear this story or not?”

Misty nodded, her bangs fluttering.

“Then stop interrupting. I’d only gotten through half of my Panda Paws before Trev broke the silence to ask me to date him. I was so surprised I choked on a chocolate chunk. He thumped my back a couple times, and when I could breathe again, I told him that I didn’t want a boyfriend; I loved being his best friend.

“He’d looked down, demolishing chunks of grass from the hillside, and muttered, ‘You’d date that fag if he actually wanted you.’”

Misty gaped, the lipstick and eyeliner going well with outrage. “He said that?”

I nodded. “I got up to leave, and Trev stood with me, grabbing my arm. He pulled me tight against him, desperate for me to agree that we would date and live happily ever after and deaf to everything I said, as usual, but the arm he grabbed was holding my Panda Paws,

chocolate-lined waffle cone. His lips ground hard against mine— I could feel the swell and grooves of his teeth through our smushed lips— as the last scoops of Mama Margoe’s Panda Paws toppled off my cone and onto our bare feet. We both pulled apart to stare dumbfounded at the lump of cold vanilla and peanut butter cups melting on our skin, and all I could hear was Trev calling Garrett a fag.

“I yanked my arm out from his hands and screeched, ‘That was the last of the Panda Paws, you bastard!’

“Trev grabbed me around the waist to reel me back in. I shoved at his chest, and he said, his voice nearly squealing in panic, ‘I’ll buy you all the Panda Paws you want if you date me.’

“I stopped struggling, looked up into his frantic, drowning, brown eyes and whispered, ‘I don’t want to date you.’

“He froze, his hands still bruising around my hips like an anchor as his eyes welled. My chest aching, I leaned in slowly, whispered, ‘I’m so sorry,’ and laid my lips gently over his. They were pillow-plump and gave under the slight pressure of mine. The kiss only lasted a little more than a second, but he smelled sun-baked and chocolaty. His breath hitched and expelled in a steady, savoring rush, and just as he opened his mouth, I swept my tongue across his full, vanilla-chilled lower lip and pulled away.” I sighed regretfully. “My heart kept beat throughout the entire kiss.”

“Which one?”

I flattened my lips. “The one that counted.”

Misty didn’t say anything. She looked down and began scrubbing again in rigorous, soapy dirt circles.

“I’m getting the vibe that this is kind of important,” I said tentatively. “Is there something specific that you wanted to talk about? You don’t have to tell me now. We can get together tomorrow if you want or later today if—”

“Could you just not tell anyone that I asked?” Misty said, staring fixated at the puddle of sludge she’s created on the ping pong table.

“Sure thing.” I looked back at the pool where Garrett and Cecilia were refocused on the water and their twelve splashing patrons, resigned to waiting their turn. Caleb was pointing savagely at the guard position next to him where he wanted me to stand— no rotation for me— looking hostile. Jackie was reaching for her octopus claw hair clip. She jerked her gaze back to the pool when she realized I was watching her watching me, and under the first twelve foot diving board, a jump below and two strokes from a hair primping Jackie, a seriously distressed swimmer was gurgling his way toward the ladder, sinking faster than he was swimming.

My heart slammed heavily into my gut. I took off at a sprint toward the pool, kicking off my flip flops as I ran. The grass was still slippery from the morning dew, so I took shorter, more careful strides until I hit the concrete. My calf muscle twitched. I ignored the slow itch of seeping blood down my leg— chlorine did wonders against bacteria— because the man’s head was already under. His arms flapped like he was trying to fly, but with every recovery motion, he sank farther from the surface. My soles didn’t have calluses from the pool deck this early in the summer, so the concrete bit into the bend of my toe as I curled it around the pool’s edge and stride-jumped into the water. The cut on my calf sang on contact. I clenched my teeth and scissor-snapped my legs closed as hard as I could kick, but without the rescue tube, I couldn’t keep my head above the water.

Million of little bubbles rushed up everywhere. For the few seconds it took for me to reach the surface, I lost sight of the man. Maybe he was deeper than I'd thought. Maybe he was directly under me, or I'd jumped past him. I felt stupid and disoriented. The view of calmly watching from outside the pool is always completely and inexplicably different from the view of adrenaline-spiked saving from inside the pool, but knowing that I should have been at my stand and should have grabbed a rescue tube and should have known exactly where he was didn't do the man any good. I held in my frustration and panic and breath. Jackie should have been the one performing the save anyway.

I broke the surface. He wasn't in front of me. I twisted around, and two beefy arms wrapped solidly around my neck and pulled me back under. My face was suctioned into the doughy muscle of his chest. I couldn't breathe out. I couldn't break free. My heart vibrated my chest with each weighted, laboring pound. Everything was bubbles, skin, yawning silence, and a swiftly burning, inevitable urgency. My hands found his arms. I gripped his biceps and leveraged my chin into the crook of his elbow.

He was still kicking which kept us from hitting the bottom but not powerfully enough to break the surface. If he would stop moving, we'd sink, and I could push off the pool floor to dislodge his hold. His knee came up and pounded my hip. I gagged, choking. If I was sure I could outlast him, I'd have conserved my breath until he fell limp. I'd still drag his ungrateful ass out of the water and restore him to consciousness, but everyone was probably watching. Caleb was watching. The man kicked me in the shin. I winced, and I kneed him back.

Tucking my chin the best I could, I pushed up on his elbows. His grip slipped to around my mouth, releasing the terrible pressure on my esophagus. I pushed harder, groaning with the effort. The friction of his hold scraped over my ears and slowly smashed my nose up and flat

against my face. My breath was starting go. I kneed him hard in the inner thigh and heaved up on his arms, and my head finally popped loose from his hold.

I scissor-snapped my arms up to pencil dive to the bottom, but before I could move completely out of his way, the man flailed his arms, trying to latch onto me again. His elbow clipped me in the mouth. Sharp pain split through my face as my tooth punctured my lower lip. Air bubbled out of my mouth, and I sank to the bottom of the pool in a daze. Sunlight filtered through the bubbles and outlined the man's body as he kicked and waved his arms and drifted away, giving up on me now that I was so far below. I kicked off the bottom of the pool in streamline, not quite as desperate as I should have been, as I had been before the elbow strike, but realizing sort of vaguely that air would be a good idea.

I broke the surface. Caleb's shouted orders and Cecilia's softly trilling whistle penetrated through the muffled rush. I sucked wind in a choking gasp. The air grated against my raw throat, tore my lungs wide, and felt wonderful. My face tingled in a flash of heat. My lip throbbed. The man was just below the surface, his movements lethargic instead of jerky and panicked. I treaded behind him, out of reach, and Caleb threw me his rescue tube like a shot-putted torpedo.

It splashed a few feet to my right, its roped handle unraveling mid-throw and stretching tight over the water's surface as Caleb held onto the looped end. I grabbed the rope and yanked the tube under my armpits. Its slick, rubber surface was sun-warmed. The man's back was in front of me. His arms barely moved. I leaned over the rescue tube, reached down so my cheek dipped into the chill water, and scooped him up to the surface by his under arms. I squeezed the rescue tube against the water's suction to keep it wedged between us. Using the momentum of his body and the rescue tube like a high bar, I pivoted us both onto our backs. A chop splashed over me. I closed my eyes against the water and tucked my head to the side, so his head smashed

hard into my shoulder when he fell back against me instead of my face. The tube was still tight under my arms, keeping me afloat, and across the man's back, keeping him afloat, and I could feel his deep, labored breaths puffing against my ear. Caleb tugged on the rope. The water rushed past as he reeled us to the side of the pool.

“Keep leaning back. You're gonna be just fine,” I wheezed. The adrenaline was tapering, and despite the embarrassment of being part of the rescued when I was supposed to be the rescuer, I didn't help Caleb pull us to the wall. The energy needed for kicking was beyond me. Granted, the rescue tube took nearly all his weight, but balancing him on the rescue tube and keeping my face out of the water was enough of a challenge after the aerobics he'd just put me through.

His breathing was starting to steady.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, breathing heavier.

“The ladder didn't seem that far away,” he said, his tobacco roughened voice sounding embarrassed.

“Oh, that's alright Mr. Russiani. It happens,” I said, recognizing Dean's voice thirty years older and chain-smoke strangled.

Caleb cushioned my shoulder and Mr. Russiani's hip from hitting the wall when we reached the side of the pool. He bent down and took hold of Mr. Russiani's wrists with his opposite hands so as Caleb lifted Mr. Russiani out of the water, he spun and sat him on his butt on the edge of the pool. Caleb moved towards me. I waved him off. He hesitated but he turned back to Mr. Russiani to ask him a barrage of standard questions— Are you alright? Do you hurt anywhere? Are you catching your breath? Do you need further assistance?— as I floated on the surface, off the mark on all those questions myself.

Caleb helped Mr. Russiani to his feet and walked him over to the nearest white, plastic lawn chair. I pushed away from the rescue tube and clung to the side of the pool for a moment before pulling myself out of the water. My arms trembled. I knelt on the hard scrape of the deck and focused on breathing deep and even. Blood dripped off my chin and onto the concrete. I grazed the top of my lower lip with my fingertips and winced.

“Patty-Cake!”

I looked up.

Misty had replaced Caleb at the zero degree entry. Her eyes were tear-dropped with worry. Although she was staring at me instead of at the pool, she didn’t seem particularly put upon for having to guard with her newly dyed hair. Cecilia and Garrett were half off their chairs and ready to jump down and save me, so I gave them a thumbs up.

Garrett leaned back, looking doubtful.

Cecilia remained tense.

I stood, my legs wobbly, and walked with carefully measured steps to the Hut. The gauze and bandages hung off my calf, barely covering the scrape and leaking thin, pink streams from its chlorine-bloated mass. My entire calf was throbbing with its own heartbeat; the first aid closet had better still be stocked with ibuprofen.

I picked up Popeye and Olive when I stumbled past it on my way into the Hut, shut the door behind me, and raided first aid. As I dumped an armload of supplies onto the plastic table, I realized that I hadn’t even signed in yet. Eight dollars an hour wasn’t much; my two minute save just earned me a quarter, a bloody lip, a bruised hip, a strangled throat, and the satisfaction that Dean would see his dad later today as if it had been any other. The satisfaction made the rest

worth enduring, which was the reason I never really minded only getting twenty-five cents, but I still wanted my quarter.

I shook out my hands before opening the log-in binder. The clock hands were pointing at four passed nine, but I'd probably noticed Mr. Russiani going down around eight fifty-five. He shouldn't have been my save anyway, so I signed myself in for eight-thirty. Even with an extra half hour, Caleb would still clean house. I could forge an entire eight hours, and our checks wouldn't even out. I glanced over my shoulder at the closed Hut door, bit my lip in indecision, and shuddered in agony from biting my lip. A warm slide of thicker blood oozed down my chin; I smeared it off with the back of my hand. Caleb was probably still tending Mr. Russiani. I flipped to the back sleeve of the log in binder, but the pay chart wasn't where I'd tucked it.

"Where are you?" I whispered. I glanced up to scan the shelves. Pocket masks, rubber gloves, Band-aids, gauze, medical tape, and various antiseptics were lined up or piled in neat rows, but the pay chart wasn't tucked anywhere that I could readily see. I slammed the binder on the table, sure that Caleb had pulled a slick one, and a sheet of loose leaf wafted gracefully to the floor. I crouched to pick it up, and the slicing burn in my leg throbbed. The knot on my hip ached. My hand shook from holding in the pain as I pinched the corner of the paper with my thumb and forefinger. The back of my hand was smeared with blood, and I didn't want to smear more anywhere else.

I used one of the metal folding chairs to straighten and held on to it for balance as I read over the paperwork. The figures on the chart hadn't been altered since last night. I glanced at the Hut door. Caleb couldn't see me, but anyone could walk in. I looked down at the pay chart, wishing I had enough time to compare his hours to his salary. If I could figure out how much extra he was swindling Mr. Snyder daily, maybe I could figure out where he was stealing from. I

indulged in one last glance at the closed Hut door before placing the pay chart on the table. I ripped out one of the sign-in sheets from the back of the binder, flipped to the current sign-ins, and copied Caleb's hours from the past two weeks.

My pen hovered over the page as I finished writing the last few numbers of his hourly sign-in column when I heard Caleb shout, "No, Misty. Stay there for now," his voice loud and getting louder. I jammed the pay chart back into the binder, shoved the binder into the closet, and zippered my pilfered copy of Caleb's pay chart and hourly wages into Olive and Popeye. Caleb opened the Hut's door just as I sat at the table. The binder was in place, my copy was hidden, and I focused on radiating calm innocence until I noticed the watered down blood puddle in front of the first aid closet where I'd been standing. I stood again and opened the closet under the pretense of needing another roll of gauze to smear the puddle. He hadn't noticed it, and if he did, he might not associate it with the puddle I'd left for Garrett and Cecilia to bleach this morning. Most people don't notice things they're not looking for. Although Douglas was Caleb's brother; he might have been looking.

I reached for the gauze.

Caleb came up beside me. He wrapped his warm hand around my wrist. "Sit down. Let me take care of it."

I blinked, thinking for a moment that he meant smearing the blood puddle, but then I realized he was looking at my leg, not the floor. "I can patch myself up," I said, trying to discreetly tug my arm out of his grip.

Caleb scraped his calloused hand up my forearm and bicep and to my shoulder, spreading chills over my arm, neck, and chest, and heat everywhere else. He turned me to face him. I tried to smile reassuringly. The cut on my lip stretched, and I batted my eyelashes at him to keep the

tears that smarted from leaking, praying that I looked more flirtatious than twitchy. Although, if twitchy moved him to let go of me so I could concentrate, I'd work with what I had.

“I wasn't questioning your first aid skills; I'm sure they're right on par with your lifeguard skills.”

My gaze slid to the right. “I should have signed in right away, and I should have been at my stand instead of chatting with Misty. I know. It won't happen again.”

“Sit down,” Caleb said.

I sighed.

He let his hands graze off my arm and fall to his side as I stepped away. I sat in the chair next to the table reluctantly. Caleb snatched a pair of rubber gloves from the closet. He kept his eyes locked on me as he inserted his hand into its tight, powdered, fingers with rubber band-like snaps against his wrists. I could feel their accusing heat as I stared at the dry erase board. He swung the chair from under the table to face me and sat. I shifted my eyes to meet his unyielding stare. We stared at each other. He smelled like baby powder and latex, and I was starting to shiver from being wet in the shade. He bent down, wrapped his hands around my ankle and gently under my calf, and scooted closer, so his knee touched mine. I thought he was going to pick at the gauze, but he straightened in his chair and pulled my left leg into his lap. I inhaled, and my breath stuttered.

“That was a damn good save,” he said.

I blinked slowly, swinging back from expectations of disapproval. “What?”

“You reacted quickly, and the escape was lifeguard manual perfect. I get a few bonus points for the assist though.”

He unwound the gauze slowly. The blood-to-chlorine ratio of the gauze pads became more blood and less chlorine as he peeled through the layers. Everything unwound easily without the usual stick and tug of dried blood because whatever blood had glued into the gauze layers had been undone by the pool water. The last pad was soggy and stained completely through. Caleb peeled it from my skin carefully to expose the newly torn six-inch cut on my calf. My skin felt lighter and chilled without the extra padding. Most of the scab that had formed had washed out in the pool, but flecks of dried blood still dotted the gauze. The cut itself was clean, the edges ragged and puffy.

Caleb stared at it for a tense second. He smoothed his slick, latex covered finger down the healthy skin of my shin beside the cut before pinning the heat in his turquoise eyes on me. “This is more than just a scrape. I’m surprised Dr. Carol didn’t stitch it.”

I shrugged. “It must not be as bad as it looks.”

Caleb looked back down at my leg and shook his head. “You have great instincts, and you don’t panic— thank Poseidon— because Mr. Russiani would have had you otherwise, but you need to take care of yourself as well as you do others.” He picked up the bottle of peroxide.

“I don’t think Poseidon’s specialty was pools. He was more of an ocean man.”

He poured peroxide on my leg. I jerked back and hissed sharply. Caleb held my calf against his legs firmly, so even as the cut fizzled white and foamy and I squirmed, my leg remained immobile, locked in his grip. “I’m not here to call you out on the save.”

“Then what are you here to call me out on?”

Caleb wiped the excess peroxide off my leg with a clean gauze pad. He hovered the peroxide bottle over my leg with the threat of another dousing. “Is there something I should be calling you out on?”

“Is there something you’re accusing me of?”

He dumped another round of peroxide on my cut. I winced against its sting. I tried to pull my leg off of his lap, but Caleb leaned forward and anchored my leg in place with his weight.

“Don’t answer my questions with questions; we’ve already got one of those.” He poised the peroxide half-tipped over my thoroughly cleansed leg again. “Have you heard anything about one of the guards coming here after hours?”

I glared at him through my lashes.

He tipped the peroxide. I jerked in anticipation, but nothing came out. I could see an eager droplet dangling from the bottle’s lip. “I’ll ask again. Do you know if anyone came to the Hut after hours last night?”

I shook my head, still glaring.

“I don’t like secrets, especially secrets that involve business, and I don’t like people who keep secrets.” Caleb put the peroxide back on the table. He reached for the Neosporin. “You care about the people who come to swim here and you’re competitive, which makes you great at saves, but there’s more to lifeguarding than saving lives.”

“Really? Because I was under the impression that saving lives was the most important part of lifeguarding.”

“Coming to work on time, being dependable, and taking care of Lakeside is also important.”

“I’ve always taken care of Lakeside,” I snapped.

“If you hear a rumor of anyone stealing from Lakeside,” Caleb continued smoothly, “I’d expect you to come to me the way you’d come to me for anything first-aid related.”

I leaned forward. “I’ve heard several rumors since I’ve been home. There are a lot of grandmothers in Dansbury with not much to do and a lot of time to do it in. Gossip spreads fast in this town, so I’d be careful about poking at certain rumors.”

“Losing anyone who has worked here previous summers would be unfortunate,” Caleb said calmly. He leaned closer. Our faces were inches apart. “But I will not tolerate anyone who risks Lakeside’s financial well being.”

“None of the returning guards stole from Lakeside last night.” I whispered hotly. “If you’re concerned, recheck inventory.”

“I have.”

“And?”

“Nothing’s missing this morning.”

I crossed my arms. “Then what’s the problem?”

“The stereo system that had been missing yesterday is here today.”

“That doesn’t seem like a problem to me.”

Caleb squeezed a blob of Neosporin on his finger. He swiped it casually in my cut. I flinched. “Did you previously steal the stereo system and break in to the Hut last night to return it?”

“The stereo system was never missing,” I said cautiously.

“Come again?” Caleb glanced up, still wiping in Neosporin.

“Check the inventory sheets we filled out yesterday. The stereo system was accounted for.”

“There is an error on the inventory sheets from yesterday,” Caleb said, sounding annoyed. “Your sheet and my sheet do not match.”

“Your sheet?” I asked.

“I gave everyone different items to check, but I had a master list. We disagree on the whereabouts of the sound system.”

I smiled. I was still nervous, shivering, and in pain, but the rest of me was just impressed. “The error must be yours. I saw the sound system in storage yesterday during inventory, and I checked it off the list.”

Caleb grunted, unsatisfied.

“I’m not fond of people who keep secrets either. You might be head guard, but most of us have been guarding here since the hour we turned sixteen. If this pool shuts down because someone is hurting Lakeside’s finances, there will be a lot of angry people, myself included. I will find that person, and I will bring him down. I promise you that I will not only get back every cent, but I’ll tear out his innards and use them as a new whistle lanyard. Mine’s getting a little threadbare.”

Caleb’s Neosporin-gooped fingers paused mid-smear in my cut. He studied me for a moment, his expression indecipherable. “Then we’re on the same side.”

I crossed my arms. “So it seems.”

“Then why do my instincts know that you’re holding out on me?” He double layered gauze pads on the cut and wrapped it firmly with a gauze roll.

“Maybe you need better instincts.”

He leaned forward suddenly and cupped my jaw. My mouth opened in surprise and protest and unexpected yearning. I hadn’t been kissed in so long, not that I was going to be now, especially not by Yuppie Embezzling Rambo, but the tension was there anyway: a dark look, a soft hitch of breath, and the sharp edge of suspended potential. Caleb’s eyes were riveted to my

lips. I refused to close my eyes, to delude myself into believing in the heat between us, so I stared at him staring at my mouth and grew hotter. His thumb pressed on my lip and rolled it out. He stared at the cut a moment longer, my heart pumping a moment's quicker, his eyes darker than a moment before. I held my breath.

“My instincts are just fine,” he whispered, and he smeared a thin blob of Neosporin on my lower lip.

I swallowed. “Then where’s the trust?”

He leaned back, and his head tipped to the side curiously as he scratched his thumb along my chin. The tacky slide of blood adhered his glove to my skin.

“Just because I trust you, Geraldine, doesn’t mean I’m stupid. Clean off your face before you come back out on duty. You’re looking a little gruesome.” Caleb walked out of the hut as abruptly as he’d walked in.

Five

The rest of my shift was significantly less eventful than its beginning. Misty saved Madeline when she toppled over near the mushroom, much to her hair dye’s chagrin, but she ran into the water without hesitating and only complained after the baby was upright and breathing. I had another save, but I used the Life Ring to pull Luke to the wall instead of throwing myself guns ho into disaster since he was just faking anyway. My body could only take so much of Caleb’s tender first aid and interrogation.

Isaac slid down the tube slides three times. Each time he stopped himself as he had yesterday, but instead of standing on its edge and doing a flip, he looked at me pointedly and dropped himself safely, if not subtly, feet first into the pool. When he surfaced, I gave him a

thumb's up. He smiled cockily. Caleb looked back and forth between us, unsure of what exactly was going on, but certain that whatever it was, he didn't like it.

Isaac twirled a misty off the diving board as my shift ended. I'd called out, "Nice air, Izzy! Very tight!" and Caleb tripped over the inch step from the grass to the concrete pool deck. His eyes narrowed to calculating slits as he stared between us.

Before signing out, I mentioned the pay check mystery money to Cecilia and Garrett. We agreed to meet up at Cecilia's for dessert sometime after I plowed through at least part of the basement. I'd bring the charts I'd copied, and Garrett would come bearing some form of sugar to sedate us. I drove home thinking about Caleb and Lakeside's bankruptcy and generations of future unemployed lifeguards. Although I wouldn't be devastated if I were laid off, I'd been swimming at Lakeside for two decades. Everyone in Dansbury swam at Lakeside practically since birth; witnessing it crumble and deteriorate was an epoch I'd rather not live through.

Mama Margoe was sitting on the porch swing with her right leg tucked under her bottom when I parked Maxine on the street in front of our house. The tip of her left Miss Piggy slipper rocked her gently. Her kinky, salt and cinnamon hair was yanked back into a bun, but a few wild strands at her ears and temples floated around her lime green eyeglasses. The arms of the glasses were blue with lime green swirls that caught the sunlight as she hunched over, considering her Mad Lib. She flicked her Newport automatically, dumping ashes onto the porch planks. The porch step creaked under my step. Margoe's head shot up, surprised, and she scattered the ashes with Miss Piggy.

"You shouldn't sneak up on people like that. It's rude," she said half-heartedly, writing something in the Mad Lib.

"Maxine does not sneak."

Margoe tapped her pen against the paper. “I need a type of liquid.”

“Clorox,” I said, thinking of the dust bunnies waiting for me in the basement.

“That’s boring. Give me something else.”

“Semen.”

Margoe pursed her lips. “That’s crass.”

“How is that crass? Its just part of the male anatomy. If I’d have said ‘cum,’ you could complain about me being crass.”

“Never mind,” Margoe said, shifting her attention away from her crass granddaughter.

“I’ll think of something myself.”

I sighed. “Nectar.”

Margoe wrote it in the blank. “Thank you. That’s lovely.”

I stepped back— she hadn’t scooped over when I’d approached, so I didn’t ask her to— but I paused, my hand on the screen door. “I’m cleaning out some of the basement today. Did you think of anything you might want?”

Margoe stared at the Mad Lib. “I don’t think we should get rid of any of it.”

“There’s just too much festering down there not to at least go through it.”

“You’ll never guess what Mrs. Dougherty told me when she finally got through this morning.”

I sighed, repressing the mounting frustration. “Finally got through what?”

“There were a few unwanted calls this morning.” Margoe waved her hand dismissively. “Mrs. Dougherty told me that Lakeside’s stereo system, which had been marked as missing on the inventory sheets, suddenly appeared.”

I froze, desperately trying not to respond. “That’s odd because I saw the stereo myself when we did inventory yesterday.”

“No, Mrs. Dougherty was certain the stereo was marked as missing, which makes sense that it would appear the morning after the break in.”

I swallowed. “The what?”

“Well, no one was technically caught.” Margoe sighed in disappointment. “But I think one can pretty much assume someone broke into Lakeside. It can’t be a coincidence that someone called the station to report a prowler at Lakeside the same day that the stereo suddenly reappeared. Harriet Carol completely agrees.”

“Well, if Harriet Carol agrees,” I said, lifting my hands and shaking them from the weight of authority in Harriet Carol’s opinion.

“I need a noun,” Margoe said, finishing up her cig. She lit a new one from the stub of the old one, expertly inhaling the tobacco between horrible, organ shuddering coughs.

“Lung cancer.”

“If you’re not going to give constructive parts of speech, Patricia, than I would really rather you—” Margoe looked up at me and gasped. “Dear Lord, your lip’s the size of a lemon.”

“It is not.” I touched it tentatively and winced from the tight shock of pain.

Margoe placed the Mad Lib facedown on the swing, stood, and peered at my lip. “What happened? Did someone punch you? I hope you knocked them out.” Margoe reached to touch my face.

I batted her hand away. “No one punched me, and I didn’t punch anyone because *I wasn’t punched*. I got elbowed during a save.”

Margoe's thick, black wisps of eyebrows touched. "Someone elbowed you in the mouth because you saved their life?" she asked, her voice brimming with doubt.

"I said I was elbowed *during* a save, not *because* of a save. People panic when they're drowning, and if the person drowning and panicking is taller and heavier than me, the save tends to be a little more strenuous."

She pinched the flabby underside of my bicep. "You've had a cookie this week haven't you? People who eat cookies will have a strenuous time saving people."

I wrestled my arm out of her clutches. "Lay off. Cookies are healthy."

"Cookies are not healthy," Margoe scoffed.

"They're healthy for the soul."

Margoe pursed her lips. "Who did you save?"

I glared at her, uncertain. "Does it matter?"

She folded her arms. "I'd like to know."

"I don't think I should tell you."

"Why in heaven's not? Harriet Carol will probably tell me when I call her anyway."

I folded my arms. "That's exactly why not. None of you are discreet. I'm sure the person who drowned is embarrassed enough without having their good name tossed about on hundreds of telephone calls for your own personal amusement."

Margoe stepped back, appalled. "I would never deliberately hurt anyone, Patricia. I'll tell Harriet Carol and Karen Dougherty and Julie Webber not to tell anyone."

"If you really wanted to guarantee secrecy, you wouldn't tell anyone. Talking about people when you know what you're saying is hurtful is deliberately hurting someone."

She put her hands on her hips. “Well, if they’re doing something that’s worth talking about, then maybe they deserve what’s being said.”

“Everything seems worth talking about when you sit on the porch swing all day contemplating nouns and verbs.” I said and walked into the house. The screen door shut behind me with a hard whack and a click, and I beelined to the gas burners.

I sucked down my second Black in as many days— not a reassuring predictor of the summer’s stress level— and popped a Trident in my mouth before walking to Pebble Harbor. Introducing a thirteen-year-old to nicotine wasn’t on my to-do list, although neither was getting busted by Dansbury’s queen gossip biddy. The biddies would continue to blabber about everyone and everything no matter how rude or hurtful or obvious the evidence to the contrary. Although, the gossip was recently disturbingly accurate; at least I could prevent my contribution to Isaac’s chance of being diagnosed with lung cancer.

Isaac was wearing a black Goo Goo Dolls t-shirt and skipping stones like a seasoned pro when I slid down the bank to Pebble Harbor. He glanced back at me. Tear streaks had cleaned paths down his cheeks. He turned back to the creek without saying anything. I sat on a large rock next to him.

“Nice shirt,” I said.

Isaac didn’t bother turning around. “Thanks.” He skipped another stone.

“You’ve gotten really good for only learning how to throw them yesterday.”

“I’ve had a lot of time between then and now to practice.”

I thought of living with Caleb and enduring all that hot, accusing intensity for years instead of hours. I pictured Caleb wearing a police uniform and standing side by side with Scottish Aquatic Rambo. No wonder the kid was out all day at the pool and escaping his house to

skip stones at the creek. Wanting to leave the problems we'd escaped from at home where they belonged, I changed the subject back to music. "Would you consider yourself more of a lyric man or a sound man?"

Isaac turned around. "What do you mean?"

"The Darkness has some decent lyrics, but the basis of their appeal is Justin Hawkins' unique falsetto."

"Yeah," he said, drawing out the ah, so he might as well have said, "So what?"

"Goo Goo Dolls, on the other hand, have phenomenal lyrics. Their sound is great, but their lyrics are real and filled with the nostalgia and longing and spurned hopes and everything people crave in sad Nineties rock. "

"Yeah," he said, this time in genuine agreement.

I looked up at the sky and said, "Personally, I'm a sound girl. I think Johnny Rzeznik's voice would get me even if he was singing 'Photograph.'"

Isaac winced in horror. "God, no! I'm definitely a lyric man."

"What's wrong with 'Photograph?'" I asked innocently.

"Please, tell me you're joking." Isaac sat down beside me on the rock.

I nodded. "Chad Kroeger's ruggedly caressing voice can't get me through 'Kim's the first girl I kissed. I was so nervous that I nearly missed' without groaning."

"It just can't compete with, 'Now come in from this storm, and I taste you sweet and warm.'"

I laughed. "I'd take sweet and warm over a nearly missed kiss any day."

Isaac didn't laugh. He cracked his knuckles one by one before looking up at me with his uncle's eyes. "What do you know about kisses?" he asked.

I raised my eyebrows. “Kisses in general or kisses that count?”

“What’s the difference?”

“It’s more instinctive than anything else, but it boils down to intent and response. If someone forces a kiss on you that you don’t want, it doesn’t count because the intent is wrong. If someone forces a kiss on you that you didn’t think you wanted, but realize mid-kiss that you desperately want, it counts because your response is right. A kiss that counts forces the kissers to look at one another and see a deeper person than they knew before.” I shrugged. “You have to look at it on a case by case basis to determine whether or not a kiss counts.”

Isaac turned to face me, his dirt-streaked face worried. “If a guy kisses a girl because all he can think about is how fruity her hair smells and how tight her jeans are and how pretty she is in every class, every day, but someone else—” Isaac spat with the long suffering hatred of the wrongly persecuted, “interrupts before she has the chance to kiss him back, does it count?”

I caught myself before I bit my lip this time. “What happens after the interruption?”

“The person who interrupts forces the guy into a BMW, and the girl waves at him as he gets driven home.”

“That counts.” I did not smile when Isaac mentioned the BMW. Cake for me.

Isaac’s eyes widened hopefully. “Really?”

I nodded. “Sure. Outside forces don’t affect whether or not the kiss is count-worthy. Only the kissers can do that, so if the guy really likes the girl and the girl seems to regret not getting her chance to kiss back, it definitely counts.”

Isaac scowled. “How do you know what she regrets?”

I snorted. “If she stood there and waved goodbye after the embarrassment of being caught by *someone else*, I’d be willing to bet she wanted a longer kiss.”

He mulled that over for a moment. “What about the kisses that should have counted? Like if you wanted the kiss really badly, but once you got it, you didn’t like it?”

I thought of Colton and closed my eyes.

“Or maybe you did like it and thought it counted, but the other person wasn’t affected by it. Either way, all that excitement and anticipation and wanting is wasted in disappointment. What do you call those kisses?”

I looked at Isaac. “Why do you want to know about that?”

“Have you had one of those?” Isaac asked, insistent. “Have you had a kiss that should have counted but somehow missed?”

I turned to stare at the river. “Yeah.”

Isaac gazed out at the river too. “I’ve had one so far.”

I laughed despite myself. “Planning on having more hard misses are you?”

He shrugged. “I’ll take what I can get. Kisses are better than misses, but misses are better than nothing. Gillian Pickett pushed me away screaming and slapped me across the face when I stole a kiss in the sixth grade. She’d been wearing a sun flower-patterned, cotton dress, and when the wind picked up while we were waiting for the bus, she had to catch the skirt before it blew up and inside out like an umbrella.” Isaac smiled mischievously, looking as if he were revving up for a triple flip off the tube slides the moment I turned my head. “She didn’t always react in time. It was worth the slap.”

Isaac waited for me to contribute. I concentrated on the river.

“Well?”

“I only like talking about the kisses.”

“Why? What’s the big deal?”

I looked at him. “I’d rather have nothing than misses.”

“Oh.” Isaac shifted his feet in the pebbles. “What was your first kiss that counted like then?”

I smiled sadly, letting him swerve the subject. “Alex Weidman was great, but I’d bet you’d rather hear about Martin Snyder.”

“Why don’t I want to hear about Alex Weidman?”

“Because Martin was your age.” I twisted on the boulder and pointed past Isaac’s house. “His dad was Jeremy Snyder, your neighbor across the street. Martin asked me to our sixth grade semi-formal. I’d been waiting for Colton Deitrich to ask me, but that day he’d asked Kimberly Sydes. I was insane with rage— I’d corrected his pre-algebra homework every day for the entire semester, and she couldn’t solve for x with an answer key— so when Martin asked me, I’d batted my lashes and pleasantly agreed, planning to make Colton as crazy jealous as he’d made me. I’d danced as outlandishly provocative and as close to Colton as I could without rubbing against him, but he didn’t even notice.”

“I’m not seeing a kiss coming anytime soon,” Isaac interrupted.

“I’m getting there,” I said blandly. “Martin meanwhile, oblivious to the unfolding side drama thickening around him, got the completely wrong idea from all my pelvic thrusts, ass grabs, and low grinding. I hadn’t paid attention to him all night despite having been all over him, so when we were waiting for his mom to pick us up, I was thinking about Colton and how livid I was that my plan had failed. Martin turned to me just as I was plotting to proceed with more obvious and drastic measures, and he asked if he could kiss me. I stared and said, “What?” but he was already bending down, his eyes shut, his lips closing in. Startled by his suddenness— vigilantly leashed patience from his perspective he’d later told me when we’d rehashed that night

a couple months later— I just stood wide-eyed as his soft, careful lips found mine. He smelled of Old Spice and dried sweat.

“When he straightened away from me, I realized how tall he was, nearly a whole foot, and how dark his eyes were, almost swallowed by their pupils, and how nicely his shirt tucked into his dress pants over his flat stomach and tapered waist. He smiled, genuine and gleaming and high on me, but I hadn’t even been there to enjoy it with him. I hooked my arms around Martin’s neck, yanked him back down to me, and planted my lips firmly over his, determined to give him back all of what I’d squandered on watching Colton instead of seeing who was real and already had his arms around me. His tongue pushed into my mouth. I pushed mine back against his, not sure whether I liked it or whether it was gross, but completely certain that I wanted to find out.”

Isaac laughed, but his eyebrows scrunched together. “And what did you decide? Was it gross?”

“When it comes to kissing, I’ve found out that pretty much nothing’s gross depending on the guy and how he does it.”

“How does the guy know whether or not he’s ‘the guy’ and if she’s going to like how he does it?”

I shrugged. “He doesn’t. He just goes for it. That’s the whole point of the first kiss: to find out if there’s something between two people that they both like and want more of.”

He frowned harder.

“Anyway, when Martin’s mom came to pick us up we were still going at it. The neighbors whispered about us for an entire week. My grandmother closeted herself in the house from mortification.” I laughed. “God, if she’d known how much I’d embarrass her with Jehiel

three years after that, maybe she wouldn't have wasted her time dying over only Mrs. Snyder catching us smooching."

Isaac looked worried again. "Was it worth it?"

"Was what worth what?"

"Was the kiss worth the embarrassment and gossip?"

I forced myself to answer him seriously even though I preferred to tell my kisses for amusement. Laughing at the old moments made them seem less vital and cushioned the absence of new moments. The story meant a lot to Isaac, more than just entertainment, so I put aside what I wanted and made this moment count. "My grandmother was embarrassed, not me, and there will always be gossip in this town. In my opinion, there isn't much that could make a count-worthy kiss not worth it."

Isaac suddenly stretched his arms out in exasperation. "If he was so great and he was so worth it, then where is he now? Why did you leave him?"

I pulled back, slightly affronted. "He left me. Martin died with his mom in the flood of 1999. Everyone else on Hazen Street had evacuated up the mountain, but they didn't get out in time. I never asked Mr. Snyder why they waited so long. I don't even know if he knows why. Our basement still floods with the dike but not as fast and never as bad. Puddles mostly. Martin was fourteen years old."

Isaac stared at the creek. He cracked his already cracked knuckles. "This is depressing. I thought Pebble Harbor was supposed to be an escape; now it looks like a death trap."

"The creek and the woods and the mountain are dangerous, but they're nature. The people in Dansbury are the real death trap, which is why we need Pebble Harbor."

Isaac shook his head. "That's still depressing."

“You’re the one who asked.”

“Then ask me something. I’ve suffered through your life history, so I—”

I clamped Isaac’s side in a cow bite. “Jerk-face.”

“Ow!” He flinched away, laughing.

“A question for you, eh?” I tapped my finger on my lip and felt the swollen, scabby bruise. “Do you know of someone named Geraldine? I think it might be a reference to an independent film or book character because if it was pop-culture, I would know.”

Isaac frowned. “Someone referenced someone named Geraldine?”

I nodded.

“Who?”

“Your uncle.”

Isaac rolled his eyes. “That’s easy. Uncle Caleb doesn’t do pop-culture, but he does do Romantic and Victorian poetry.” He dipped his voice to husky. “He’s very sophisticated.”

I laughed, picturing Rambo in a suit, which was essentially James Bond.

“Geraldine is a reference to the poem ‘Christabel’ by Coleridge. I can’t believe you didn’t get that,” Isaac said, incredulous and superior with his expansive knowledge.

I scrunched up my face at him. “What do you know about Romantic and Victorian Poetry?”

“Tons. Don Juan and The Rime of the Ancient Mariner were my favorite bedtime stories. Uncle Caleb lives for Coleridge and Keats. I personally prefer Lord Byron.” Isaac shrugged.

“And all this time I thought I’d had it made with the Bernstein Bears.” I shook my head.

“So what does Geraldine do in ‘Christabel?’”

Isaac grinned. “Christabel goes out to the woods to pray for her love, and she meets Geraldine, who claims to have recently escaped from a rogue band of kidnappers. Geraldine convinces Christabel that she desperately needs help, so Christabel takes her home. The whole poem is filled with lots of sinister foreshadowing, like Geraldine can’t enter the house without being invited in, she flinches away from candlelight, and none of the animals like her.”

“So she’s basically a vampire” I said, remembering Caleb touching my bloody chin and telling me how gruesome I looked.

Isaac flip-flopped his hand. “Kind of.”

“She does something terrible doesn’t she?” I asked, knowing I wasn’t going to like this comparison.

He nodded. “She essentially rapes and attempts to kill Christabel after seducing her father.”

I sighed. *This is how Caleb thinks of me, and I had the graciousness to dub him an action hero.* “How does it end?”

“That’s it. That’s all he wrote.”

“What?” I scrunched up my face in disgust. “Geraldine deceives her way into Christabel’s life, has sex with the dad, rapes the daughter, and that’s it? There’s no smiting?”

Isaac shrugged. “Nope. There was supposed to be more, but Coleridge never finished it.”

“Well, boo to him,” I said, thinking *at least I get sex, and I don’t get caught.* I could think of worse outcomes. “Geraldine seems to know how to take care of herself.”

He looked at me like I was psychotic. “Geraldine is pure evil.”

I winced. “That’s a little harsh, don’t you think?”

“Between the two of us, I’m the only one who’s actually read the poem, so it’s my opinion we’ll be trusting.”

“Ha! Give me a night or two, and I’ll get back to you on that.” I stood.

Isaac jumped to his feet beside me. “Wait a sec. Don’t I get a cig?”

I frowned. “I don’t think so.”

“We had a deal. I was bored all freakin’ day. That rule board covers *everything*,” Isaac whined.

“The bet was for all summer, not a day, and to try a puff of a cig I was already smoking, which I’m not.”

Isaac crossed his arms, glowering.

I clapped him on the shoulder. “Nice try though. Keep up the good work in the meantime.”

“Screw you.”

I turned and climbed to the flat top of the dike.

“Patty-Cake?”

I kept climbing.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, right?” Isaac shouted, his voice rising a little too high at the end.

I lifted my hand and waved without turning around.

I walked home, stepped through the back door, bypassed the front porch— Mama Margoe was still hunched, pen in hand— rolled my eyes, and walked down the basement steps. They creaked under my weight. Before I could sensor myself, I thought guiltily of the variety of tree species I’d gobbled down yesterday. I could regret their flaky, sugary deliciousness, but I wouldn’t take back Garrett’s soft lips against mine, which only ever occurred exclusively with a

shared cookie. I'd take six grams of carbs along with Garrett's lips gladly. Thank God he'd choked on that hot dog. I hadn't scrounged up an excuse for the other two cookies I'd had without sharing, but I should probably whip one up soon because more cookies would be waiting for me at Cecilia's tonight.

The basement wasn't quite as horrific as I'd imagined, but with enough incentive and determination, a fatal avalanche of boxes, garbage bags, luggage, and random junk was a definite possibility. I certainly had the incentive. Mutant dust bunnies billowed between box piles, over the wooden book shelves, and were creeping from behind the headboard of Frank's bed. Margoe had stripped the covers from the bed, the books from the shelf, the framed photos and alarm clock from the nightstand, and the clothes and hangers from the closet rack he'd nailed into the far wall. Dust and bugs in rigor mortis peppered the tops of the shelves and nightstand where his belongings used to be. I hadn't expected the basement to smell like Old Spice because Frank was dead, he hadn't visited his basement bedroom in a little less than a year, and it hadn't smelled like him when I'd peeked at the wreckage Monday morning. Even knowing for sure from common sense and experience that the basement would smell like a basement, the damp, mildew, abandoned smell caught me sideways, like walking into the guys' identically reversed locker room at Lakeside; everything was the same, but nothing was in its correct place. Maybe if I sprayed the room with his scent, I'd get over the sentimentality of what was missing and throw out everything Margoe had squirreled away. I walked down the rest of the steps and picked up the nearest box instead. Besides the slight tidying Margoe had done, the encroaching dust bunnies, and the smell, the basement was just as he'd left it when he'd left me.

I peeled the box flaps out from under each other, and inside was a hodgepodge of CDs, wire hangers, an awful purple and brown paisley tie, and a Rolling Stones Zippo lighter. I

snapped open the lighter—the upper lip and teeth were stamped on the cap and parted from the lower lip and stuck-out, glossy tongue— and cranked the flame up. The blue and orange flame flickered for a heartbeat before leveling. I cut the flame with a snap. The CD's weren't too badly scratched, but the hangers and the tie had to go.

A clump of nested hair and dirt clung the bottom of next box— I gagged— which contained double A batteries, more CDs, cologne (questionably liquefied cheese puffs and definitely not getting sprayed anywhere in the vicinity of the basement), and an extremely thick book with a forlorn-looking woman with smooth, golden hair and wide, down-cast eyes on the cover. I picked it up, intending to read the back, and froze as I read the title: *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. I tore through the table of context a little roughly; the pages made brutal crinkling noises as they flipped. By the time I skimmed to page thirteen I'd lost the biting edge of appalled disbelief, but as page fourteen and “William Blake” in monotone caps rounded the corner, it returned to shoot my heart into overdrive. Coleridge snickered at me on the next page. Christopher Ricks had chosen “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla” instead of “Christabel”— thank God for small favors— to represent Coleridge before moving on to Byron and Keats two pages later. I slammed the book shut, disgusted, and tossed it back into the box, wincing as all six hundred plus pages bashed into the plastic CD cases.

I plowed through three piles in about four hours and organized them into three categories: things to maybe keep, things to definitely chuck, and CDs. Things to definitely chuck— five boxes filled to the brim— contained things I didn't need, like the ugly tie and stinky cologne, things I already had, like the wire hangers, and things that creeped me out, like a motivational video on business success. A framed photo of Mom and Frank holding a squirming three-year-old version of me, four letters, some sheet music, and the eerie *Oxford Book of English Verse*

filled the box with things to maybe keep. I stuck the Zippo in my back pocket. I finished stacking Kansas, .38 Special, Queen, and REO Speedwagon next to Foreigner, AC/DC, Styx, Twisted Sister and Guns N' Roses in the CD box and began the long and tiring trek up and down the basement stairs half a dozen times to set up all the definitely chuck boxes on the curb for the garbage man.

When I emerged from the basement at eight-thirty, half the boxes were organized, if not clean, and Mama Margoe was already in bed. I changed into pink mesh shorts and a green kiss-me-I'm-Irish t-shirt, picked up my drawstring pack loaded— cross my fingers— with damning evidence, and tip toed over the porch. Cecilia's house was just down the street; I forwent revving Maxine and disturbing the dusk-hushed neighborhood in favor of walking.

Cecilia was already at the door before I stepped up onto her stoop. She held the door open for me. "I'm starving, and Garrett isn't here yet. He won't answer his phone."

"Didn't you eat dinner?"

"No," Cecilia said, looking savage. "Karen found my diary again. The past few days have been less bland than usual, so the only thing to punish me from was dinner. I made a slit in the lining of the work bag Margoe stitched for me. Let's see her find it in there, the bitch."

I made a sympathy face and ignored the 'bitch' because I liked Karen. "Eat a little something now, and when he comes, eat the cookies too." I walked in and leaned my cheek down to Cecilia.

Cecilia leaned her cheek up to touch mine. "Moua!" She leaned back. "I don't want 'a little something else,' I want to stuff my face with Florence Nightingale cookies."

"Florence's birthday was in the beginning of the month. When do we get cookies that represent holidays that are actually happening in the present?"

Cecilia shrugged. “When the leftovers get eaten, I guess. Mrs. Webber freezes them, so they keep. She makes the same number of batches when you’re away as when you’re home, so apparently there’s a lot of leftovers to plow through, assuming that Garrett actually shows up to feed us.”

I plopped Popeye and Olive on the kitchen table and sat. “He missed all the action last night. He won’t skip out on us two nights in a row.”

Cecilia ducked into the bathroom. “I don’t know. He’s pretty much smitten,” she shouted.

“Yeah, okay, and next week he’ll be *smitten* with some other man whore.”

Cecilia grunted, but she knew better than to say anything. She returned to the kitchen and handed me a crumpled ball of purple sequined fabric. “Here.”

“What the hell is this?”

“The top I borrowed from you for Trev’s party Sunday night,” she said, sitting next to me. “I saw the same one in green at Target. We should wear—”

I shook the wad of fabric at her. “Thanks for washing it.”

Cecilia grimaced. “Raspberry-Pinnacle and pink lemonade?”

“Yes, please.” I folded my top, attempted to smooth out the wrinkles, and placed it on the edge of the table. “I suppose Garrett’s date with J. C. went well then?”

Cecilia walked to the refrigerator. “Very.”

I sighed.

“Since you obviously can’t have what you really want, there’s nothing wrong with having what’s available,” Cecilia advised after plunking ice into a glass and filling it forty-sixty.

“Crosby, Stills, and Nash assumed someone else was around to love,” I said. “If you even think about opening the MacCallaghan can of worms, I will strangle you.”

“No.” Cecilia stretched out the ‘o’ with intense disapproval. “I’m talking about Trev. He’s tall and athletic and obviously cares about your well being. He wants you. Nothing’s stopping him from being with you except for you.”

I stared at Cecilia, incredulous. “He has a girlfriend.”

She swatted the air. “Inconsequential. He would be with you like that—” she snapped her fingers— “if you changed your mind. You don’t have to wait for something that’s never going to happen. You don’t have to be alone.”

“I’d rather be alone than be with someone who would drop his girlfriend ‘like that,’” I mocked. “Who’s to say he wouldn’t drop me in a snap?”

“Oh, please,” Cecilia scoffed. “You’d be different.”

“Bullshit.” I poked the table with my index finger. “He’d get what he’s always wanted, and once he’s had it and got bored with it, he’d move on to the next thing he wanted but couldn’t have.”

She handed me my drink. “That’s cruel. Trev’s not like that.”

I sighed. “I don’t find the fact that he’d dump his girlfriend for me attractive. I think *that’s* cruel.”

“How could you *not* find that attractive? He’d go through Herculean lengths to be yours. It’s romantic, and you just throw his efforts right back into his face.”

“First of all, watching Misty’s heart break is not romantic. It’s sickening. Secondly, he’s never gone through any lengths to be with me, let alone Herculean. He’s given me pretty promises and hopes and kisses, but he’s never actually *done* anything about it. He only ever wanted me after he realized I wanted Garrett. Denying him is not throwing his nonexistent efforts into his face. It’s staying true to myself.” I took a healthy slug of my drink, careful to

balance the glass above my split lower lip. The tart lemonade pickled my tongue, and when I swallowed, the vodka burned down my throat, landed warm and pleasant in my stomach, and left behind a lingering sweet hint of raspberry. I licked my lips to spread the flavor and hissed as the alcohol seeped into the cut. I threw back another gulp. "Delicious."

"Thank you," Cecilia said as she made a drink for herself. "You've never even given him a chance."

"I don't want to give him a chance. I don't feel anything when I'm with him." I thought of turquoise eyes and dangerously stretched t-shirts and large, calloused hands scratching my cheek and shoulder and calf and wanting to nibble the curve of his puckered, goosebumpy neck, and I closed my eyes to compose myself before I started panting.

"You just thought of something."

"No. I'm just feeling the vodka."

"Not on your first drink, you're not."

I glared at her.

She narrowed her eyes at me under the pink fringe of her bangs. "That look a second ago wasn't about either Garrett or Trev, was it?"

I shook my head.

"Who then?"

I gulped down another slug of spiked lemonade. "Caleb."

She shook her head, mildly disgusted. "What is with you and head guards? You need a broader range."

"There's nothing wrong with my range. The problem is that he's the enemy, Ceil. If there's anything that Mata Hari taught us, it's that a woman will eventually fall in love with her

lover, and when her lover is the enemy, she dies. James Bond always got away unscathed, the bastard.”

“Who said anything about lovers? Do you have a lover?” Cecilia asked, perking up.

“Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous.”

She frowned. “Why would you having a lover be ridiculous?”

“Because—” I took a second to savor another slurp of sour lemon against sweet, burning raspberry. “The first time didn’t even count, so emotionally, I’m a virgin. Who the hell wants to have sex with a twenty-two-year-old virgin? Men want sophisticated women with experience.”

Cecilia took a sip of her drink and grimaced. “Ugh!”

“Too strong?”

She nodded. “If men only wanted sophisticated women, every woman in Dansbury would still be virgins, with the possible exception of Jackie who could probably con some poor slob into thinking she’s sophisticated with those trashy nails and all that coiled hair and her phony superior snootiness. Face it, Patty-Cake, we’re all hicks at heart. No amount of education can change that.”

I nodded reluctantly.

“And what the hell do you know about what men want? You don’t even have one as a basis for generalization. You—” she gestured her drink at me, sloshing a little onto the table. “are wallowing. There could be men out there right now with their radar set for mature-educated-hick-emotional-virgin.”

I finished off my drink. The last gulp was mostly raspberry; I shuddered.

Cecilia got up and made me another drink. “What has Caleb done to make you think he’s the enemy?”

“I’m not sure what he’s done.” I pointed my forefinger at Cecilia. “But no matter what he is doing, it doesn’t bode well for us or for Lakeside.” I dug the pay chart out of my bag and slapped it on the table. “He knew I was in the Hut last night, but he didn’t even attempt to hide the chart or change the numbers for the next day. Why?”

Cecilia shook her head and sat down, sliding my drink over. “I think you’re over-reacting. I cleaned up the blood while Caleb was out filling your gas tank, and his brother didn’t catch you. Douglas can’t report something he didn’t find.”

“Caleb signed in a half hour before you today, so he had roughly forty-five minutes to notice the blood before you hoodwinked him into saving Maxine.”

“I don’t know—”

“Douglas didn’t notice the light on his own because the trees block the view of the Hut from the street. He would have had to actually done out of his way to stop his patrol and get out of his car to notice the Hut and become suspicious, and I’d be willing to bet a tank of gas that he got out of his car and became suspicious because someone ratted us out.”

Cecilia raised her eyebrows mid sip. “I wouldn’t play so loose with your gas if I were you. Garrett’s the only other person who knew what we were doing last night.”

“Trev knew.”

“You think Trev ratted us out?” Cecilia asked, sounding skeptical.

“No. Maybe.” I shook my head. “I’m just hypothesizing. I don’t know exactly how Caleb knows about last night, but he knows. He made that clear today when he was re-bandaging my leg.”

Cecilia leaned back in her chair. “Alright, so he knows. He tried to warn you off, but he didn’t do anything drastic. He didn’t fire you. He didn’t have Douglas arrest you. I’m not seeing

the enemy aspect, Patty-Cake. If anything, he's just as concerned about Lakeside as the rest of us." She threw her arms out wildly to encompass all those concerned, her face flushed, and I chugged half of my new drink to catch up.

"We still have the rat to worry about. Douglas definitely mentioned the tip and his visit up to the Hut to Caleb. He'd have told Caleb that the light was on, which wouldn't mean much except that I bled everywhere. Caleb might have been more observant because of his brother's tip, which would increase the chance of Caleb noticing the blood, and if Caleb did in fact see the blood in the forty-five minutes before you bleached it out of the wood, we are fucked. Without the blood, anyone could have broken into Lakeside, but with the blood, the suspects narrow down considerably." I paused. "Well, I'm fucked." I amended, and tossed back the rest of my second drink. Cecilia stood, slightly unsteady this time, and mixed me a refill as I continued. "And what all of this boils down to, besides me being fucked, and not the fun kind of fucked because Caleb looks like such a wonderful fucker—"

Cecilia giggled and handed me my third. She sat heavily and sipped on her first.

"—is that he knows someone was there last night, but he didn't bother to change the numbers on his pay chart."

Cecilia frowned, more from the effort to keep up with the conversation than from disagreement. "So maybe he just doesn't know about last night, like I've been saying. Maybe you misunderstood, and when he asked about someone breaking in, maybe he wasn't threatening you, but genuinely asking your opinion."

I took a swallow and gagged. Cecilia's sixty-forty lemonade to vodka ratio had turned into forty-sixty. "He used the peroxide as a mild torturing device," I gasped.

Cecilia ignored me. “If he’s doing something fishy with the money, and he would have hidden or changed the pay chart if he knew that someone saw it last night. He does not know about the break in.”

“He definitely knows. He just doesn’t care about the pay chart,” I said.

“Why wouldn’t he care about fishy money?”

I waved the pay chart in front of Cecilia’s face. “Because it’s not fishy. I added up what he’s earned throughout the last two weeks from his ten dollar head lifeguard salary and subtracted that from three thousand six hundred and forty, the paycheck he’s actually getting. He’s either stealing or earning an extra two thousand seven hundred and twenty dollars, but he works a varied schedule. I took each individual day and accounted for the exact hours he worked, and the math doesn’t lie. All the figures checked out.”

Cecilia slapped the table with both her hands. “What checked out?”

“The extra money fluctuates in accordance with how many hours he works. He’s earning an extra forty dollars an hour. Monday, when he only worked eight hours, he earned eighty dollars from being head lifeguard and one hundred and sixty dollars from the pool fairy, but when he worked twelve hours on Friday, he earned one hundred and twelve dollars from guarding and four hundred and eighty dollars from the pool fairy. I went through each day, calculated how much he should be earning per hour from lifeguarding, and forty dollars an hour is what was left over. Either he’s stealing money that we don’t have in exact proportions to what he would be earning if he were earning a steady forty dollars an hour—”

Cecilia sat up straight. “or he’s actually earning an extra salary of forty dollars an hour which wouldn’t make the money fishy because he’s supposed to be getting it. He’s not stealing it.”

“Right, so who the hell is paying Caleb forty dollars extra an hour plus the regular head-lifeguard salary to work at Lakeside and why?” I drummed my fingers on the countertop and choked down a few more swallows, liking the hard rap of the table against my nails. “Maybe Lakeside is better off than we thought. Maybe Jerr really is making that kind of money. I don’t know, but there’s only one way to find out. Do you think Jerr keeps Lakeside’s financial information at Lakeside or at home?” I paused to think and sneered. “Or with that money grubbing-yuppie?”

Cecilia smirked lazily. “Caleb’s in the wrong generation to yup, and besides, I thought he was Scottish and Aquatic?”

I frowned, uncertain. “He’s both.”

“Rambo was never yuppie material.”

“Caleb is setting new standards for what Rambo is capable of.”

Cecilia laughed. “Uh huh.”

“Shut up and answer the damn question.”

“My guess would be at home. Even if Caleb has the financial information for Lakeside, I don’t think Jerr would give him originals; he’d make Caleb a copy and keep the originals in his house where they’re safe.”

“Not for long.” I held my glass up. Cecilia clinked her glass against mine, and we both knocked back the rest our drinks, all two swallows of her first and the second half of my third.

“What’s not for long?”

I turned around and smiled at Garrett standing rumped in the hallway.

“I didn’t hear the door open,” Cecilia said.

I shrugged, feeling warm and dizzy.

Garrett dimpled. “You’re both juiced.”

“What else is there when we’re not slumming through the woods at night?” I snapped my fingers. “Reading. That’s what we’d be doing. Or what I should be doing. Well, what I will be doing once I have a book I can actually read. Do you have a copy of the poem ‘Christabel’ by Coleridge? I need to read it pronto and my copy is littered with unwanted sentiment.”

Cecilia placed her hands on her hip. “Who does a girl have to do to get a decent cookie around here?”

He shook a Tupperware at us like a tambourine; the cookies thumped against its soft plastic. “That would be me, and yes, of course I have a copy. When did you suddenly pry yourself away from a movie screen and look in a book, let alone a *poetry* book.”

“Oh, I haven’t. Not yet, and I’m not particularly looking forward to it, but Caleb apparently does particularly look forward to reading poetry, so then too must I.”

Garrett shook his head, looking mystified. “Why must you read poetry?”

“I need a better understanding of the person I’m up against,” I said, wondering why that wasn’t obvious.

Garrett shifted his gaze between us. “You two sit tight. I’ll make coffee.”

When he placed the Tupperware on the table in front of us. Cecilia ripped off the lid and shoved a stethoscope-shaped chocolate-iced sugar cookie in her mouth. “I prefer to linger in my drunken stupor for as long as it wants to last, thank you very much.”

I took out a red and white glazed nurse’s hat and picked at the wobbling sprinkles.

Garrett put a pot of water on the stove. “Too bad because I want coffee to dunk my cookies in.”

Cecilia made a yuck face. “Crumbs will crumble off and contaminate your drink.”

He laughed. “That’s how I like it.”

I picked off more dancing sprinkles.

“Are you gonna eat that hat or tease it all night?” Garrett asked.

I focused on the hat. “Tease.”

Cecilia swung her head in my direction. “Mama Margoe pinched your bingo arm again?”

“Yep.” I Frisbeed the cookie back into the Tupperware.

Cecilia nodded appreciatively at my aim. “Nice.”

“Oh no, you don’t.” Garrett stormed over to my side of the table, reached into the bowl, and picked up the cookie. “You already touched it. It’s contaminated. You have to eat it.”

“You just said you liked things that are contaminated.”

“No, Cecilia’s under the misconception that crumby coffee is contaminated. Eat the hat.”

I shook my head stubbornly.

Garrett placed the bottom half into his mouth. “I’ll share it with you,” he said around the cookie. He waggled his eyebrows.

My breath caught through the haze of guilt, alcohol, and equal longing for sugar and Garrett, and I leaned in.

Cecilia looked away.

His movements seemed deliberately tentative— the careful bite of cookie, the slow chewing, the soft press and slide— but the friction of cookie crumbs and lips still abraded my cut. I bit and chewed and pressed and slid in turn without wincing or pulling away. *I’ll nurse my lip later.* I swallowed the cookie and a giggle. *Oh, Florence.*

Garrett pulled back, swallowing. “Yummy cookie.”

“They always are.”

Cecilia bit into a vanilla and strawberry swirl Band-aid viciously, its marshmallow pad clinging to both halves and stringing from her mouth to the ragged edge of bitten cookie. “We’re breaking into Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear’s house tomorrow.”

Garrett stood and returned to the stove, shoveling coffee grinds into the pot of heating water. “For fun?”

I slumped in my chair, losing some of my giggle. “Not exactly.” I explained our deep misgivings for Caleb, his potential treachery, and the likely rat that had infiltrated our circle of acquaintances. “We need to know how deeply Caleb’s roots are entrenched in the stink of evil, therefore we need to know who is paying him forty dollars an hour. We also need to sniff out the rat and the siphoner, but I think Caleb is the most attainable issue at the moment.”

Garrett poured the bubbling water and coffee grinds through a strainer sock and into three coffee mugs. “Why don’t we just ask Caleb where the money is coming from? He obviously doesn’t care if people see what he’s earning if he’s keeping it in the log-in binder.”

Cecilia stared intensely at the strainer sock. “Why didn’t you use the coffee press?”

Garrett shrugged.

“We can’t just waltz up to him and ask,” I grouched. “What if he starts asking questions?”

“He has already asked you questions.” Garrett passed out the coffee mugs— mine had Raggedy Ann on the side— and put milk and sugar on the table.

I splashed in a dollop of milk and two scoops of sugar. “What if he asks more questions, more accusing questions with more than just implications hidden in them? What if he uses something more damaging and persuasive than peroxide?” A flash of me succumbing to Caleb’s damaging persuasions interrupted my argument in a burst of throbbing heat. I took a deep, unsteady breath and a sip of coffee. “I wouldn’t hold out for long.”

“Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear lives across the street from the MacCallaghan clan. Breaking and entering is not a good idea.”

Cecilia shrugged. “So?”

“What do we ever do that is a good idea?” I stared at Raggedy Ann.

“We could ask Jerr about Caleb’s pay check,” Garrett suggested weakly.

Cecilia and I both stared at Garrett blankly.

Garrett nodded. “Alright, alright, we’ll break into his house, but when this all goes to shit, I’ll tell you that I told you so.”

“You know what I’d like to know?” I asked, my gaze drifting back to my mug.

Garrett raised his eyebrows, and Cecilia waited in apt silence.

“Where the hell is Raggedy Andy on this mug?”

Cecilia leaned over and looked at my mug. “It’s a Raggedy Ann mug, not a Raggedy Andy mug, so Raggedy Ann is on it.”

I shook my head. “Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy sewed their hands together, so they would hold hands forever because Raggedy Ann gets heart sick when they’re apart.”

Cecilia gaped, looking appalled. “Raggedy Ann is heart sick on this mug because she’s Andyless?”

I nodded.

“What bastard manufactured this mug?”

I took a gulp of sweet, strong coffee out of my sick, heartbreaking mug and shook my head in resentment. “Bastards.”

Garrett looked back and forth between Cecilia and me. “And these are the masterminds who will stealthily creep through Jerr’s home to bring Caleb to his knees before he takes down Lakeside and all of Dansbury with it.”

“It’ll be alright. I’ll buy a Raggedy Andy mug so Raggedy Ann won’t be alone,” Cecilia said, stroking Ann’s big, red, triangle nose.

I shook my head, distraught. “You can’t sew their two dimensional clay hands together. They will still be alone, forever looking at one another from across the cabinet shelf but forever denied the comfort and warmth of the other’s hand because they are imprisoned on their separate mugs.”

“I can glue their hands together,” Cecilia said, close to sobbing. “They don’t have to be alone forever!”

“Alright now you two, I think that’s enough coffee.” Garrett pried our hands from the mug and rinsed everything off in the sink. He pointed a finger at Cecilia. “You are going to bed.”

Cecilia sniffed. “I need to floss my teeth.”

“You may floss your teeth and then go to bed. You—” He pointed at me. “Grab a cookie to go. I’m walking you home.”

I lifted my chin. “I can make it down the street on my own, thank you.”

“You were just distraught over the cosmic romantic injustice of a children’s cartoon coffee mug.” He glared pointedly at me. “I’m walking you home.”

I swiped my purple top off the table and stood, using the table for balance when the floor ducked and bobbed, and I conceded to being walked home. Garrett snagged a lantern-shaped cut out with yellow sugar confetti out of the Tupperware for me before ushering me down the hallway and through the front door. The road was just as shifty as Cecilia’s kitchen floor. Garrett

wrapped his warm, lean arm around my waist to keep us walking in a straight line, and I made a mental note to get juiced every time he showed up late.

I sighed. “Garrett?”

“Yeah, Patty-Cake?”

“Why were you late to Cecilia’s tonight?”

Garrett didn’t say anything.

“Never mind. It doesn’t really matter. It was a stupid ques—”

“I had another date with J. C.”

“Oh,” I said, dying a little inside. “How did it go?”

Garrett paused again.

My throat spasmed.

“You don’t have to ask, Patty-Cake.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” I blurted in a rush, horrified.

Garrett tightened his hold on my waist. “That’s not what I meant. I’d tell you anything you asked; you know that. I meant that you don’t have to feel obligated to ask if you don’t want to know.”

I swerved dangerously to the right suddenly, slipping out from under his arm. “You’re my best friend. Of course I want to know.”

“You’re my best friend, and I know that you don’t,” Garrett said, taking my hand as I flailed for balance. He tugged me upright.

We walked the rest of the way in silence. When we reached my house I said, “Thanks for the escort, *Chico*,” let go of Garrett’s hand, and left him standing in the grass on my front lawn, a forgotten lantern with yellow light confetti in the other.

Six
Wednesday

I woke up bleary-eyed and nauseous to The Darkness' halted, beginning chords of Justin Hawkins' love-confused feelings.

"What the hell," I grumbled. As much as I loved the unique vibrations of his voice, I did not love him before six-thirty. Rolling over in bed, I groped the nightstand for my cell, and I paused in disbelief as I faced the harsh, glowing numbers on my alarm clock: ten-thirty. "What the hell!"

I flipped open my phone and growled, "Why didn't you call me four hours ago?"

"You were sleeping," Garrett whispered.

"That's why a phone call would have helped!" I shrieked and then I whimpered as my brain rattled.

"Don't worry. It's better this way."

I wedged the phone between the mattress and my ear. My lip scraped the pillow. I hissed against the added pain, and I held my head together with the flat of my hands as the pulse in my temple tried to explode through my ears. "How is this better? Caleb already hates me, and now I'm skipping work!"

"No, he doesn't, and no, you're not. Caleb probably thinks that you're Super Guard. Besides, I told Caleb that you and Cecilia were both ill, and that neither of you would be coming in today."

I licked my bottom lip. It tasted salty. "Super Guard does not bleed worse than her victims. Don't you think that breaking and entering is enough sinning for one day? You shouldn't add lying to the list. We're kind of digging an unfillable hole."

“We make up for it in the lives we save. You might have bled worse than Mr. Russiani, but you saved Luke after being nearly drowned and taking a direct elbow shot to the face. You’ve got Caleb wrapped around your pinky finger.”

“I don’t think so. There are other good guards at Lakeside.”

“You mean like Misty, who doesn’t actually guard? Or Jackie, who doesn’t actually pay attention? Or Trev who doesn’t even show up for work, and when he does, can’t perform a decent save to save his own life let alone someone else’s? Convincing Susan Carol that Trev hadn’t lost stabilization last summer when she’d drowned and hit her head on the side of the pool, even though she could swim and she wasn’t near the edge, was like talking to a belligerent sheep.”

I sighed. “Well, he did lose stabilization.”

“Exactly! Trev used a chin-neck support even though he knows he’s no good at it. A law suit would have bankrupted Lakeside if her mother didn’t have a soft spot in her heart for Jerr. He’s lucky she was able to stop her exaggerating, attention-hogging, home-wrecker of a daughter from hiring a lawyer.”

“Harriet Carol is able to do anything she wants. The other guards I was referring to were you and Ceil.”

“Ceil and I are good, but I would have left Mr. Russiani to fend for himself after that elbow strike. Cecilia would have elbowed him back for sure. You’re all about the save. And I didn’t lie about you being sick. You have a headache don’t you?”

Brain splatter hadn’t seeped from my ears yet. “Yes.”

“You feel nauseous don’t you?”

My stomach heaved. “Yes,” I whispered.

“Then I didn’t lie, you are feeling ill, and Lakeside will survive a ten hour shift without you. I promise that we lowly, nonsuper guards can hold down the fort.” He paused. “Well at least Trev and I can. Misty’s back on tile duty.”

“Trev didn’t call out?” I asked, surprised.

“Not today.”

“Great. Just peachy. Today is the one day he doesn’t call out. If Jerr realizes that someone broke into his house, Cecilia and I will be the first suspects on Caleb’s hit list, and if we’re his first suspects, then we will be Douglas’ suspects.”

Garrett laughed softly. “Jerr does not have the observational prowess to notice, and even if he did notice, he does not have the vindictiveness to call the police. He’d feel bad especially if he couldn’t find anything missing. The only way you will get caught is if you literally get caught. Don’t do that. That would be irredeemable.”

A beam of sunlight stabbed through my window, and I clenched my eyes shut against the pain of thinking. “Right.”

“Text me when the mission is complete. I’ll keep an eye on Caleb and Jerr and text you if they leave Lakeside. If you ever get up here today, I stashed ‘Christabel’ in the Hut for you, just so you know. Otherwise, I’ll bring it by later.”

“I impart to you my eternal gratitude.”

“I don’t think a poem is going to give you terribly good insight into Caleb’s psyche.”

I shrugged, realized he couldn’t see me, and said, “Shows how much you know.” I licked my lips, but my tongue was dry; it pulled on my lip instead of saturating it with spit. My lip throbbed. “Thanks for being my look-out.”

“Anytime. ‘May the force be with you.’”

“‘Live long and prosper.’”

Garrett chuckled. “Different movie.”

“Not really,” I said, and hung up.

I reached up to close my curtains against the persistent, unsympathetic sun, looked outside, and noticed that the front yard was suspiciously bare. Flattened grass and air filled the space where I’d piled five overflowing Frank-filled boxes last night. The garbage truck wasn’t supposed come until Thursday.

I crawled out of bed and stumbled down to the basement, wanting to believe that the garbage truck came early or that some neighborhood kids had raided our trash or that the boxes had sprung legs and hobbled away, but the sickening knot in my stomach wasn’t just from the raspberry lemonades anymore. When I reached the last step, I stared dumbfounded at all three piles of boxes safely hidden from the landfill. I stood for a few minutes, letting the wasted time, effort, and emotional growth simmer, before I clenched my fists, turned around, and stomped back to my room.

I flopped onto my bed, frustrated and roiling in aggravation. Justin Hawkins’ guitar blasted in my ear. I flipped open my phone, the pulse in my temple pounding with horrific and suddenly frantic vigor. “I’m dying,” I groaned.

“Ditto,” Cecilia said, her voice hushed and strained. “We are suffering the repercussions of our sins. Great-Grandma Margoe was right, God bless her soul.”

“Or we drank too much.”

“That too, but Great-Grandma Margoe would say that was the same thing. She’s smiting us.”

“Great-Grandma Margoe didn’t know squat,” I said and then added, “God bless her soul,” to avoid further smiting.

Cecilia sighed. “She raised Mama Margoe.”

“Exactly.” I curled up, but my stomach insistently protested. I straightened and lay haphazardly across my bed. “She never understood the Swiss cheese of local law enforcement, she didn’t believe in cable, and she raised a stubborn doormat, all of which were deliberate attempts on my sanity.”

“I’m going to take a wild stab in the dark here and guess that basement cleaning isn’t going well?”

“Not particularly.” I filled Cecilia in on the extent of my cleaning— the amount of boxes I’d gone through, how long it had taken, the things-to-maybe-keep and CDs that I’d found— and Margoe’s subsequent rebellion against all things mentally stable.

“Well that just sucks,” Cecilia said.

I sighed. “I’m going to have buns of steel by the time I bring all five boxes back to the curb. Maybe I should take them to the dump myself.”

Cecilia was quiet for a long couple breaths. “Do you have to throw all of it out?”

“I’m not throwing all of it out, just a lot of it. I made two boxes of memorable, semi-important stuff to keep, like pictures and sheet music and a book.” I patted the floor for my jeans with my free hand, my body still on its back and otherwise immobile. My fingers found a lumpy wad of thick, rough denim. I yanked my jeans from yesterday onto the bed and dug the Rolling Stones Zippo out from the front pocket. “No one needs lame, outdated ties or extra wire hangers. They don’t mean anything. It’s just crap. Margoe hasn’t been coping very well. She is single handedly keeping the Mad Lib company in business.”

“Maybe forcing Margoe to let go before she’s ready isn’t helping.”

I flicked the Zippo’s lid up and snapped it back down. “This is why I came back this summer, to help Margoe and clean out Frank’s crap.”

“I know, but maybe waiting until Margoe is more accepting of letting go would be a better time to plow through the boxes.”

I grunted. “There will never be a time when she actually wants to let go of the boxes.” I rolled onto my side. “We have more pressing things to worry about besides Margoe’s repressed grief. Garrett is keeping an eye on Caleb and Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear at Lakeside. We need to make our move while we still can.”

“We have a move?”

“Of course we have a move. We get in. We find dirt on Caleb. We get out.” I scraped the flame on.

Cecilia sighed. “That’s our move?”

“Yep.”

“This is stupid. I don’t even want to break into Jerr’s house. We should just let Caleb have at it, whatever ‘it’ is, and screw Lakeside. This is our last summer anyway,” Cecilia whined.

I twitched my finger up to snap the lid closed, but the lighter slipped and burned my thumb instead. “Shit,” I hissed.

“What?”

I sucked on the throbbing, stinging side of my thumb which made my lip throb and sting, so I gave up and laid flat on the bed, not sucking on anything and living with the stinging. “It’s

not all about you. Sometimes it's about the greater good. We can not let Lakeside be taken over by the dark forces of Yup, no matter how Scottish and Aquatic they are."

Cecilia exhaled into the phone in a loud, static-filled breath. "When should I meet you?"

"I'll meet you in Jerr's backyard in twenty-five. Be there or be rectangular."

I flipped my phone closed and shut my eyes, listening to my breathing and ticking off my objectives for the morning: change into real clothes, brush teeth, fluff hair, meet Cecilia in Mr. Snyder's backyard, snoop in his house for anything incriminating, and not get caught in the act of snooping. None of that sounded particularly peppy, so I tried to make a list of long term objectives, but all I could foresee were long hours guarding other people being peppy and possibly being crushed by collapsing basement boxes. Peppy was obviously not within my range; maybe Margoe and Isaac were compensating. I wondered if Caleb hid any peppy under the brooding stoicism since he was within my range according to Lakeside history if not according to how he wielded hydrogen peroxide. I opened my eyes, cutting my thoughts mid-emotional betrayal, propped the Zippo on the window sill, and shuffled to the bathroom. Garrett did a wonderful peppy.

After I'd completed half of my morning objectives, I gave the basement steps a final disparaging glance in the direction of the almost trashed Frank boxes, flounced out of the house in an attempt to appear normal and carefree, and tripped on something tucked on the top porch step. The stumble made the porch cringe from the impact, and the cut on my calf twinged. I snapped an accusing glare on the something that had tripped me, and I discovered a potted bunch of pink-tipped begonias on the stoop. A little envelope inside the pot's rim leaned against its plump leaves.

Just what I need, another early morning letter, I thought, picked up the envelope, and ripped my finger through the flap. A card with a worried looking mouse holding a piece of scrap paper that read, "Thank you" in tiny, neat script was inside. I opened the card.

Hi Patricia,

Thank you very much for helping me from the pool yesterday. I feel terrible about your lip. Dean says to bring your Jeep to the shop anytime you want the muffler replaced. I'll pay. He has Wrangler parts in stock whenever you need them.

Sincerely, Jimmy Russiani.

I stared at the card, my mouth gaping as I reread the letter and feeling slightly embarrassed that Dean had heard Maxine rumbling around the neighborhood. Mostly though, I felt touched. For the passed seven summers, I'd had an average of about three saves a week, which is roughly thirty saves per summer. Out of a total of two hundred and ten saves, no one had ever sent me a thank you present. Granted, I'd never been elbowed in the face, but I'd never expected thank you presents either because saving those in swimming distress was my job. I enjoyed that part of my job, but as I stared at the scrawny mouse with his sad, twitchy, little whiskers and curled up, uncertain tail and Mr. Russiani's thin, jagged scrawl, I felt my throat tighten and my breath sigh out gratefully. I brought the begonias inside and sat the pot on the windowsill in my room next to the Rolling Stone's Zippo, letting the thick, bushy plant soak up the thin, slated sun rays through the blinds.

Twenty minutes later, I was sweating in Mr. Snyder's backyard, scoping out possible entries and waiting for Cecilia. She had obviously decided to be rectangular.

I dug my cell out of my jean's pocket and texted her: *Where are you? I'm still waiting.*

The door was locked, which was surprising because I'd estimate that eighty percent of Dansburians left their backdoors unlocked, and if not their backdoors, their screen doors at the very least. A couple upstairs windows were open, but his aluminum siding wasn't conducive to climbing. I'd have to check the side windows.

I flipped open my phone. Another minute had ticked by without a reply. Trying to look casual instead of wracked with adrenaline, I strolled back to my house and took a gander down Hazen Street. Cecilia wasn't walking down the street. She wasn't leaving her house. The neighborhood was dead, and so was Cecilia the next time I saw her.

Squeezing my hands into tight fists, I walked back across the street toward Mr. Snyder's backyard. A box fan whirred in one of the ground-floor side windows. I glanced around. All of our neighbors were probably at work except for Cecilia and me— damn her to perpetual hangover hell— so before one of the biddies could peer through her lace curtain and bust me, I raised the window, pushed in the fan with a hard thunk, and hoisted myself onto the sill.

The sill's plastic ridges dug painfully into my palms and stomach as I balanced with my head and shoulders in the house and my butt and legs still dangling out. I tried to swing my leg up to straddle the ledge, but the window wasn't wide enough. My knee rammed into the aluminum siding. Gritting my teeth, I wiggled my hips up to the sill, heaved my entire upper body into the house, and twisted to the side. My stomach hitched sickeningly as I fell. My back thumped onto the living room carpet, and the back of my knees caught roughly on the sill, so my calves and feet still hung outside the window. My neck bent at an awkward angle against the floor. The fan whirred noisily in my ear, and blew my hair across my face, over my eyes, and in my mouth when The Darkness' electric guitars split the rushing wind tunnel in Mr. Snyder's living room.

I pushed down on the carpet to lift my butt, and I kicked my legs up in a deranged, lopsided pike, trying to catch the window ledge with my foot, but my flip flop slipped on the plastic. The back of my knees caught on the ledge again. My skin pinched and scraped against the siding.

My calf throbbed, but it didn't look as if the cut was bleeding. I kicked up again, caught the ledge in the center of my foot, and pushed both my legs into the house. I laid in a heap on Mr. Snyder's living room carpet, my hands a little raw and my ankle smarting. I flipped open my phone just as Justin Hawkins was touching and being touched.

"I'm in. You're not here. I can take care of it myself."

"You need to actually look to see who's calling."

I recognized Garret's upbeat voice even in the midst of chaos. I regrouped. "I don't usually need to; I have a sense about these things."

"Dude, why isn't Cecilia with you?"

"Because I sense that she doesn't want to implicate herself this time should things turn sour." I scowled. "Cecilia will not be getting any cake, chocolate or otherwise."

Garrett snorted. "Did you get a sense that Caleb just received a phone call less than a minute ago? He's royally pissed."

"Of course I didn't get a sense about some stupid phone call. I don't really care what Caleb is royally pissed over as long as he's royally pissed at Lakeside." I paused, concerned. "He hasn't left Lakeside, has he?"

"No, but even from just hearing one side of the conversation, it doesn't bode well. I would find whatever you're looking for now, and get the hell out of there."

"As if I was planning on staying a while. What did he say?"

Garret hummed. “He said, ‘Not quite what I expected, but it figures,’ followed by a pause, an intense whisper-hissed, ‘Right now?’ and a growled, ‘Do what you need to.’ He’s been stalking around, snapping orders like we’re in the military instead of students on summer break. Something’s up, Patty-Cake.”

I rolled onto my feet and tucked an errant curl behind my ear. It sprang out and poked me in the eye. “I seriously doubt that phone call had anything to do with me.”

“Just get out, pronto.”

“I will, I promise, as soon as I find—” I paused, not hearing anything on the other line over the whirl wind around me. “Garrett?”

Silence. I flipped my phone closed, and I set it for vibrate.

Mr. Snyder’s living room was small, just enough to fit a brown, threadbare love seat, a lumpy rocker, and a console TV. The console was very masculine, with etched pillars on either side and four rectangular, faux drawers with little brass handles on the bottom. Framed pictures of Martin and Mrs. Snyder— some with Mr. Snyder between the two of them, his arm around Martin or hugging Mrs. Snyder, and some without— sat on lace doilies on top of the console. I passed the TV on the way to Mr. Snyder’s cramped office just off of the living room and paused at a picture of Martin and me. We were dressed for the sixth grade semi-formal, he behind me in a black suit and green tie and I in a matching, sparkly, green, halter dress. His arm hovered around my waist, but his smile was wide and excited and happy to be there. I looked comfortable, my hands holding his wrists, my back leaning against his front. I may have had my eyes set on Colton, but Martin had been there, waiting and ready for me to notice. I smiled, remembering the kiss and really glad I’d noticed.

I turned away from what could have been and ducked into Mr. Snyder's office. Windows lined three of the four walls, all of them with a great view of the old Moyer place across the street and my house— four forsythia bushes, two oak trees, and thirty meters of thick, fertilized grass away— which meant anyone who cared to look had a great view of me. I crawled over to his desk, hopefully out of view of any biddies pressing their noses against the glass, and opened the bottom drawer. Paper clip, staple, and rubber band boxes were stacked to mid-drawer. Pencil and pen packets stood wedged between the boxes. Nothing incriminating or interesting was wedged in sight. I snooped around a bit, not letting anything get too out of place, but I couldn't find anything besides basic office supplies. The drawer was clean.

The top drawer had some stacked folders. I fanned them out on the floor with their labels visible: Car Maintenance, Insurance, Investments, Medical, Misc., Pool Maintenance, Receipts, and Thrift Savings. I opened the Pool Maintenance folder, and faced a ridiculous chart of expenditures dating back to 1969 when Mr. Snyder had bought the land from the late Mayor Jason Winneski Sr. and built Lakeside pool. The chart was organized by year, the amounts spent, the item or service purchased, and the amounts earned. I heaved three fourths of the stack over to skim through the Nineties and early Two-Grands, but I couldn't look through everything that I wanted at the pace I wanted because it would take too long. Garrett's warning was eating at my nerves. I photocopied the last two years of the chart, crammed the pages into my back jean pocket, and covered them with my baggy, grey, A Change of Pace t-shirt to inspect later when I was home and relatively safe from the biddies and the MacCallaghans' wrath.

I returned all the folders to their top desk drawer and moved on to comb through the filing cabinet. The bottom three drawers in the filing cabinet were completely empty. I yanked the top drawer open savagely, frustrated by the lack of dirt in Mr. Snyder's drawers, and paused,

my heart pounding. The entire drawer was labeled McKenzie & MacCallaghan, but only one, thick folder was inside. I leafed through packets filled with signatures and legalese, and my fingers ached to crinkle the papers in my fists. *No, no, no, no!* The horrible thought that Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear had sold out after more than thirty-three years of owning Lakeside leaked through the numb denial as my eyes scanned page after page of legal contracts. I couldn't photo copy everything to figure out exactly what he'd done and how permanent it was, but hopefully, there would be enough in the pool maintenance chart to give me some insight. Hopefully, I could undo whatever Caleb had coerced Jerr to sign.

A vision of Lakeside being corporate sprang to mind: yuppies in gaggingly expensive suits states away making cold, financially sound, small-town-devastating decisions like bulldozering the woods for villas and pavilions, and draining Lake Wimple for dams and roads and other unnecessary construction purposes that would make filthy rich corporations disgustingly filthy rich and trample Dansbury with tourists and commuters and city people. I stared in the drawer, my fingers entrenched in the treacherous legal stink of contracts, and the numbness gave way to dread. My throat tightened.

“Are you alright, Miss Margoe?”

My woe cut abruptly on a spurt of horror-filled adrenaline. I recognized the accent from Isaac and Caleb, but the timbre of the voice was slightly different, not quite deeper than Caleb's, but softer and rounded, as if his voice weighed less. My heart nearly going into cardiac arrest, I turned slowly, aiming for casually surprised, like when you see an old friend unexpectedly at the supermarket, instead of dread-crazed and awkward from all the years spent avoiding them shot in an inevitable moment of karma. I widened my eyes— *oh my, I wasn't expecting you*— and then smiled genially— *but what a pleasure to make your acquaintance on this fine morning.*

Douglas wasn't quite the uniformed twin of Caleb I had envisioned. His hair was blond, like Isaac, but cut high and tight, not quite as severe as military but damn close. He was dressed in a loose undershirt and jeans instead of his uniform, but his badge hung on a lanyard around his neck. A pair of mirror lens aviators clipped onto the V of his undershirt. His arms were muscled, but lanky instead of bulky, and I would never have paired him and Caleb as brothers if it wasn't for the intensity of his scorching turquoise eyes staring holes into my face.

“Miss Margoe?”

I breathed. “Yes, I'm fine. I just wasn't expecting you. You must be Douglas MacCallaghan.” I offered him my hand.

His eyes flicked, hesitating for a fraction of a second. He stepped forward and enveloped his hand around mine.

“It's nice to finally meet you, Chief MacCallaghan.”

He gripped my hand, warm and calm, and stepped back. “I would say the same, except I'm not quite sure what we're doing here.”

I cocked my head. My back itched from gliding sweat. “Well, I know what I'm doing here, but I don't know what you're doing here. How on earth did you get in?” I asked, infusing my voice with bumpkin innocents.

Douglas raised his eyebrows. “The same way you did, I'd imagine.”

I forced a laugh. “That's silly. Why didn't you just knock on the door?”

“And why would I do that?”

“So I'd let you in.” I frowned. “Do you need something? Mr. Snyder will be back from work at around five if it's something I can't help you with.”

Douglas crossed his arms. “I was just curious why you didn't knock yourself.”

“Why would I knock if I knew he wasn’t home? Mr. Snyder asked me to photocopy some papers from his office.” I unfolded the papers from my pocket and waved them flippantly, resisting the urge to hyperventilate. “But he forgot to leave the door unlocked.”

Douglas stared like Caleb could stare, but the badge made it harder not to wilt. I smiled and thanked God that I’d had those two days with Caleb to harden my resolve.

He held out his left hand. His face was tense. “May I see the papers?”

I shrugged and handed them over. “Sure. It’s just pool maintenance records.”

He scanned the first page, flipped through the rest, and handed them back, his mouth marginally less pinched than a moment before. “I’m sorry that I barged in on you. Was something the matter? The way you had bent over the drawers, you looked, well, frankly, you looked distraught.”

I waved his concern away and gestured to the picture on the console, knowing I was definitely going straight to hell for this one. “It’s been about six years now, but sometimes the suddenness of it catches me blind-sided.”

Douglas turned. He bent to look at Martin and me in our best semi-formal ware and smiles, and he smiled back. “When was this taken?”

“Sixth grade.”

“My son, Isaac, is just a few years older. He’ll be fourteen this September.”

I smiled. “He’ll be asking girls to dances soon, if he hasn’t already.”

“Probably sooner than he should.” Douglas’ face took on a harder edge, reminding me of Caleb in a snit, reaching for the peroxide. I remembered Isaac’s rapt expression as I explained the fundamentals of counting kisses and flinched; I should have known better than to bring up

Isaac and dating. Douglas misinterpreted my expression, and his own relaxed into sympathy.

“How long after this photo was taken did he pass?”

I didn't have to fake the regret. “Three years.”

“Were the two of you—” Douglas seemed to struggle on what word to settle on. I waited him out. “Were you very close to one another?” He finally asked.

I debated on my own word choice, knowing that his question might be more than polite interest. “I would say we were as close as kids that age can be in a town like this, where behind every bush and through every window and in front of every closed door a retired grandmother has one hand over her mouth in shock and the other speed dialing your mother. You can't get away with much in Dansbury without every mother hearing about it and every daughter getting lectured about it, but what we did get away with was enough for us.”

He nodded slowly. “I know what you mean. The MacCallaghans grew up in a small highland town like that, where people watched out for one another and were actually involved in one another's lives. It's been a long while since Isaac, Caleb, and I lived in a community like this.”

“That's a shame,” I said, oozing calm and sympathy.

His mouth quirked to the side. “That it is.”

We walked through the living room, and I replaced the box fan in the window as we passed. I left the back door open, “just in case there was anything else Mr. Snyder needs photocopied,” said good bye to an outwardly friendly MacCallaghan cop— if he possessed even a fraction of his brother's tenacity, I cringed to think what he would dig up on me— walked briskly back to my place, and nearly tripped on the curb as I got a good look at Maxine's front

tires. My phone vibrated in my pocket, but I couldn't think past the instant rage that flashed through me. The passenger's side hubcap was getting up close and personal with the asphalt.

I stomped over to Maxine, rubbed her hood in reassurance, and squatted down to look at the damage. A healthy minute passed before I noticed the hole in the rubber because I had been looking for a pot hole burst or a curb swipe mark. Unless I ran over a six-inch, upright, mutant thumb tack, someone had slashed my tire, and my bet was on the mysterious siphoner from yesterday morning.

Resigned to wait another eight point six minutes to study the photocopied charts and destroy Caleb, I unhooked the spare tire from Maxine's rear, rummaged in her trunk for the jack and cross wrench, jacked her up, and started twirling love nuts. I was on my third nut when a car door slammed. Caleb was striding forward at a clipped pace, looking murderous. My stomach lurched in equal parts excitement and dread, and I dragged my attention back to changing Maxine's tire instead of drooling over the enemy. I'd never trust Garrett as my lookout again.

Caleb stopped uncomfortably close, his shadow engulfing me and the tire as he hovered, not a difficult task to accomplish at slightly over six feet with me kneeling in the gravel. His voice was tight and impossibly low as he growled, "Patricia." I could feel the tension coiled through his muscles and burning from his eyes and into the back of my neck.

I kept twirling. "Caleb, how nice of you to stop by," I said, infusing my voice with pathetic fatigue and appreciation. "I'm still feeling under the weather, but when I noticed Maxine in this horrible condition—" I gestured to her slashed tire, which really was horrible even if I wasn't particularly appreciative, "— I had to change her immediately." I looked up to meet his cutting expression and struggled to keep mine open. "You know how I am about car maintenance."

He bent down and glared into my face from inches away. I could nearly feel the spray of spit as he snapped, “You and I both very well know that you are not ‘feeling under the weather.’” Jeremy did not request any damn photocopies. I approached him about it when I got off the phone with Douglas, and he said that he doesn’t remember asking anything of you.” A vein throbbed through his forehead. “You weren’t even there this morning to ask!”

I shrugged lightly, pleasant against the bombardment of his rage while my heart quivered, and I twisted off the last nut. “Of course he doesn’t remember asking me. He didn’t even leave the door unlocked.”

Caleb closed his eyes, visibly struggling to regain control. “You are lying.”

“Why would I lie about photocopies?” I pulled off the dead, useless tire.

He opened his eyes and each word he said was distinct. “Why would Garrett lie about your health?”

I frowned, pushing on the new, firm tire. “He didn’t lie about anything. I felt terrible when I woke up this morning.”

“So terrible that you fixed a flat tire—”

“Well, I have priorities.”

“And broke into Jeremy’s house?”

“What?” I gaped, focusing on twirling nuts on the new tire instead of the swiftly returning nausea. “Someone broke into Mr. Snyder’s house? I hope nothing was stolen.”

“Don’t play that pathetic innocent routine on me.” Caleb jabbed his finger at me. “You broke into Jeremy’s house.”

“You think *I* broke into Mr. Snyder’s house? We’ve been neighbors for twenty-two years. I dated his son for three years. His wife was my third grade math teacher. This is the sixth

summer I've worked for him. Stealing from him would kind of be like stealing from myself, considering he writes my paychecks."

"No, nothing so bland as petty theft. You're up to something much more conspiratorial."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, because the big plan in my master conspiracy scheme is to make photocopies." I stopped twirling, reached into my pocket, and shook the papers at him. "Kind of anti-climatic, don't you think?"

Caleb raised his eyebrows. "You're building up to a climax. I have a feeling this is only the beginning." He reached for the papers. "What did you photocopy?"

I moved them out of his reach and folded them back in my pocket "If Mr. Snyder wants, he'll share that information. In the meantime, I'll keep the photocopies to myself, if it's all the same to you."

"No, it is not 'all the same to me!'" he roared, his neck veins bulging. He leaned closer, nearly taking out my nose with his finger, his voice suddenly twenty decibels quieter. "I will find out what all this is about, and I will put a stop to it."

"Right back at ya, Caleb darling."

I tightened the last nut and stood. Caleb didn't move. I ended up closer to him than I'd expected, but I refused to step back. He was wearing a wife beater again, the stretchy, ribbed fabric helpless to contain his pecs. The sides of each muscle peaked out the arm holes in all their hard, tanned glory. The stretch of thick, sun-bronzed skin from his high, prominent cheek bones to his cleft chin looked peachy smooth. He must have shaved this morning, but I couldn't remember taking particular notice of his stubble or lack of it yesterday. I realized that his hair was pulled back. He was staring at my mouth, and he smelled salty fresh, like the beach.

He cleared his throat. "Get in the car. I'm taking you to Lakeside."

I shook my head. "I don't feel well. My guarding won't be at its best."

"Then you'll be at the same level as the other guards."

I glared at him.

His mouth pulled to the side in amusement, just showing a hint of his front teeth. "I'm not taking you up to guard. Jeremy wants to speak with you."

"Good, then I can give him the photocopies," I said, suppressing the urge to bash my head against something and end it all.

Caleb lost the grin, looking uncertain.

"Maxine can take me."

His face clouded over again. "I will be taking you."

"I don't see what difference it makes who takes me."

"Then it doesn't make a difference that I'm taking you."

I gritted my teeth, wrapped in the backward knot of my own logic. "I guess it doesn't."

"Good." He turned and strode back to his gleaming BMW. I did not want to sit in cramped, close proximity to a man whose gorgeousness I shouldn't have, who wasn't offering even if I should, while I'd be reminded, in stark comparison, of Maxine's many shortcomings by a snooty, arrogant car for eight minutes, six if Caleb pushed her like he could.

I released the jack and put it and the cross wrench back in the trunk. I emerged from Maxine's trunk in time to see Caleb putting her discarded tire back on the ground. He turned his head to scowl at me, looked back at the tire to scowl even harsher at it, and turned away from the tire to open the door to his BMW. I threw the pathetic, drooping tire in the trunk with everything else. Maxine looked naked without her spare. I huffed out a deep breath, fluttering the curls that had sprung in my face, and followed.

He was already in the seat and buckled as I opened the passenger door. BMWs had doors. I cursed inwardly, refusing to do that to myself or to Maxine for the whole ride. Maxine had character, and besides, I liked that she was doorless. She had enough problems without me throwing extras on the checklist just for jealousy.

Caleb pressed the radio knob— the veins on the back of his hand shifted as he adjusted the volume— and the burdened down strokes of strings plodded over a deep, wondering brass solo.

I raised my eyebrows.

“It’s Tchaikovsky’s first movement of ‘Manfred Symphony.’ You wouldn’t like it.”

“You’re right. I prefer the second movement, but neither belongs on the road.” I crossed my fingers that a second movement followed the first. “Don’t you have *Goo Goo Dolls* or *A Change of Pace* or *The Darkness* or—”

“Patricia.”

“— something that actually jams?”

“Just get in the damn car.”

I glared at him. He stared back, unmoved, so I relented and got in the damn car. My butt slid a little on the seat as I slammed the door. I wasn’t used to leather.

“Easy on the frame, Patty-Without-The-Cake,” Caleb said, but without any real heat. He looked significantly calmer than thirty seconds ago.

I lifted my hands, palms out. “*J’ai desole.*”

“*Vous n’etes pas, mais je vous pardonne parce que votre francais est terrible et je vous prefere plus que ma voiture, bien que je ne puisse pas pardonner comment vous m’effectuez au-delà de la raison.*”

I stared, wanting to be annoyed but impressed in spite of myself. “I have no idea what you just said. My French sucks.”

“I know. You conjugated your apology incorrectly— *desole* is an *etre* verb, not *avoir*— and your accent is atrocious.”

“Just because my accent isn’t great doesn’t mean I couldn’t know the language.”

“I didn’t say your accent wasn’t great. I said it’s atrocious. Plus there was the verb conjugation.” Caleb revved the car without a hiccup, and she purred as smoothly as the leather under my ass.

I shrugged. “That’s what happens when your last language class was in high school.”

“You didna have to take it as an elective in college?” He pulled away from the curb and started down Hazen Street. The BMW glided over the road without a sputter.

“Nope. I tested out.”

Caleb glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, looking doubtful.

“I was decent once upon a time. Give a girl some slack. I had a rigorous tutor my junior year.”

“Really,” Caleb said, sounding uninterested.

“Yup. Ray Lewis. He’d—”

“You were tutored by a Lewis?”

“Misty is uncertain, not dumb, and Ray really knew his stuff. He’s a florist now. Moved on up the mountain last year with the son he’d brought home from his year abroad. He wouldn’t even tell his own brother anything about Gisele other than that they’d met in Nice, and she’d named Adrien after her father. If I had a brother like Officer Bruno Lewis though, I would keep the details to myself too.”

“Should I apologize that you and Ray didn’t work out?”

I laughed. “He was my tutor for one semester, not my husband. ‘It never would have worked between us, darling.’” I shook my head and sighed. “Poor Grégoire.”

“Who?”

“It was his French name.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Good memory.”

“Not really. I just said it a lot between kisses.”

“I thought you said he was teaching you French.”

“He was.”

Caleb finally cracked a smile.

“He really did tutor me though. I got a B plus that semester. We just found time to have fun researching everything that’s French. Why is yours so fluent?” I rolled down a window to blow the curls and sweat out of my face and to remind me of Maxine.

“The air conditioning’s on.”

I closed my eyes, enjoying the wind. “So?”

My elbow started to levitate; he was rolling up my window.

I rolled it down a little.

He rolled it up a little more.

I rolled it down the rest of the way and it pinched my weenus. “Ouch! Bug off and answer the question.”

Caleb squirmed in his seat slightly, suddenly reminding me of an overgrown Isaac. I fought not to smile. He glared at me before turning right at the deranged forsythias. “How is my language fluency pertinent to the conversation?”

“I’m extracting intimate information about your French speaking adequacy to use against you in my master conspiracy.”

He kept his attention on the road, but the muscles in his jaw flexed. “Not funny.”

“Aw I don’t know, I thought it was pretty damn hilarious. You get any more serious and your neck might crick.”

We caught red at the light, of course, and Caleb turned to look at me as we waited, his eyes squinted in confusion. “My neck might what?”

“Crick.”

“Isn’t that a small river?”

“Sure, but you can also get one in your neck, you know, like when it gets stiff and it hurts so bad you can’t move it.”

The light turned, but he didn’t move right away. “You mean like a stiff neck.”

“Yeah, a crick.” I pointed at the light. “You’re green.”

He dragged his attention back to the road and turned left onto Hollander, and I turned my face back into the wind, thinking *You’re a crick in my neck*, and smiled.

“I like to travel.”

I turned to face him again.

Caleb was relaxed, but he concentrated on weaving around Hollander Road’s potholes and meandering turns five speeds under the limit, fifteen speeds under my usual. We were dangerously close to beating my record worst, twelve minutes. I pressed my foot flat against the floor mat. Maxine could eat Caleb’s BMW for breakfast the way he drove her.

“My French is good because I like to travel, and the languages stick.”

I pretended to frown. “My brain is obviously missing the language adhesive.”

He smiled, and it held longer than usual, more than the brief span between two blinks.

“What languages have you picked up?”

“French, English, and Gaelic obviously, and Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and Greek.” He listed them as I would what I’d eaten yesterday.

“You travelled to France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece and here and they just—” I flapped my hand in the air— “stuck?”

“I already knew English, but yes, pretty much.”

I was quiet for a minute, quelled by the enormity of foreign language talent sitting next to me. He could be lying, of course. I could claim to be an astrophysics wiz; my high school science teacher might damn me to eternal hell, but Caleb wouldn’t know the difference. “Do you miss travelling?”

“What do you mean? I am travelling. I’m not in Scotland.”

“You’ve been in the United States for nine years. You might not be in your home country, but you aren’t travelling anymore.”

His jaw flexed again. “I’m with Douglas and Isaac now, so whether I prefer Scotland or travelling or the United States and stability is insignificant.”

I shrugged and turned back to the window. “Where a person lives, despite who they’re living with, seems kind of significant to me.”

“What do you know?” Caleb snapped, taking a left a little more sharply than the others but still considerably slower than my typical hang-on-to-your-butt turns. “Where have you travelled to that you have such a knowledgeable outlook on places and where to settle?”

I laughed. “Good joke. I’ve never been anywhere but here.”

He slowed to his previous crawl around the next bend. “You’ve never been outside the United States?”

“I’ve never been outside the state. The only way I even dreamed of ditching town was for college. Dansbury is like the Brigadoon of Pennsylvania; you should feel right at home.”

Caleb shook his head, astonished. “What have you got against travelling?”

“Its price. I loved getting away for college. I’d love to stay away, but travelling costs money. Paychecks go toward bills and groceries in my family. There’s nothing left over for plane tickets and hotel rooms.”

Caleb seemed to consider that. “Do you not like Dansbury?”

I smiled ruefully. “Dansbury will always be my home, and if I can escape, I want it to remain the same for when I return. I’d be heartsick if Dansbury ever changed, gossipy biddies and all, but if I don’t get out soon, I won’t have a self for my heart to beat in whether it’s sick or not.”

“I felt the same once for Leven, Fife, the small town I grew up in. I felt stifled and detached and torn between loyalties to my roots and myself.”

“And now?”

He sighed heavily. “Now, I would very much like to see if all has remained the same in my absence. Obviously things change— people age, new buildings are constructed, old structures collapse— but the soul of a place that imprints on your heart as home is what needs to remain. When I was home, I desperately wanted to leave to discover who I was, and I did. I found myself a while ago during my travels and helping my brother raise Isaac, but the imprinted part of my heart still beats in Scotland.”

“I think I’m still in the stifled, detached, and torn phase,” I grumbled.

Caleb laughed softly, slowing down at the yellow light at the end of Hollander Street instead of speeding through it. “The longing, heartsick phase isn’t much better.”

“You could always move back.”

“Trying to get rid of me after only three days is not a good indication of my people skills.”

I smiled. “Your lack of people skills is not why I’m trying to get rid of you.”

He turned his head to frown at me, and he missed the light change.

“You’re green again.” I pointed.

Caleb turned onto Lakeside Street still frowning.

“You need to lighten up and learn how to take a joke, Rambo.”

“Your jokes aren’t funny.”

I scowled at him. “*You* don’t think *I’m* funny?”

“I didn’t say that. I just don’t think you’re funny when you’re trying to be. Like what is a Rambo? I’m assuming it’s some kind of slang. I know you mean it sarcastically and playfully by your tone, but because I don’t understand its meaning, I don’t think it’s funny. You make jokes like that a lot. It’s not my fault your only form of humor is based on American culture.”

I bit my lip, too embarrassed to laugh but too thrown not to, so I looked out the window instead. “I’ll attempt to broaden my horizons.”

Caleb turned into Lakeside’s parking lot and pulled up next to Jerr-the Gummy-Bear’s Oldsmobile. I moved to put my hand on the door handle, but Caleb reached out and covered my hand with his. The calluses on his palm scratched the top of my hand, and his fingers weaved tightly through mine. My gaze snapped to his. The set of his jaw tightened, and I held my breath.

“Before you leave to talk to Jeremy, I want to let you know that—”

“I know, I know. ‘You will find what’s going on, and you will put a stop to it.’” I sighed tiredly.

“— you can tell me what’s going on instead of forcing me to find out, and I can help you sooner rather than later.”

I frowned, confused by an image of Caleb breaking into his own house for me to sabotage himself to justice. “What are you talking about? Why would you help me at all?”

“Because as much as you want to get away, Dansbury is your home. You love this town and the people in it, and in some harebrained, ridiculously illegal scheme, I’m pretty sure you are conspiring to do something you feel has to be done for the good of the town or the good of the people or the good of something, but it’s obviously not for the good of you. You are going about it all wrong— as I suspect you always have, so you’re past rehabilitation— but you mean well. Someone else, however, does not mean you well.”

I felt cold, and my hand clamping involuntarily on the door handle. “I didn’t do anything. Let me go.”

Caleb growled in frustration and squeezed my hand painfully. “You’re not listening. I don’t think you did anything. Well, I know you’ve done something, but I’m willing to put that temporarily on hold to figure out who siphoned your gas and slashed your tire. Do you know anyone who may want to hurt Maxine?”

I hesitated, debating whether he was genuinely trying to help or trying to get an edge over me the way I was trying to find one over him. I needed help— catching tire-slashers was a little beyond my scope of expertise— but I didn’t want to trust Caleb. Besides, if I confided in Caleb about the harassment note, I’d be a backstabbing hypocrite if I continued to dig up dirt while he

was helping me— maybe that was his plan— and he'd probably want to read it. Just the thought of standing next to him while he read 'diseased pussy parade' in reference to me tipped the scale.

I shook my head. "Leave it alone. Maxine and I have been just fine on our own for years; we'll be fine without you for one more summer."

Caleb let go of my hand, looking disappointed, disgusted, and undeterred. "You'd think a person who lies as much as you do would get better at it."

I opened my mouth to say something snotty.

He turned away from me and looked out the windshield. His voice was harsh and unyielding as he whispered, "Get out of my car."

I hesitated, strangely not wanting to leave it like that, but he turned back to face me. I couldn't hold the anger in his gaze without flinching. I opened the car door, stepped out, and after very little internal debate, slammed the door as hard as I could.

Seven

Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear was talking good naturedly to Harriet Carol as I approached from the locker room. Harriet Carol daintily covered her mouth with her French tipped fingernails, closed her eyes, and erupted in machinegun giggles like Betty Rubble, oblivious, as usual, to Madeline flirting with the edge of the pool. Mr. Snyder smiled kindly as Harriet Carol enjoyed whatever he'd said, and I hesitated, reluctant to interrupt their conversation. I kept a wary lookout on the long-term-memory-impaired, five-year-old courting disaster. Isaac glared at me from the tunnel slides because I hadn't acknowledged the past two safe slide entries he'd landed in the forty seconds I'd been studying Mr. Snyder and Harriet Carol. Irregular rewards made a

behavior strong and permanent, so I continued to eavesdrop on Mr. Snyder. Isaac slid down the tube slide a third time.

I'd never imagined Mr. Snyder with anyone but Mrs. Snyder, which I supposed was childish of me. Nine years was a long time to remain alone. Harriet Carol might not be anything more than friendly acquaintances with Mr. Snyder— he certainly had more of a way with older women than his employees— but I didn't want to ruin his move if something was brewing.

Mr. Snyder glanced over when I stopped walking. He smiled, held out a finger to me, and turned back to Harriet Carol. He held on to her lower arm, leaning close to say something, and Harriet Carol's head swung side to side, her lips pressed tight, the amused giggles vibrating out of her on overdrive as she swatted at Mr. Snyder's shoulder. He pressed a hand to his heart as if wounded, patted her arm one more time, and turned back to me. Harriet Carol finally noticed Madeline, and she scooped her away from the pool's edge just as she'd braced her chubby little legs to catapult herself into ten feet.

I met Mr. Snyder halfway in the space between us, attempting to keep my expression neutral. "Caleb said you wanted to talk to me?" I asked.

He nodded, ushering me toward the Hut. "Sure, sure. Let's go in where there'll be more privacy."

I followed Mr. Snyder past the zero degree entry, the mushroom, the ping pong table, the canoe, and into the Hut while Garrett, Misty, Trev, and Jackie stared at me with various expressions of panic, worry, concern, and relish. Caleb planted himself at zero degree entry and scanned the pool, his expression unreadable. Mr. Snyder shut the Hut door behind me. He dug out his wallet from the back of his plaid shorts.

"Mr. Snyder?"

“I’ve told you since you were ten to call me Jeremy.” He pulled a wad of cash from the wallet. “How much you need?”

I blinked. “How much of what do I need?” I asked, knowing he must be referring to money the way he was licking his fingers and thumbing through the twenties in his hand, but I couldn’t think with that many Jacksons staring at me.

Mr. Snyder placed a pile of cash on the table. He continued counting what was left in his hand. “There ain’t no need to hedge, Patricia. Chief MacCallaghan called Caleb, who told me that you broke into my house this mornin’.”

The churning Pinnacle in my stomach made a swift return. I swallowed the vomit back, so nothing came up except a burning in my throat. “I didn’t—”

“I don’t understand why you would resort to breakin’ in.” Mr. Snyder interrupted, shaking his head. His mustache quivered with intense disapproval. I stood, transfixed because I’d never heard him interrupt a person in my life. He was always the person being interrupted. “If you ever need anythin’, I’m here to help. I watched you grow up, Patricia. You’re a good kid. If things get so rough that you need more money than you’re earnin’, than you talk to me. I’m your boss, your neighbor, and I’d like to think you can come to me, knowin’ I’ll do what I can.” He leveled a steady gaze on me with more sturdy resolution than I’d ever thought him capable of. “How much?”

“I don’t want your money,” I said. Mr. Snyder lifted a finger, and I rushed ahead before he could wedge back in the conversation. “I admit that I did crawl through your window this morning, but it wasn’t for money. I would never steal from you like that.”

Mr. Snyder’s hands stilled, a wad of Jacksons clutched in both hands. He frowned “You’re not in a scrape?”

“No, not financially.” I winced and added, “Well, not more than usual.”

“Then what were you doin’ in my house this mornin’?”

I took a deep breath, knowing I should keep my misgivings to myself, but I felt uncomfortably moved by Mr. Snyder’s generosity. I didn’t want our interaction completely one-sided, so I choked down the panicked creek hoodlum inside of me, yanked out the papers from my back pocket, and slapped them on the table next to the stack of twenties. “I made a photocopy of the last two years of financial records in the Pool Maintenance folder in your desk.”

Mr. Snyder still held the money as if unconvinced I wouldn’t be taking it. Jackson’s eyes kept an expectant look out from under those umbrella-bush eyebrows, and I tapped the photocopied financial records to reaffirm, if only to myself, that I didn’t want the money. Mr. Snyder picked up the photo copies and flipped through them, looking baffled. “What’s so important about the last two years of Pool Maintenance that you would break into my house just to photo copy them? What’s this all really about, Patricia?”

I tucked my hair behind my ears, resigning myself to elaborate. “Did you know that Caleb is not only earning ten dollars an hour for lifeguarding, but also an additional forty dollars an hour?”

Mr. Snyder nodded, his expression shifting from confused to perplexed. “Of course.”

“What do you mean ‘of course’?” I shouted. “There is no ‘of course’ about it. Caleb is more than just a head guard if he’s earning that much money. I saw the folder in your filing cabinet labeled McKenzie & MacCallaghan. Is Caleb part of, or God help us, a partner in some major company or corporation? What’s going on?” I closed my eyes in dread. “Tell me he’s not timeshare.”

“What’s timeshare?”

“Oh, geez Louise,” I muttered, shaking my head. I opened my eyes. “Who does Caleb work for besides us?”

“His father’s business. Caleb’s father is the MacCallaghan in McKenzie & MacCallaghan. They bought into Lakeside—”

“You let Caleb take some of Lakeside?”

“—and he’s been makin’ some real great decisions since he started this past April. He told me we’ll see solid results by the end of the season.”

“He’s making decisions? Like what kind of decisions? How much of Lakeside does he own?”

Mr. Snyder patted my shoulder. His frown cut two painfully deep creases into his eyebrows. “Is this what prompted you to break into my house? You’re this concerned about Caleb?”

His tone made me feel a bit loony for being concerned, but obviously my fears had been well placed; Caleb already had his talons in a chunk of Dansbury. “I don’t want someone who doesn’t care about the land or the town or the people here in charge of what happens to Lakeside. You’ve owned the property for forty years. Why are you selling parts of it now? Why did you sell part of it to a major company instead of someone in the community?”

“Caleb is someone in the community.”

I shook my head vehemently. “You know what I mean. Why didn’t you sell it to a local, someone who already lives here and wants to own it, as opposed to an outsider who had to move here to own it.”

“I needed someone with enough money and time and experience to invest themselves into this place. Profit ain’t been good the last few years. I didn’t want to sell the entire property, but I needed a boost. This is a good thing, Patricia, not somethin’ to fret over and break into people’s houses over.” He patted and squeezed my shoulder placatingly before stepping back. “Like I said, you’re a good kid. Your heart’s in the right place, so if you do need money or an ear to chew or whatever, let me know. I’ve heard your grandmother ain’t been workin’, and without your dad—”

I stilled, bracing myself not to flinch and angry for needing to brace myself.

“I wasn’t sure if things were goin’ alright.”

“Things are just fine,” I lied, “but I truly appreciate your offer. Really,” I added, attempting to infuse my voice with sincerity. My words and tone didn’t do justice to how touched I felt by his concern and willingness to help. He’d just admitted that he was going through a rough spell too, yet he was dealing out twenties like playing cards. My throat tightened.

“You talk to me and let me know if I can help.” He insisted.

I nodded.

He smiled, and the skin around his eyes crinkled like thin paper. “Alright then. No more breakin’ and enterin’.”

“I won’t break into your house again, Mr. Snyder. I promise, and I’m sorry I—”

“Alright. Good, good. And for the last time, call me Jeremy,” He said, patting my arm a few more times. I looked down, torn between his kindness and my instincts to doubt and snoop, and his hand moved from my shoulder to my face. I jolted up, startled. Mr. Snyder leaned in as his dry, meaty hand urged me closer, and he kissed my cheek. His lips pressed firmly into my

skin with more surety and confidence than I would have expected. Mr. Snyder might have been wishy washy on enforcing rules and managing his staff, but once he landed on a final decision, like condemning his business to the sharks— Lord, help me— he committed to the decision full force.

When he pulled away, I raised my fingertips and touched my cheek. My skin tingled where his mustache had scratched. I met his Beagle-sad, blue eyes and smiled. Jerr smiled back, his mustache stretching and smiling too, and walked out of the Hut.

The Hut door closed, a moment passed, and I stood alone and suddenly despondent in the Hut's shadowed dim, wanting to support Jerr's financial decisions more than ever, but if McKenzie & MacCallaghan's only concern was making money, I didn't want to think of the horrors Caleb could implement to meet their goals. I did think of them, of course, and in vivid, demolished detail, and the back of my throat clamped tighter. My chest ached. Tears slipped through my lashes and dripped down my cheeks. I pressed my lips together firmly, breathed shakily through my nose, and hoped I'd be able to find some tissues before leaving the Hut and facing Garrett, Misty, Trev, Jackie, and Caleb in the sunshine.

After a few snuffles, some deep breaths, and picturing how Jackie's face would implode when she realized I hadn't been fired, I calmed down enough to open the first aid closet. I wiped my tears and blew my nose on a gauze pad. *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature: Romantic Poetry and Prose* sat between a bottle of saline eye wash solution and a pocket mask. Its cover was plain black with a little square picture of a boy under a cave unhappily watching over his dozing sheep. The cave sported dangling roots and was topped by a crazily limber tree, a decidedly less feminine cover compared to *The Oxford Anthology of English Verse*, yet when I scanned the table of contents, the poets were generally the same. Their selection of poems,

however, were beefed up to include some poems that the English Verse edition didn't offer, including 'Christabel.'

When I left the Hut, Garrett seemed less panicked but nowhere near reassured. He sat on the edge of his stand, his elbows digging into his knees and his hands clasped in a tight, white-knuckled fist. Misty pleasantly scanned the pool from entry, no longer concerned. Trev blatantly stared from twelve feet, still obviously worried. Jackie continued scanning at ten, her eyes about to explode from their sockets in pressurized rage, and Caleb scowled at me. Jerr stood beside him at entry, talking and patting his shoulder— no apparent limit to shoulder pats stored up in Jerr— as Caleb perfected his most naturally reoccurring expression. I held up the poetry book and winked at Garrett. His expression didn't change, but he leaned back in his chair, appeased for the moment. I ignored everyone else, walked through the locker rooms, and left Lakeside. I'd never walked all the way to my house from the mountain, so I didn't know exactly how long it would take on foot the way I could estimate the driving distance. My guess would be thirty to forty-five minutes. Lights weren't a factor, but pace was more of an issue. Luckily, the trek was all downhill, so maybe I could lean closer to a half hour.

I'd almost reached the first right onto Hollander Road when hurried sneaker slaps on asphalt echoed behind me.

“Wait up!”

I glanced back. Isaac was running down Lakeside Street toward me, his towel flapped over a shoulder, around his neck, and flailed behind him, so he looked like a half naked pilot on speed. His straight, blond hair poofed up and fell flat with each stride. His fists pumped high and strong as he pounded after me, and I kept walking. He'd reach me in a few seconds anyway.

Isaac slid on the loose grave when he caught up and adjusted his pace to walk beside me as we turned onto Hollander at the light.

“What’s the hurry?” I asked.

“What’s with the book?”

“I can’t like poetry?”

“You didn’t even know who Geraldine was,” Isaac scoffed. “So no, you can’t like poetry.”

I shrugged. “Just ammunition.”

Isaac stared at me.

“So what good deed did I do to deserve your company this early in the morning?”

“You didn’t do anything; you just keep good company. Well, you keep concerned company. You shouldn’t walk all the way down the Buckbur Mountain by yourself,” Isaac said snidely, his lip curling up. “Do you want to get pancaked by a speeding hick?”

I laughed. “That sounds eerily like a quote I know.”

“I added the ‘pancaked.’” Isaac said, frowning.

“Nice verb. Let my grandmother borrow you for an afternoon, and you’d infuse her life with pep.”

His eyes widened, looking bewildered. “Is she a fan of verbs?”

“She’s a fan of interesting and amusing words indiscriminate of parts of speech.”

“Word search?”

I sighed. “Mad Libs.”

He nodded, but his frown didn’t ease. “How did you know I was plagiarizing?”

“I’ve heard that speech from Trev before. Who was he spouting it to this time?”

“Uncle Caleb. They were arguing over whether you were actually attempting to walk all the way down the mountain by yourself, and if you were, who should do a drive by and take you back home. Uncle Caleb claimed he didn’t think you were that stupid, and Trev said that he obviously didn’t know you very well. The conversation didn’t look like it was going anywhere fast, so I decided to walk with you until one of them picked us up. We might make it back to Hazen Street before then though.”

I smiled. “Well aren’t you the gentleman. Thanks for the company, Izzy. I’m touched.”

“Yeah, well.” Isaac tugged on the ends of his towel, one end in each hand, so they both hung over his chest. “Thanks for not noticing my restraint on the slides.”

“I noticed.”

“You didn’t look like it.”

My smile faded. “It’s been a rough day.”

“The day just started,” Isaac said, looking at me like I was delusional.

“Some days seem longer faster than others.”

Isaac mulled that over for a second, and he nodded. “Like having a test first period.”

“Like waking up after three hours of sleep.”

“Like jumping in a pool and getting called out for thunder.”

“Like driving to work without thunder.”

Isaac laughed. “You like thunder?”

“Every lifeguard in the history of the world worships thunder.” I laughed because Isaac’s laugh was so hearty and infectious. “So either Trev or Caleb, eh?”

Isaac nodded.

I shook my head in trepidation. “Either has the potential for varying degrees of awkward, just so you know.” I eyed him up and down in a mock inspection. “You’re not socially squeamish, are you?”

“Hell, no. I’ve got nerves of steel. Why are you anticipating awkward?”

“Your Uncle and I just had a mild spat—”

Isaac nodded as if from experience. “Understandable.”

“— and Trev and I have been treading a shallow spat for years.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Because of a miss?”

I shook my head. “Because of a kiss.”

“I’m surprised.”

I blinked, slightly taken aback. “Should I be insulted?”

“No. God, no,” Isaac said hastily. “I mean, doesn’t Trev live just down this road?”

I nodded, not quite sure what he was getting at.

“Well, you live on Hazen Street with me. I’m just surprised Trev would want to lower himself down the mountain.”

We walked around the first sharp bend in the road. “I take it the gap between us creek kids and the mountain yuppies hasn’t closed through the generations.”

“I wouldn’t consider myself a whole generation behind you, but no, Ryan and Evan remind Luke and me where they lives almost daily.” Isaac cracked his knuckles. “I could take them.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’d be outnumbered, Luke’s got you by two years, three inches, and I’d guess twenty pounds, and if Evan’s anything like his brother, he’s got a lot of built-in, pressurized anger.”

Isaac busted out a few swift karate chops. “But I’ve got moves.”

“Oh, I’m quaking.” I pretended a full body shiver.

Isaac laughed.

“If Trev rubbed my nose in his money the way you say Ryan does to you and Luke, Trev and I wouldn’t have ever been friends.” I smiled. “I would have ‘taken him’ back in kindergarten, and that would have been the end of it.”

“But you didn’t.”

“I didn’t have to. The money was always in the background; he had a flat-screen in his room, and I had a fifteen inch in the family room. He had an in ground pool, and I had the creek. He had duck hunt on his Nintendo, and I aimed a sling shot at birds in the woods.” I shrugged, still smiling in the memories. “I’d go to his place to play duck hunt, and he’d come over to mine to swim in the creek. I thought his TV was freakin’ awesome, and he fired my sling shot at anything that moved and most things that didn’t. We shared what we had and enjoyed what we didn’t from the other, and I don’t think either of us thought what the other had was better or felt like less of a person because we didn’t have it. I know I never did until we were older. Even then, it wasn’t him who made me feel that way.”

Isaac kicked a stone at my feet. “Is it different between you now because of money or because of him liking you more than you like him?”

I kicked it back at him. “Probably a little of both. He doesn’t understand me because he’s so stuffy and rigid and by the book. When I mess up, he covers for me, but the worry and guilt and secrets just don’t do it for him like they do for me. It tears him up, and because he’s so stuffy and rigid, *he* just doesn’t do it for *me*. The money shaped who he is, and the lack of money shaped who I am; we just—” I hesitated, struggling for a delicate way to phrase it to prevent too

much corruption. “— solve problems differently, and we don’t agree with the other’s moral compass. I can’t date someone I don’t respect.”

“Isn’t he dating the hot, goth lifeguard?”

“Exactly.”

Isaac frowned. “And you don’t respect her?”

“No, no, no. I like Misty. I just don’t think Trev should still be actively pursuing me if he’s committed to her. That’s what I don’t respect: his obvious disrespect to her.”

He mulled that over for a moment. “Do you think Trev will come for you— right now I mean, not in the long run— if we don’t beat him down the mountain?”

“Maybe.” I kicked at the gravel on the side of the road, not aiming any of the stones in any particular direction. “Trev and I fought the last time we talked. He’s either still pissed and won’t come, or he’ll want to make up and will come. Caleb is definitely still pissed at me. He hasn’t been at Lakeside for very long, so he’ll probably want to stay. But he also might want to talk to me about my conversation with Jerr.” I shrugged. “It’s a toss up.”

“Who do you want picking us up?”

I glared at Isaac. “I can make it down the mountain just fine on foot if it’s all the same to you and the rest of Danbury’s men.”

A car revved behind us.

Isaac jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Obviously it’s not all the same to them, because here they come.”

I sighed. “I have legs. I can use them.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” he said, looking down.

I looked down at myself. My wound from the rusted fence looked a little gnarly. It wasn't bleeding anymore, but its edges were red. "Nothing a little peroxide won't fix. It's not pussy; it's just not healed, yet."

A burnt orange Challenger sped around the bend behind us, and I groaned. "I call back seat."

Isaac smirked. "Ha, like I would miss out on watching all the juicy, awkward tension between the two of you from the vantage of the backseat. Not on your life."

I shoved his shoulder. "Sixty years from now when you're retired, you're going to watch reruns of 'Murder, She Wrote' with all the other old ladies in the nursing home and enjoy every minute of it."

Isaac wrinkled his nose at me as the Challenger stopped next to us. The passenger window rolled down, and we bent to look inside. Trev stared at me, nonplussed.

I beamed at him, radiating sarcastic good will. "Hello! What a coincidence running into you on this lovely morning."

"Get in the car."

I glanced up and lifted my hand to indicate the dimly clear sky, although considerably less dismal since I wasn't watching people attempt to stay afloat. "But it's such a beautiful day for a—"

"A leisurely stroll?" Trev's expression didn't change.

Isaac coughed beside me, but I could see his smile behind the hand he used to cover his mouth.

"Please, Patty."

I opened the passenger door reluctantly. Isaac pushed me out of the way, popped the front seat forward, and dove into the back before I'd even opened the door more than a crack. I glared at him, and he stuck his tongue out at me as I whipped the seat upright and clocked him in the face with the headrest. He fell back into the seat, cradling his face, and yelling, "My eye! My eye!" in between staccato bursts of laughter.

I plopped in the seat and shut the door.

"Thank you for being so mature about this," Trev said coolly.

I looked over and saw the corner of his lip twitch up as he shifted into first, released the clutch, and zoomed down the mountain just over the speed limit.

"Well," I said, facing forward again, "I'm a very mature person. I don't know why you would expect anything less from me."

Trev laughed. "Silly me." He suddenly reached over and squeezed my hand resting on my thigh. Just as I was about to tense, he pulled away, and returned his grip to the stick shift. "You were right the other night. I've been—" he glanced in the rearview mirror— "pushing you for a while, and the pushing has replaced our friendship."

I nodded, feeling wary instead of vindicated because I could tell by the set of his jaw that the apology was only half over.

"Would you meet me at Pebble Harbor tonight?"

Isaac's foot jerked against my seat belt, and I felt it clamp uncomfortably around my waist.

I shook my head and opened my mouth, about to use the basement cleaning as an excuse to ease the rejection.

“Just as friends,” Trev said, hastily. “I’ll bring brownies, and we can hang out like we used to. No expectations. Just us and how it used to be.” He looked at me. “No pushing, I promise.”

I bit my lip and inhaled sharply at the shock of pain as the cut split again. I licked away the blood that welled up. “I guess.” I thought about how it used to be between us, knowing that too many years had gone by for that feeling of comfortable closeness to return but also knowing that if he meant the apology, half of the comfortable closeness that we had would be light years better than what our relationship had morphed into. That was worth an awkward, honest, pushless conversation or two. I’d give that a chance. I nodded, more sure than before. “Yeah, that would be really nice actually. You’re on, and you’d better not forget the brownies.”

Trev smiled, looking relieved.

Isaac kicked the back of my seat.

I turned around and raised my eyebrows.

He crossed his arms across his chest. “Muscle spasm.”

“Spasm in that direction,” I said, pointing to the empty seat next to him.

Eight minutes later— not that impressive considering he’d picked us up on Hollander Road instead of starting all the way back at the beginning of Lakeside Street— Trev dropped Isaac and me off between our houses on Hazen Street. I had to assure him two times that it was completely unnecessary to watch each of us enter our houses because I was the head hoodlum on the block. Trev didn’t know about the tire slashing siphoner; unless that goon was Garrett, Cecilia, one of the MacCallaghans, one of the Russianis, or Jerr, he didn’t live on the block, so I hadn’t lied. If the tire slashing siphoner was Garrett, Cecilia, one of the MacCallaghans, one of the Russianis, or Jerr, I had much bigger problems to confront than my compulsive lying.

Trev drove back to Lakeside, complacent in the knowledge that he'd be eating brownies on a sand spit of pebbles beside the creek in my company in about seven hours. Isaac trudged over to his house after waving mopily, and muttered, "Duped to dine with the dark side by the promise of dessert." I wondered if he'd watched *Star Wars* between the afternoon we'd met and now, or if his word choice had been swayed by the irresistible bounce of alliteration. I shook my head and reminded myself that not everyone was as obsessed with movies as me or as anal with word choice as Mama Margoe. Normal people lived somewhere on earth; I just wasn't surrounded by any of them.

I stepped gingerly onto my porch and reached for the doorknob when Margoe bounded out of the house, jamming my fingers and nearly clipping me in the head with the screen door.

"Ouch! Geez, Margoe," I hissed, cradling my hand. "What the hell?"

"I could ask you the same thing." She pointed into the kitchen. Her arm was shaking. "Get inside. Now."

I walked through the doorway. "That's exactly where I was headed until you smashed the door into my fingers."

"Sit down." She pulled out a chair for me but stood hovering next to it instead of pulling out one for herself.

I placed the Romantic poetry book and my cell on the table, but I remained standing. "What's going on?"

"Mrs. Lewis called me today, and do you know what she told me?"

"Oh, Jesus Christ," I groaned and slumped into the chair. I folded my arms onto the warped, maple table top and burrowed my face in the crooks of my elbows to avoid the barrage of she said she said barreling toward me.

“Well, yes, but that came after she said that you had broken into Jeremy Snyder’s house and ransacked his office!” Margoe screeched.

“Mrs. Lewis is a yappy, self-deluded hag who forces Misty to constantly tip toe on egg shells,” I said, my voice muffled by the table and my arm. “Do not put stock in her ramblings. That woman raised Bruno, for heaven sakes. Her say-so isn’t worth squat.”

“So you didn’t break into his house and ransack his office?” Margoe asked, but it burst out somewhat desperately, sounding more like an accusation on the verge of hysterics.

“Ransacking implies a hostile, messy, carelessness about the perpetrator. I’m much too disciplined and goal-oriented to engage in ransacking.”

Mama Margoe stared at me, astounded, her thin, hot pink wire frames slipping down her nose. “You admit then that you broke into Jeremy Snyder’s house this morning?”

I shrugged. “I needed something photocopied. He understands. Well, not really; he isn’t as concerned as I am about Lakeside’s well being, but he isn’t overly concerned about the breaking and entering either, granting I don’t get caught again.”

Margoe made a distressed whimper, swiped a napkin from the dispenser on the table, and fanned herself with it.

I sat up, knowing the futility of explaining what had occurred in reality versus what Mrs. Lewis had magnified, but I felt compelled to at least try to defend myself.

“What do you mean ‘he understands?’ He already knows?” she asked, pushing her glasses up by the nosepiece.

“Well, I’d hope for all our sakes that he’d know before you and the rest of Dansbury’s gossip mongers. Douglas told him. When he got off the phone with Douglas, Jerr called me in, and we talked about why I broke into his house.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That I needed to make photocopies.”

Mama Margoe pressed her lips together in a wrinkly, frustrated line I recognized from years of her recognizing my careening, confrontation-avoiding, half-truths. “What did Jerr have to say?”

“Don’t worry. He understands.”

“What do you mean, ‘he understands?’ That isn’t very detailed. What am I supposed to tell Mrs. Webber, Mrs. Dougherty, and Harriet Carol when they call: that you made photocopies and Jerr understands?”

“You don’t have to tell them anything because none of this is their business. They have nothing to do with Jerr or me or the break in, so they can just shove it.”

Margoe stepped back from the table and from me, appalled. “I will certainly not tell Harriet Carol to ‘shove it,’ so you’d better come up with something a little more kosher than that.”

“I don’t have to come up with anything!” I shouted. “My purpose in life is not to appease these people. Mrs. Lewis can amuse herself with someone else’s life. I refuse to contribute to her melodramatic tendencies, especially when her latest soap opera, hot-topic is me.”

“Which is all the more reason to defend yourself. If you don’t give me a decent, honest-to-God, wholesome reason for ransacking Jeremy’s home office, I’m not going to be able to show my face at Harriet Carol’s Tuesday Tea for months!” Margoe gripped her hands in front of her in desperation. “Maybe you saw a lurking shadow in Jerr’s house and broke in to protect him and his belongings from some vandalizing, city gangbanger.”

“You don’t even know what a gangbanger is,” I muttered.

“I know it’s not something you want lurking in your house on a Wednesday morning, that’s for sure.” She paused, considering. “That’s a little reckless on your part anyway. Maybe you just saw a lurking city person. That’d be disturbing enough.”

I stared at her, unmoved. “You want me to lie to you about the break-in, so you can lie to Mrs. Lewis about me, so you can hold your head up at some tea party?”

She blinked, not understanding the root of my vehemence.

“*You’re* disturbing. You’re all disturbing,” I spat. “You have nothing to be ashamed of. I did not break into Jerr’s house to steal. I needed to find proof of something important that drastically affects Lakeside and bring it to Jerr’s attention.” My conscious twinged slightly, knowing I hadn’t intended to bring it to his attention. “Jerr understands why I did what I did, and his opinion is the one that matters.”

“Why should his opinion matter over Mrs. Lewis’ when she’s the one I have to face at Tea next Tuesday?” Margoe asked, completely baffled.

“Jerr actually cares about me and my well-being. Mrs. Lewis only cares about how she can construe my well-being to her amusement.” I took a moment to breathe back the rage. “We do not reward malicious, selfish, destructive behavior. When did these people even start inviting you and the Webbers and the Doughertys to their tea parties? If they’re inviting all of us, they must not have their noses lifted quite as high as I thought they did.”

“They didn’t invite us; they invited me,” she said. “Maybe if I brought a copy of the photocopies with me to the tea party as proof of your valiant, wholesome intensions, I could only miss one Tuesday.” She lifted her hand and massaged her temple weakly. “My, it’s like Jehiel Moyer all over again.”

“That was six years ago. Get over it!” I exploded. “I don’t care how many Tuesdays you have to miss. I don’t care if you never see another Tea for the rest of the Tuesdays in your life; you’re not getting a copy of these photocopies on principle alone!” I reached into my back pocket to flaunt them at her, but my pocket was flush against my butt and empty.

My heart stilled, thinking I’d lost them, until I remembered slapping them on the table next to the ever watchful Jacksons, and it kick-started. My heart pounded mercilessly as I envisioned Caleb perusing the Hut and noticing the photocopied Pool Maintenance log. His suspicions of me being a bull-shitting, conspiring thief would be confirmed unless Jerr covered for me and said he remembered asking for the recent logs photocopied. Although Jerr was on the side of good and local, he wasn’t very swift or convincing. He’d already been unknowingly suckered into the evil legal tangles of big company prospects. Caleb would see through his cover.

“Maybe I could make my own photocopies.”

“I’ve got to go,” I said, standing abruptly. Margoe was drowned out by my metal chair scraping against the tan linoleum floor. “We won’t continue this conversation when I get back.”

“I’m not through with—”

“Well I am, and we have more offensive things to talk about besides breaking and entering and the finer points of ransacking, such as you gathering all my back-breaking, thigh-burning, box-moving efforts, and pissing them into the wind by stashing Frank’s boxes back in the basement!” I fisted my nails deep into my palms, but even as I felt my skin give and the tips of my fingers dip in a warm smear, the anger compressed until my body shook. “Think of defenses while I’m gone because when I come back, you’d better have a better reason than ‘it’s fine the way it is’ or I will flip out!”

I pounded out of the house, the screen door slapping and the porch rattling under me, hopped into Maxine, cranked her into gear, and roared down Hazen as fast as Maxine could floor it. The first light turned green just as I approached, which was decent of it considering I hadn't been slowing down. I turned left and careened over Hollander Road's pothole-ridden meanders a tad too fast for comfort, but I didn't have a passenger, and a yammering Mama Margoe and vodka induced migraine was spreading out from above my right eyebrow. Being on the edge of control was much more satisfying than being on the edge of strangling my grandmother.

The seat belt prevented me from whipping out of Maxine as I curved right and from tumbling into her passenger seat as I bore a quick left. I accelerated out of each turn, pushing her harder, breaking slightly into the turn, and then shooting all she could muster, so my body bolted into the seat, more immobilized than the previous straight away. The potholes were more jarring the higher Maxine's speedometer inched. I could feel their double thump compact in my spine despite the defunct muffler and crazed shocks as I coasted into the next turn, blurring passed Trev's yellow siding and brick split level. The massive oak tree loomed ahead, its gnarled, twinning trunk approaching faster and faster but probably still not as fast as Frank had. His white cross bore a new wreath of yellow daffodils. Their starry snouts trembled as I whipped past.

I thought of the photocopies waiting blatantly on the Hut table, of Caleb looking through them and having his suspicions confirmed, and it bothered me. I'd only known him three days while I'd known Jerr twenty-two years. I'd only just realized Jerr's opinion mattered within the past two hours, but Caleb wouldn't let me fly fifteen minutes late on the stand with only a finger shaking. He'd seen through my bluffs and suspected my late-night and later-morning breaking-and-entering excursions even if he was giving me the benefit of the doubt. Caleb wouldn't offer me money if he caught me snooping in his office drawers; he'd probably flay me alive.

I smiled slightly, feeling a rush of excitement through the pumping adrenaline of irresponsible driving at the thought of being caught by Caleb. He wasn't someone who would give in like Trev or avoid like Garrett; he pushed back. Caleb counted for more than just muscles, although they definitely had some input. I forced Maxine even faster, not wanting Caleb to count despite his presence and intensity and solidness because he could be the catalyst to Lakeside's destruction, but his opinion mattered despite what I wanted. I jerked the wheel left, slammed the accelerator through the turn, shuttered painfully over a massive pothole, and screamed as my front passenger tire burst as if it had triggered a land mine.

Maxine squealed left and then rocked right and tipped, independent of my efforts at the stirring wheel. The rim of her broken wheel sparked hot against the pavement. I pulled a hard right, trying to get her back on all fours, but we were already going too fast. The seat belt locked, gravity shifted, and suddenly the ground was scraping her passenger side door frame at forty miles an hour. Something sharp stung my cheek. I tightened my hands and ducked my head under my arm against the gravel. Sharp twinges peppered my arms, shoulder, and neck as stones lashed at my skin. The twining grind of metal against asphalt vibrated through my back teeth.

The ground dipped, and Maxine was riding on grass and dirt and weeds for less than a second. A tree suddenly swung into view from above, seeming to come at us faster than we were coming at it.

I am such a dumb ass, I thought, and the tree smashed into Maxine's grill, the seat belt cut painfully into my stomach and shoulder, and my head slammed forward into the steering wheel. Maxine stopped moving. Pain flared through my neck, and something hot soaked my face.

I opened my eyes, not remembering when I'd closed them. My stomach flipped. I clenched my teeth. Throwing up would not make my neck happy. I patted the passenger seat looking for my bag and cell phone, but after a long, slow moment, I realized I was hanging sideways thanks to the seat belt, its grip more uncomfortable than painful compared to the whiplash screaming through my neck. I thought about unstrapping myself to reach anything that had fallen off the passenger seat but decided against it. My body was battered enough, and I didn't think I had the energy or awareness to attempt a solid landing. I looked down past the passenger seat to the ground. Nothing was there. Popeye and Olive had probably flown out of Maxine when we first tipped. My cell phone was probably smashed along Hollander Road.

“Patty-Without-The-Cake?”

I opened my eyes again. Vomit was splashed on the grass, some more liquidy parts on Maxine's door frame. I patted the passenger seat for my cell and remembered that I'd left everything on the kitchen table after fighting with Mama Margoe. I didn't have anything with me. I was forgetting important things on tables all over Dansbury.

“Patricia!”

I shut my eyes. I opened them slowly. I couldn't keep them open for long. They closed before I could say anything.

A hard, crunching sound woke me, and a large, familiar hand cupped my cheek. Two fingers pressed against my neck, under my jaw.

“Oh, thank Christ. Aye, Douglas, but get J. C. and Bernardo here now. No severe external injuries except a blow to the head. Some superficial cuts and scrapes. Maxine's a wreck. I need to get her out.” Silence. “Patty's car. The last I heard it was possibly leaking gas. I'll call back when we're a distance away.”

A cell phone slid closed.

“Caleb?” My voice sounded mangled.

His hands closed gently on either side of my face. “Aye, it’s Caleb. How do you feel? Where does it hurt?”

I opened my eyes, but his hands worked softly through my hair, over my shoulders, down my arms, my waist, and legs before I finally focused on his stern face.

“You’re going to get permanent wrinkles.”

His hands stilled, and his gaze met mine. “What?”

“You’re always frowning.”

“You’re always pissing me off.” His hands resumed their patting. “Where does it hurt?”

“I have a concussion and whiplash. Other than that, I just felt you feel me up, and I’ve been moving around, looking for my cell. I’d bet your share of Lakeside that other than minor injuries, I’m in tip top shape.”

“How do you know you have a concussion?” He asked.

“Because I’m pretty sure I’ve been losing time, and you’re standing in my vomit.”

Caleb’s lips stretched to the left. “By the book memory. For that, you get extra icing on your cake.”

“My cake?” I asked, thinking that I hadn’t known Caleb long enough for my lingo to be rubbing off on him.

His eyebrows plunged. “Like your name.”

Someone tapped my cheek lightly. “Stay with me, Patty. Come on. Wake up.”

I tried to open my eyes, to speak, to respond coherently, but I was too tired. I felt myself breathing.

“Patricia!”

Caleb’s tone sounded urgent. I forced my eyes open.

“Stay awake,” he ordered.

I smiled slightly and mumbled, “Sir, yes, sir.”

One of his hands wedged under my knees. “Even mostly out of it, you’re still a pain in my arse,” he said, but he sounded relieved. “You might not have smacked your head on the steering wheel if your airbag had gone off.”

“Maxine doesn’t have airbags.” I slurred.

“Why the hell not?”

I tried to enjoy his bare, smooth muscle flexing against my thigh, but my stomach was still churning. “I couldn’t afford them after they deployed the last time I was home.”

“Did you try to take out an innocent tree last time too?” He asked.

“Deer. The tree cut into Maxine’s seat when I swerved. Those trees are wilier than you’d think.” I licked my lips, and the sting helped me focus. “How did you know I’d wrecked Maxine?”

“I didn’t. I was driving down to drill you about the stolen photocopies you left on the Hut table, but that can wait. What made you decide to finally do Maxine in? I thought you girls stuck together.”

“Oh, poor Maxine,” I moaned. “Do you have a phone on you?”

“Aye, I’m using it to call the ambulance.”

“I need to call Dean.”

“Who?” Caleb asked, sounding impatient as he wrapped his other arm under my back.

The motion shifted my body against his chest, and my neck knotted from the movement. A weak, stuttered exhale shivered out.

Caleb leaned closer and rested his smoothly weathered cheek against mine. He whispered, "I'm sorry, but we have to get out of Maxine. She was a hazard to ride in before you scraped her against the road and smashed her into a tree. We have to get a safe distance away in case she's leaking fuel."

I took a slow, deep breath to calm down, but even that shot needles into my neck and squeezed through my head. Tears leaked and pooled between our cheeks. "It hurts," I ground out, writhing against him.

"I know. Think about something else, like who's Dean and why would we need to call him second to an ambulance?"

"Dean Russiani. My mechanic. Maxine's looking worse than usual, but Dean kind of owes me. Maybe he'll let me pay him in installments."

"You're looking worse than usual."

"This hasn't been my week," I mumbled.

"I'd hope not. If this were any representation of a normal week, you'd never have survived to see twelve let alone twenty-some years." Caleb lifted me inches off the seat, bracing my head in the bend of his elbow to keep it from jostling. "Undo your seatbelt. I've got you."

I fumbled for the release on the seatbelt and pressed the button. It took more effort than usual. The belt whipped off and was sucked back. Caleb stepped out through Maxine's open top and ducked under her frame, cradling me. His shirt was damp and smelled like chlorine.

"What happened, Patty? Why did you crash Maxine into a tree?" Caleb asked firmly. His chest vibrated against my ear.

I huffed, which was the closest I could manage to a laugh without hurting. “You ask as if I’d crashed her on purpose.”

“I only see one set of tire marks on the road, and they aren’t swerving. You weren’t avoiding oncoming traffic. You weren’t avoiding an animal. Unless trees can dash in front of your car like deer, you weren’t avoiding hitting anything, so what were you doing? Going sixty?”

“Not quite.” I’d have welcomed a time lapse about then, but they never occurred conveniently.

“Why were you ‘not quite’ going sixty on Hollander Road?” Caleb’s words were clipped and enunciated savagely.

Each step he took jostled me slightly, and between the pain and the concussion, I couldn’t think. “To get to the photocopies before you.”

He stopped walking. I could feel his gaze riveted on me. “You crashed Maxine over those stupid photocopies?” he whispered hotly.

It felt as if my body was somersaulting, but when I opened my eyes, we weren’t going anywhere. “I’d just had another fight with Margoe, and you were already so pissed at me, and I was so pissed at everything. I didn’t want you to think that I, that I’m just, I don’t know,” I said, my voice trailing off. Starbursts of light and black dotted my vision.

“But you don’t care if I’m pissed. You like pissing me off.”

“Unintentional.”

“Patty.”

“Mmmm?”

“Don’t give in. Just a few more minutes, Patricia. Open your—”

My neck was secure and immobile, and something stabbed the bend in my elbow. I jerked away.

“Shit,” someone grumbled.

Someone tightened their hand in mine. “Patty-Without-The-Cake?”

I squeezed back.

Someone lifted my eyelids. I cringed away from the light as someone else went for my elbow bend again.

“Shhhh.” Caleb cupped my face and softly grazed his thumb over my cheek. “Keep still, and let the medics do their job. Bernardo’s trying to give you an IV.”

“That explains the prick,” I murmured.

Someone laughed. “You see? She’s already back to normal. She’ll be just fine, Mr. MacCallaghan.”

Caleb leaned closer. I felt his breath heat the side of my face. “I’ll meet you at the hospital with Margoe.”

I clenched my teeth to keep from complaining about the pain again. I swallowed. “Would you do me a favor?”

“Pulling you out of your totaled car, calling the ambulance, and driving your grandmother to the hospital isn’t enough for you?” he said, but he squeezed my hand as he said it.

I squinted up into his eyes. “Don’t blab to Margoe about anything concerning Lakeside prowlers or gas-siphoners or tire-slashers. I have enough damage control to contend with because of the photocopies.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He started to pull away.

I tugged on his hand to keep him in view. “Thank you, Caleb.”

He stared down at me for a long second. I tried to hold his gaze, but then I was opening my eyes and he was suddenly closer, brushing aside a stray curl stuck to my temple. His lips scrunched in a thin, grim line. I wanted to reach up and touch him, but someone was still holding my arm immobile for Bernardo’s IV. He squeezed my hand one last time before letting go and leaving me to the efficient care of the other EMT.

Eight
Thursday

My room was dim. I must have only slept a few hours, which sucked because I’d need whatever wits the concussion hadn’t bashed out of me to talk Caleb into giving me back Jerr’s photocopies or to distract him enough to steal them back. I suspected the latter would be necessary. I also suspected I wouldn’t be even half ready for that level of excitement no matter how many hours I’d slept, but I rolled over to look at the clock and calculate the hours I could store up anyway: two thirty-six pm. I blinked at the clock in astonishment. They’d kept me at the hospital the entire day and most of the night for observation, but after five stitches, six extra strength Tylenols, eight mind-numbing berating sessions from Margoe, and four-finger shaking sessions from Jerr, I was ready to be released by late-afternoon.

Dr. Carol had been horrified by the barely healed cut on my calf and mildly concerned about the scabs on my palms. He narrowed his eyes as I explained about electric knives and stubborn pot roasts, but he glued the remaining tears in the cut on my calf without an interrogation. Margoe had the grace not to comment on the fact that we hadn’t had pot roast this week. She patted my shoulder, glad I was alive and especially glad I was well enough to evade scandal even if that involved playing loose with the truth. According to Dr. Carol, the scabs on

my palms were superficial, but they were also clearly a sign of repressed emotion. “Tell me something I don’t know, like how many hours I need to remain conscious before I can be released,” I’d said. He’d dropped the subject. The last I’d lost consciousness was before the EMTs had arrived. Dr. Carol had released me six hours later with the express order to get lots of rest and a stress ball, and I’d apparently slept for seventeen hours.

I struggled upright, a different brand of sore than I was used to after that first week of track following a year of eating Mrs. Webber’s cookies and loafing. The soreness from track practice used to feel like the brink of death, but I’d also feel accomplished, energized, and motivated for the upcoming season. Now I just felt like the brink of death.

My curtain was closed, and the sun wasn’t beating behind it with the force of an atomic ray gun. I should have noticed the difference right away, which was not a promising testament to my wits. I pulled the curtain aside to see if Maxine’s mangled remains were outside, wondering if God could resurrect her for the rest of today and if not, who was susceptible enough to convince that driving me to Lakeside was a good idea. Too bad Isaac didn’t have his license.

I stared, dumbfounded. Maxine was parked along the curb as I’d hoped and completely resurrected. Her windshield was crackless, her side was scratchless, and her front bumper was tree-shape-dent-free. None of her mirrors were broken. None of her headlights were smashed. She had a healthy, inflated, front passenger tire, and a new spare on her rear. She looked better than she had when I bought her from Dean my junior year in high school.

I flung off my bed sheet and winced from the over-exuberance, but I couldn’t contain my excitement despite the whiplash and concussion. The stairs were brutal on my sore muscles, but I hobbled down slowly, snatched Strawberry Shortcake and my cell conveniently discarded next to

English Lit on the kitchen table, minced down the porch steps, and climbed carefully into Maxine's flawless leather seat.

I sat still. I held Strawberry Shortcake on my lap, her wide shining eyes, cutesy freckles, and fetching, berry hat radiating hope and encouragement while I smoothed my fingertips over the grooves in Maxine's key. I didn't deserve a working muffler. I'd been angry and stupid and reckless yesterday, but Maxine had stuck by me and held on by her last engine sputters while I saved money just slowly enough to run her into the ground. She deserved a working muffler even if I didn't, which had to count for something.

I took a deep breath, slid the key home, closed my eyes in tense, doubtful expectation, and twisted. The engine turned over without a hitch, hiccup, or cough and continued running at an even, vibrating purr. I slumped in the seat— *unbelievable*— leaned back, and took a moment to soak up all that healthily contained horse-power. After a while my neck started to protest the slouching, so I squirmed upright, flipped open my cell, and called Russiani Car Repair.

"Baby-Cakes!" Dean boomed. I angled the phone slightly away from my ear. "How you doin' girl? Feelin' any better?"

"I'm still a little rocky, but pretty damn good considering. Did God perform a miracle in my front yard while I was passed out last night?"

"Nah, that'd be me, but it was no less a miracle, let me tell you."

"She's gorgeous, Dean. Thank you." I ran a hand through my hair. "I really appreciate it, more than you know, but—"

"I know just how much you appreciate it, babe. We share the same love of motor vehicles. Always a rare pleasure to work on Maxine, knowin' how much you appreciate it."

“*But* unless we set up some kind of monthly payment plan, I can’t afford all the work you’ve done.”

Dean popped his gum. “Ain’t no problem. It’s already paid for.”

“What?” I gaped. “How? Your dad can’t afford all the parts and labor you put into Maxine in one payment.”

“My dad only sprung for the muffler. Mr. MacCallaghan paid for the rest, but I gave him your regular discount, plus a little extra off the top on account of him callin’ an ambulance and helpin’ you out of the Jeep and all. Decent guy.”

I let that last comment go, knowing in my bones that he was, but I was having issues tagging Caleb as both decent and the wrecker of Lakeside. I focused on something even more mind boggling. “Caleb MacCallaghan paid for all the work you did on Maxine.”

“Cept for the muffler, yeah.”

I blinked rapidly. “How did you get the work done that fast? She was a wreck!”

“I always got spare Maxine parts ready in the shop.” He chuckled. “Never knew when somethin’ was gonna bust on her, but I was always ready. She should be good for a while now though.”

“You’d buy parts for Maxine before she was broken?”

“Sure. She ain’t no spring chicken. I knew she’d break down, and you’d buy the parts eventually.”

I laughed. “I thought maybe you bought them when you heard me drive into town.”

“Oh, I heard you. I’ve been itchin’ to get my hands on that muffler all week; I had the muffler in stock for months now.

My face heated. “That’s very ESP of you.”

“Well, I was right. She needed almost everythin’ I’d stocked. A newly graduated lifeguard doesn’t exactly got the means for high end car repair. Your safety’s more important than my pay check, so if I come across a cheep Wrangler part, I get it, knowin’ you’ll be able to afford it when you need it. I even installed a waterproof glove compartment for the next time you go muddin’.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

“Drive a little safer for me from now on, would you? I’m fresh out of replacement parts for Maxine after this last visit.”

“I’ll do my best,” I murmured, my breath caught by his sincerity and thoughtfulness. I’d thought I hadn’t wanted my neighbors’ sympathetic apologies, whispered glances, hand pats, and leftover noodle casseroles, but if Jerr and Dean were any indication of the majority of my neighbors, I should have come home much sooner. “Thank you. From my heart, really Dean, thank you.”

“My pleasure, Baby-Cakes. You take care of yourself.”

“I’ll try.”

We hung up. I shook my head in disbelief, shifted Maxine into first, and drove her up Buckbur Mountain within the speed limit, still a little awestruck from the shock of Caleb taking care of Maxine. I caught red at both lights, and I made it to Lakeside in fourteen minutes, a new snail record. I was all stocked up on accidents for the week, so I didn’t care if it took me twenty minutes. It would never take me twenty minutes—I’d have to be going in reverse—but I wouldn’t be annoyed if it did. The metal skids on the road and the ravaged maple tree looked woebegone and surreal. Maxine’s damage was fixed, but theirs wasn’t. I could relate. The rest of the trees appreciated my careful driving.

I parked Maxine between the Bug and the Yuppie Mobile in Lakeside's parking lot. Coraline was absent. The Challenger was parked in the corner between two free spaces. The baby blue Mazda was parked on the opposite side of the lot, as far from the Challenger as it could get. The OldsMobile loomed at the front of the lot, flabbergasted by the empty spaces. Maxine exuded confidence, no longer ashamed to be seen peripherally with the BMW since her makeover. I tucked Strawberry Shortcake into my waist band. Her keys jiggled on my hip as I climbed the stone steps to the pool.

Trev and Jackie were the only guards on duty when I walked out of the locker rooms and approached. Luckily for everyone involved, Luke and Ryan were the only swimmers, and they could usually handle themselves, especially without Isaac inciting mayhem. Isaac missing an afternoon of pissing off the guards and other patrons was a rare treat for Trev and Jackie.

Caleb was lecturing Misty, but she continued scrubbing tiles on all fours without looking up. His expression was mildly irritated, but when he glanced over and saw me walking toward him, his eyes focused like laser sights.

"What are you doing here?" he asked harshly. "You're supposed to be resting. You can not work the day after you—"

"Chill out, Caleb. Do I look ready to spring onto the stand?" I waved my arms to indicate my baggie Carnegie Mellon t-shirt and polka-heart flannel shorts, chagrined to realize that I hadn't even bothered to fluff my hair or wash my face.

I watched his anger seep from the lines etched in his pursed lips. His shoulders loosened slightly, and his eyes melted to concerned and slightly suspicious

I tried to tuck an obstinate curl behind my ear, feeling suddenly unsure of myself and wishing I'd had the presence of mind this afternoon to take personal hygiene into consideration.

“Meet me in the Hut, will you?” I walked past him before he could respond.

I opened the Hut door and held it for Caleb as he followed, although following implied a submissiveness that was beyond him. He stalked past me. He leaned back against the round table with his arms crossed, so he was half standing, half sitting, and tensed to attack if necessary.

I closed the door and leaned against it, ready to bolt if necessary. I was already nervous about what needed to be said; his intensity was making me sweat.

“You paid to fix Maxine.”

Caleb blinked and slowly uncrossed his arms as if he hadn't expected that to begin the conversation. “Mr. Russiani paid for the muffler, but other than that, yes.”

“Why?”

Caleb shrugged, looking casual except for the muscle flexing in his jaw. “We need you at work as soon as possible. You're our best lifeguard, and—”

“I think you just made it pretty plain when you saw me walk in a second ago that you didn't want me at work today.”

His jaw flexed.

“Why did you spend thousands of dollars on me, Caleb? You know how much I make lifeguarding. You know I'll never be able to pay you back.”

“I don't want you to pay me back,” he ground out.

“I wouldn't want Garrett, whom I've known and loved for eight years, to drop that kind of money for me.” I placed my hands on my hips. “You don't even like me.”

“Unintentional,” Caleb murmured.

My breath caught. “What?”

He heaved a reluctant sigh. “I paid for Maxine because you would have had to claim her as totaled. Her damage was worth more than she was, but you love her. I couldn’t just let her die when I had the means to fix her.”

“You saved Maxine because you know I love her?”

Caleb nodded, looking wary.

I braced myself, hoping my gut wasn’t being duped by gratitude and raging lust like my heart. “Who do you work for?”

“What are you talking about?” Caleb asked. He frowned for a confused moment, either truly confused or stalling for a lie. “You know who I work for. We work together.”

I shook my head, miserable. “Who’s paying you forty dollars an hour? What are you doing here that’s worth forty dollars an hour?”

“Is this part of your master conspiracy plan? Because it’s only a conspiracy if I don’t know about it,” Caleb said skeptically.

I shrugged. “It’s not the part that I had planned. Unforeseen events occurred, and now I’m forced to improvise.”

“Well, your plan sucks because I work for Jeremy, same as you.”

“No, not ‘same as me’ because I earn five times less than you do!”

Caleb ran both hands through his hair. I focused on not being distracted by how thick and soft and beautifully layered his hair was, which was obviously a futile effort. “Knowing your grandmother, you’ve probably heard that Douglas had a wife who died nine years ago. Her name was Fay.”

I nodded, not quite seeing the link between Douglas' dead wife and earning forty dollars extra an hour to lifeguard, but I was willing to wait him out. "I didn't know her name, but yeah."

"She and Douglas ran her parents' consulting business back home in Leven. They gave local shops stuck on the rocks a little boost with business advice to get them on their feet and back in the green. When Fay died, Douglas fell apart. I came home from a dive in Italy to take care of the business while Douglas focused on Isaac. Once I'd honored the last of McKenzie & MacCallaghan's contracts, we moved to New York, Douglas became a cop, and I mostly raised Isaac, but when we moved here, Jeremy heard how we used to help small businesses. Douglas doesn't want a hand in anything that doesn't bust crime, so I agreed to help. Lakeside has been doing very well these last few months, as Jeremy told you." Caleb's eyes widened in sudden enlightenment. "As you were checking for yourself with those photocopies."

"Well enough for you to earn forty dollars an hour?" I scoffed.

"Yes," Caleb said, his eyes holding mine.

I gestured around and over my head to encompass the general Lakeside area. "I haven't seen any noticeable changes."

"We haven't changed anything noticeable. We charge more for summer passes, buy equate versions of brand name supplies, and order them in bulk. Nothing drastic, but enough to make a real difference. I've got plans for this place, Patty, good plans, so you need to stop killing yourself over it because as I've been saying and you've been ignoring: I'm here to help."

I licked my lips. "If you really wanted to help this place, you'd pave some of the woods closer to Lakeside and build more rural communities. More patrons to buy pool passes means more revenue."

"What are you talking about?" Caleb scowled.

“You could even build a hotel or two to attract vacationers. People would really like the view from the over—”

“That’s insane,” Caleb snapped, suddenly angry. “We doona have the means to take on a project like that, nor would I want to. The woods and the small, closely knit community is what makes Lakeside. The locals like where they live, and they want it to stay that way. I’m insulted that you even suggested something like that. I can make plenty of money without resorting to agricultural rape, thank you verra much!” He looked away, shaking his head.

An ugly, knowing, poisoning pressure relaxed from my heart, and I felt as if I could breathe without the stink of worry and responsibility clogging my insides.

“You of all people,” he muttered.

“I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Caleb leaned close and gazed critically into each of my eyes. “Maybe you should return to bed. Trev or I can drive you.”

I stepped between his slightly bent legs. I felt the warm exhale of his breath hitch against my face. “Sounds like something an outsider would suggest,” I whispered, staring at his lips, “but now I know better.”

He didn’t move off the table. He didn’t move at all. He barely breathed. I restrained myself from panting.

I placed a hand on either knee sandwiching me, and I leaned up thinking, *He saved me, he saved Maxine, and now he’s going to save Lakeside, my God.* I scratched my nails through the thin, curly, bleached-blond hairs on his knees. This entire week I’d checked my thoughts and longings, and I’d satisfied myself with witty repartee because his fit muscles and layered hair and piercing, turquoise eyes were off limits. He’d been my apple; now that I knew for sure that he

was on my side— at the very least, he was on the side of small town and agricultural preservation— I could finally take a bite.

He leaned down, I closed my eyes, and our lips, open and hot and urgent, finally touched. One of his hands came up to cradle the back of my head. His other hand smoothed down the side of my face. I shivered and pressed myself tight between his legs, scratching my nails up his hard, sun-bronzed thighs to the edge of his swim trunks. His tongue swept inside my mouth. I opened wider for him. He pushed deeper, tasting smooth and familiar, like sugar, and I pushed back. He moved his hand down my back, slipped under my polka-heart flannel shorts, his palm rough on my skin, and squeezed my ass, pressing me closer to him. I nipped at his lip.

He caressed his warm, scraping palms over the highest part my thighs and sucked in a trembling breath. “Jesus, Patricia.”

I could feel him eager against my stomach. He bit my lip. I pulled back sharply because it hurt, but I latched my hands around his waist, more turned on than jackhammers, beach hickies, Goo Goo Dolls, Panda Paws, first love, and French tutoring combined could have affected me, no maple syrup needed.

“Sorry,” Caleb growled, tugging me closer by both butt cheeks, but he slouched back, trying to get a look at my lip.

“Quite alright,” I whispered breathily. I went in for his lips again. He dodged to the side.

“Hold on one second. Let me see.”

“It’s fine.” I swooped in from the side, his breath warm on my face.

He ducked, taking his lips out of range, but he exposed the thick, smooth line of his neck.

“Just hold ah—”

His words whooshed out into a groan as I nibbled down his neck to his shoulder. The coconut sunscreen smelled sweet, but his skin was salty and difficult to bite into without catching too much meat between my teeth because even his neck was muscled. He tried to turn his head and catch my lips, but I licked up the long, pinkened, teeth-imprinted path I'd just worked on all the way to the delicate shell of his ear. He sucked in a stuttered breath. I smiled to myself and bit his ear lobe.

“Wow, that’s typical.”

I jerked away from Caleb’s ear. Trev was leaning against the Hut’s door frame with his arms crossed, his face smoothed over to neutral. His fingers dug crescents into his upper arms.

“I guess you learned a thing or two from Sydes, huh?” he said.

I shrugged, trying to pull away from Caleb. He refused to budge his solid hold on my hips. One of Strawberry Shortcake’s keys pressed sharply against my side.

“Is there something in particular that you came for, Trevor?” Caleb asked harshly. His tone, which I’d become accustomed to hearing directed at me, was somehow comforting to hear in defense of us, and it quelled my impulse to jump away red-handed.

“Yeah,” Trev said, staring at me.

The embarrassment of being caught with Caleb boiled away in a swift rush of anger. “We agreed to work on being *friends*.”

Trev shrugged. “We haven’t worked on being anything that I know of.”

“Well, I thought we were going to,” I said, exasperated. “I’m sorry I couldn’t make our Pebble Harbor date, but I was a little busy being unconscious after I crashed Maxine.”

“I know,” Trev said, rubbing his palm flat down his face. “That’s why I came in here. Jackie said you’d just walked in, and I wanted to see how you were holding up, but when I saw him all over you—”

Caleb grunted, and my face heated.

—“I couldn’t think about anything else. I can’t help being jealous,” Trev said roughly.

I shook my head. “But you can help how you react.”

“You’re right.” Trev sighed, sounding frustrated. “Please. Rain check for our missed date yesterday?”

I nodded.

“I’ll meet you tonight at Pebble Harbor?”

“Only if you bring those brownies you promised.”

Trev smiled.

Caleb’s shoulders stiffened under my hands.

“Alright. I’ll see you then.” Trev said. He walked out. Jackie sprang out of nowhere, her expression molding from rapt to concerned. Trev shut the door behind him, so I couldn’t hear what she was saying as she twittered beside him.

I turned back to Caleb. His shoulders were still tight, but he turned back to me, his hands still resting firmly on my hips.

He raised his eyebrows. “And I thought my only competition was Garrett.”

“Garrett?” I asked, laughing. “Garrett’s gay. He’s dating Joe Cummings.”

“Garrett’s gay? He doesn’t act gay.”

“Not at work he doesn’t. One on one he does a little, but it’s just who he is.” I frowned.

“Is that a problem?”

Caleb cocked his head. He looked as if he was considering that deeply. “No, but I still think he’s competition.”

I rolled my eyes. “And Trev isn’t competition either. We’re just friends.”

“He would prefer otherwise, but you’re right: he’s not competition.”

“Then who were you referring to besides Garrett?”

“Whoever this Sydes person is.”

I frowned. “The guy I dated last summer. He broke up with me a little less than a year ago. What does he have to do with anything?”

Caleb looked considering, as if he wasn’t sure yet. “How did Trevor know him?”

I bit the inside of my cheek, suddenly sheepish. “He was head guard last year.”

“So I fit your type,” Caleb said, amused.

“I don’t have a type,” I snapped. “Besides, how are Garrett and Sydes competition even though Garrett’s gay and Sydes broke up with me forever ago when Trev isn’t competition? He’s straight and actively fighting for my affection.”

“You wanting someone else makes them my competition. If Trevor had his way, you would be his girlfriend, but that isn’t what you want. If you had your way, I think things between you and Sydes would have ended differently, and your relationship with Garrett would definitely be different.”

“Oh.” I said, thinking that over. Who was and wasn’t competition seemed unimportant compared to his big, calloused hand slowly scratching up and down my back, but I focused on the conversation anyway. “I think Trev just considers everyone competition.”

“Trevor is in a slightly different position than I am,” Caleb said, looking a little smug. He stood up from the table. I stepped back to give him some space, and he bent close, kissing me

lightly on the lips. “You need to get home and rest, and I’ve got a pool to run. Stay out of trouble.”

“I always do.”

Caleb’s jaw flexed.

“Thank you for saving Maxine and for not being the evil, money-grubbing, hot-shot, city scoundrel I thought you were. I’m really grateful.”

“I could tell,” Caleb said, a slow, spreading smile widening his cheeks. I’d never seen a smile stick on him. They were usually fleeting or sarcastic, but he stood in front of me, our arms wrapped around each other’s waists, and beamed down at me.

After a moment of astonished awe, I smiled back.

“Get out of here,” he said, turning me around. He nudged me forward. “I’ll pop by your house after work to check on you and Maxine.”

“Why Maxine?” I asked over my shoulder.

“She has a better chance than you do of taking a turn for the worse.”

“Dean said she’ll hold together for a while now.”

“Not with you driving her,” Caleb said. “If you get a chance, you may want to speak with Isaac. He was really worried about you last night.”

“About me?”

“About you and the accident.”

I blinked, surprised at first because my conversations with Isaac had seemed like a world apart from reality, as if I’d go back to Pebble Harbor, and he’d be skipping stones and we’d talk about the random stuff we always talked about, our conversation completely unaffected by the outside. That seemed so stupid the moment I thought it that I was surprised at myself. I tried to

think of the name of the girl Isaac had probably kissed here in Dansbury, but I couldn't remember if he'd told me.

"Is something wrong? You don't have to see him if you don't want. The way he's talked of you, I just thought you would."

"Oh, I do," I said hastily. "I'll talk to him sometime tonight. Maybe I'll swing by your place after Pebble Harbor."

"Alright." He looked confused, but he let it go. "I'll see you later."

"Okay," I said, quoteless and awkward-free for once as we parted. I left the Hut, darted through the locker room more quickly than my body really wanted to under the threat of leering spiders, trudged down the stone steps, and eased myself into Maxine. The drive home clocked in at eleven minutes, a decent, respectable time for someone in my condition.

When I got home, nothing was waiting for me except Frank's attempted garbage boxes. Below average speed would have sufficed. The boxes sat in their leaning, precarious pile. Their presence chafed the same raw part of me they always had since Frank left, but no matter how much I wanted the rest of him gone as permanently as he was, carrying him back to the curb would be an exercise in futility. I'd missed the garbage truck today by roughly nine hours. If I killed myself over moving the boxes now, Margoe would have an entire week to thwart me. Plus, I was sure that lugging five boxes up the basement steps to the curb again wasn't what Caleb would consider rest. The only incentive I had to work on trashing the rest of Frank was my own stubborn resentment, which wasn't nearly enough compared to the aching soreness in my neck and the stinging pound in my forehead, so I popped three extra strength Tylenols, swiped English Lit from the kitchen table, and brought it, the things-to-maybe-keep box, and the CD box to my room.

Three hours later, I'd listened to more Eighties rock than was probably healthy— I'd popped another two Tylenols and turned up the volume to enjoy it properly— replayed my favorites until “Hot Blooded,” “Caught Up in You,” and “Feels like the First Time” became a little unnerving, and switched to “Welcome to the Jungle,” “Bicycle Race,” “Juke Box Hero,” and “We’re Not Gonna Take It” to cool the edge off. I burned them all plus thirteen others— not including AC/DC because “You Shook Me All Night Long” seemed a bit presumptuous— onto a mix CD I labeled: Lyric Man Music. Lakeside didn't close for another two hours, so I turned “Too Much Time on My Hands” down to a hum in the background, watered Betty Begonia, and hunkered down beside her under my orange and pink swirl comforter to read some of English Lit to her. English Verse stared forlornly from her perch on the top of the things to maybe keep. I shut the tabs on the box to keep from feeling as if I were cheating.

Another three hours later, Caleb hadn't shown, so I'd read through a little Keats, skipped all of Blake after the Songs of Innocents— I'd save him for a mentally sturdier day— and was thoroughly convinced after Byron that I'd make a much better Donna Julia than a conniving, life-sucking Geraldine.

I felt a little restless, disappointed, and vaguely insulted. What did Caleb think that made him, the Baron? The Baron was a ninny, and I'd never waste my time seducing a ninny even if I was sadistic and evil. I picked up my cell and Lyric Man Music off the bed, deciding to swing by Pebble Harbor now in the hopes that Isaac was still there because I didn't want to swing by his house later and risk seeing Caleb after he'd just stood me up. I remembered to wash my face, fluff my hair, and change into jean shorts before leaving the house this time. My headache felt better, even if the spreading purple bruise from the stitches on my forehead to my cheek bone looked decidedly worse. I tried to hide it with cover-up, but the powdery tan of the cover-up only

dulled the purple to a blotchy dark patch on the side of my face, which made the bruise less severe, but it also looked silly. I opted for blotchy and silly over wincingly severe. Isaac was bound to notice either way, but with the make up, my face was tolerable to look at.

Mama Margoe was Mad Libbing on the porch swing where she'd taken permanent residence this summer, so I snuck out the back door. When I reached the top of the dike, I noticed how dry the creek was for this time of year. The weatherman kept predicting thundershowers, but a raindrop hadn't been spotted in weeks. Heat lightning hadn't even struck in the week I'd been home, making pool patrons happily sun burnt and lifeguards everywhere miserable. The creek was so low, I could see the damp, fine sediment beds that log boulders against the current. The tumbling rapids looked wimpy, the rush of current just a hiss. Pebble Harbor peeked above the water halfway across the creek like a sunken bridge when I turned the corner instead of peaking against the creek's edge like a lump. Isaac came into view. He was sitting on a rock in his swim trunks, hugging his bony knees to his bare chest. I looked across the creek to see what he was staring at, but I only saw trees, moss, and a gnat cloud. He ignored me as I slid down the dike on my butt.

"Holy tomatoes, Batman!" I sat next to him.

Isaac didn't look at me. "That can't be a quote."

"It's a reference."

"You crashed your Jeep."

I blinked. "Quit the bullshit and cut to the chase why don't you?"

"You crashed your Jeep on purpose," he hissed, vehemently.

I frowned. "Who told you that?"

“I overheard Dad and Uncle Caleb whispering downstairs last night.” He chucked a rock in the creek, not even attempting to make it skip.

“Isaac.”

He ignored me.

“Isaac, look at me.”

He pursed his lips but turned to glare at me.

“I did not crash Maxine on purpose. My tire blew out when I hit a pot hole. I was speeding, and I lost control. I don’t need to do anything on purpose to get hurt these days.”

“My mom was killed on purpose.”

My throat tightened. I took a deep breath and held up my pinky finger. “I promise that my car accident was an accident.”

He stared at my pinky for a moment. I wiggled it up and down. He smiled reluctantly and wrapped his pinky around mine.

“My mom was killed too.”

“Uncle Caleb said your dad was killed last summer in a car accident.”

“Ah,” I said. “Like father, like daughter, eh?”

Isaac shrugged.

“My dad didn’t crash on purpose either. He’s just always been really good at leaving. My mom died before I knew her. She drowned.”

“In the creek flood with Martin and his mom?”

I shook my head. “At Lakeside.”

“Was she good at leaving too?”

“No. She was just really bad at swimming.” I chucked a stone into the creek. It plunked into the water, and the ripples washed away with the meager current. “The guard at ten feet had gone on break before his shift ended. Margoe said it had been a slow day. Frank said he had been watching me. Jerr never made an excuse. His mustache stretched to the left and twitched when I asked.”

“I didn’t get to know my mom either,” Isaac whispered. “She wasn’t bad at anything that I know of.”

We were quiet for a moment, thinking about our moms. Without actually looking at a picture, her face was mostly blurred over in my memory, so the impression of her that had stuck with me for seventeen years was mostly a mess of frizzy, blond curls and the spicy smell of snickerdoodles. She’d love to bake, or so Frank had told me, but she’d especially loved cinnamon.

“When did Frank leave before he died?”

I sighed, her memory more sentimental and her loss less gaping than Frank. “What makes you ask that?”

“You said that he was good at leaving, so he must have left more than once.”

I cracked my knuckles. “Frank moved out of Margoe’s house to live with Susan Carol when I was thirteen.”

Isaac blinked slowly. “He didn’t bring you with him?”

“He knew I’d refuse to live with Phil Carol, Susan’s son, but he moved in with her anyway. Everyone agreed that I’d be happier staying at Margoe’s. Frank had pleaded and faked hurt-filled indignation for weeks, but he’d known about my hard miss with Phil. He shackled up

with Susan and moved away with full knowledge that I would never follow.” I kicked a spray of pebbles into the creek.

Isaac watched the pebbles drop in a kaleidoscope of ripples. “What happened with Phil?”

“Phil Carol was the most popular boy in the entire fifth grade, and he sat beside me in my trumpet lesson group. Most of the girls hated him because he’d never include us in four-square tournaments in recess, he’d trap our hair between the back of the chair and his desk if you had the misfortune of sitting in front of him in class, and he spit a lot, but the boys worshiped him because he was a Phys Ed god. He could hit a wiffle ball clear across the gym to the far wall for a homerun on every pitch he swung at.”

“Wow,” Isaac said, feigning doe-eyes. “Impressive guy.”

“You would have thought so too four years ago. Anyway, I was invisible in class and recess and in the cafeteria, but every Thursday during our half-hour Trumpet lesson, he would crack snarky comments to me about Mr. Hepner’s pot belly behind his back, I’d nudge him awake when he missed a cue, and we made beautifully out-of-tune music together. It only took three lessons before I started picking flower pedals over him. Halfway through the school year, I made him a card for Valentine’s Day. I’d cut out a yellow trumpet Margoe had drawn for me on construction paper and glued it onto a pink background along with black notes and red hearts spewing from its bell. He’d picked up the card from his desk, burst out laughing, and turned every boy in the class against me. They hooted and chanted, ‘Patty-Cake, Patty-Cake made a mistake and thought Phil liked the sounds her trumpet could make’ until Mrs. Lewis settled everyone down for the Pledge of Allegiance. She let them torture me for three whole minutes, the hag. I quit the trumpet and never willingly spoke to Phil Carol for the rest of my life.”

“You’re whole life?” Isaac asked skeptically.

I rolled my eyes. “I may have said, ‘Hi,’ in the supermarket once. Enough talk of misses. This is depressing.” I held out the CD. “I brought you something.”

He opened the case and laughed. “Lyric Man Music?”

“Some of these may be a little more dramatic than you’re used to.” I thought of Freddie Mercury belting out how he sometimes wished he’d never been born, and I smiled. “You’ll have to tell me what you think.”

“Yeah, for sure. Thanks, Patty-Cake,” Isaac said, his eyes wide and excited.

“Don’t mention it.” I skipped a rock into the creek. “How’s your lady friend doing?”

Isaac skipped one after mine. “Lori? She’s good. We haven’t gotten caught since Monday.”

“You and your Uncle have a lot in common.” I paused, thinking. “Lori Dougherty?”

Isaac nodded, skipping another stone.

“Brothers don’t usually take a shining to their friends dating their sisters.”

“Do you have a brother?”

I shook my head.

“Have you dated someone’s sister?”

I grinned and shook my head again.

“Then you’re not exactly the wisdom of experience.”

He leaned over for another rock, and I pushed him off the boulder. He tipped over onto his butt in the dirt. “When Luke kicks your ass, I’ll point and laugh.”

Isaac splashed creek water at me. “He already knows. I met Luke through Lori. We’re cool. It’s my dad who has the issues.”

“I think your dad just worries that you and Lori will move too fast.”

Isaac made a face, looking both frustrated and indignant. “Lori’s not a slut like her sister.”

I frowned. “What makes you think Cecilia’s a slut?”

“Lori said so. She said that Cecilia’s having sex with some guy all the time, but Lori’s classier than that. If I wanted to be her boyfriend, I had to be happy waiting until she’s ready, or I could beat it.” Isaac smiled. “But she also said that she hoped I decided to wait because eventually she’ll be ready.”

“And you’re willing to wait?”

“Well, yeah,” Isaac said, as if there hadn’t been any other option. “Lori’s a babe, and she makes really good Funny Cake.”

“Food gets me every time, too,” I said, thinking of Mrs. Webber’s cookies and Garrett’s mouth, although both were slightly less the aphrodisiac with snickerdoodles in mind and Caleb’s focused, sugary, intensity to compare it to.

“What do you care anyway? Were you planning on making a move?” Isaac nudged my shoulder.

“Yeah. I’m real bummed. My Funny Cake skills suck.”

Isaac’s expression sobered. The serious laser sights in his eyes clenched in my gut because they reminded me of another pair of turquoise eyes I was becoming fond of. “Uncle Caleb says there’s more to dating girls than looks and food.”

“Uncle Caleb’s a smart guy,” I said carefully.

“You and I have more than looks and food.”

“Yeah, eight years more,” I scoffed. “I’ve got the hots for your uncle. Sorry kid, but there’s just too much against us, Izzy.”

He nodded. “Yeah, that’s what Lori said, but you do know that Uncle Caleb is twenty-nine, right? Age is no excuse.”

I stared at him. “You talked to your girlfriend about dating me?”

“I asked her why she wasn’t peeved that I was hanging out with you.”

“And?”

“She said that you weren’t a slut, that you were kind of old, and that your heart was already taken.”

“When did you talk to her about all this?”

“Tuesday.”

I frowned. Caleb hadn’t paid for Maxine until Wednesday, we hadn’t even kissed until today, and I’m pretty certain most of the vibes between us had been more on the hostile side of lust than on the love-struck side. Dansbury’s gossip biddies’ phone lines were record breaking, but they weren’t faster than the events themselves could unfold.

“Did Lori say who’d snatched my heart?”

Isaac shook his head. He tried to wipe off some of the dirt caked onto the wet seat of his trunks. “I’ve got to go. I waited all day for you to show. Dad’ll be waiting for me for dinner.”

“Sorry I took so long. I was resting, catching up with ‘Christabel,’ and slaving over that CD for you.”

“Yeah, I’m sure clicking buttons on your laptop was real back breaking,” he said snottily. “You read ‘Christabel’?”

I nodded.

“Did you like it?”

“Yeah, I did. I’d have to say Coleridge is one of my favs.”

“What’s your top pick?”

“Wyler.”

Isaac scrunched his face. “Who?”

“The director of *How to Steal a Million*, the original *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Big Country*.”

Isaac shrugged.

“*Ben-Hur*?” I asked, horrified.

Isaac stared at me blankly.

“Watch something with Charlton Heston for God’s sake, and then get back to me.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t take a liking to Blake.” He commented innocently.

I threw a dirt clump at his chest. “You’re such a brat. Get lost.”

Isaac ran up the dike on all fours, snickering. “See you later, Baker’s Man.”

“You’re definitely not getting any cake,” I shouted after him.

“Like I was ever in the running anyway,” Isaac shouted back before dipping behind the dike’s grass mound and out of sight.

Nine

Mama Margoe loomed behind the screen door with the dining room light back lit behind her as I plodded down the dike’s wood and dirt steps. She didn’t move. Even as I stepped onto the back stoop—its warped, wooden planks shuddered ungratefully beneath me— her silhouette remained still and staring.

I stood on the other side of the screen door before reaching for the knob. “Stop being such a creeper, and let me in before this damn porch collapses.”

“Jeremy Snyder reinforced that porch this past spring. It’s the front one that needs worrying over.” Margoe plunked her hands onto her hips. “I’ve been waiting. You came home from work and left without even a hello.”

“I was coming right back.”

“You’re always waltzing in and out of this house. We’ve barely even talked since Monday. Did you know that I had to hear from Mrs. Lewis that you and the MacCallaghan boy have been getting a little friendly?” She widened her eyes suggestively on friendly.

I opened the screen door, walked inside, and brushed passed Margoe. “That’s disgusting. Isaac just barely started high school. We’re friends, but that goes to show you can’t believe everything you hear on the telephone.”

“My Lord, Patricia, I was referring to Caleb.”

I blinked in mock surprise. “Then you should have specified. Caleb is most definitely not a boy.”

Margoe shut the door. She gestured for me to follow her into the kitchen. I stepped up to the counter next to her and eyed the ceramic bowls, the silver caldron, and the strainer gleaming with clean readiness on the worn Formica. “Here, peel a potato.” She slapped a potato and a peeler into my palm. “We’re having pot roast.” A slow smile wrinkled over her cheeks.

I narrowed my eyes.

“If anyone asks, we’ll say it’s leftovers. So how was he? Was Caleb a biter like Sydes?”

“I thought Harriet Carol would have included that in her report,” I said, starting on the potato.

“What do you have against me talking to my friends?” Margoe asked, exasperated.

“Nothing. I just don’t like when I’m the topic of conversation. You’re not the only one she gabs to.”

Margoe scraped a sliver of skin from her own potato. “If you didn’t do anything to deliberately attract attention to yourself, people wouldn’t talk about you.”

“I do not deliberately bring attention to myself.”

“Just like you didn’t deliberately bring attention to yourself under the bleachers with Jehiel Moyer. Getting hot and heavy with Caleb MacCallaghan in public is most definitely deliberately bringing—”

I pressed harder into the potato in an attempt to stave off the anger. “It was just a kiss. We were not ‘hot and heavy,’ and the Hut is not considered ‘public.’ The door was shut.”

Margoe looked disappointed. “Just a kiss, huh?”

I couldn’t help but smile in remembered heat. I shook my head. “Not just a kiss.”

“So tell me about this semi-not-so-private not just a kiss, and stop complaining about things you can’t change, like gossip, if *you* don’t intend to change.”

I gaped, taken aback. “My God, you sound like Garrett.”

“He’s such a sweet boy,” Margoe said wistfully, probably wishing she’d raised a sweet girl.

“You have the attention span of a hamster,” I commented, finishing the last strokes of potato skin. “Knife?”

Margoe handed me a knife she had waiting on the counter. “He introduced me to his boyfriend at the supermarket yesterday. You two get along so well. Why didn’t something ever develop with him?”

“He’s not interested in girls, Margoe,” I said without inflection. I stabbed the potato with relish.

She waved her hand as if being gay was no excuse, and she started dicing her own potato. “But he’s interested in you. That’s what matters.”

“How do you know what Garrett is interested in? If you say that Mrs. Lewis told you, I’m dumping my potato skins over your head.”

Margoe picked up the cutting board and scraped our freshly diced potatoes into the pot of water with the other potatoes she’d already drowned. She turned the burner on high. “Mrs. Webber told me.”

I clenched my hands into fists, and potato skins wedged out from between my fingers like flopping rabbit ears. “Well, Mrs. Webber was probably high on non-stick cooking spray.”

“Patricia! That’s very ungrateful of you. You’ve always enjoyed Mrs. Webber’s cookies.”

“I do. They’re delicious,” I said, blushing, “but I don’t think she’s a very good judge of Garrett’s sexual yearnings.”

“Who better than his mother?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Joe Cummings, perhaps?”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. Mrs. Webber knows what she’s talking about. If Garrett likes men but also happens to like you, Mrs. Webber would know before Joe Cummings. I doubt Garrett is insensitive enough to tell his male lover that he’s interested in his female best-friend.”

“That would make awkward pillow talk,” I conceded, “but I still think she’s wrong.”

“Mothers know these things.”

“No, mothers delude themselves into thinking they know these things.” The potatoes started to boil.

“I knew the exact moment your father fell in love with both your mother and then later with Susan.”

“Did you know the exact moment Frank decided to love Susan more than me?” I crossed my arms, feeling petulant but justified.

She considered me over her thick, blue, sparkle frames. “Where did you get that music you were playing earlier?”

I stilled.

Margoe wrung the lip of her pink, lace trimmed apron. “Because it was really nice to hear after all these years. I assumed Frank had taken those CDs with him when he moved to Susan’s place. He used to play them all the time. I’m surprised he left them here.”

“He left a lot of important things here when he move in with Susan.”

Margoe released the apron. She tucked her hands into its patchwork pockets.

I looked down, feeling like a shmuck. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to fight with you about him anymore, but even after all this time, anything that reminds me of him, anything that resembles what he did—” I took a deep breath, uncrossed my arms, and traced the dotted pattern on the countertop with my fingernail.

Margoe turned off the stove, picked up the pot of dancing potatoes and bubbles, and poured it through the drainer in the sink. “Did *Styx* make you feel that way? Did *Foreigner*, *REO Speedwagon*, and *.38 Special* hurt because they remind you of him?”

I frowned. “No. They’re still the best.”

“Maybe you should think about that.”

“About what?”

“Not everything about your father has to be about him leaving.” She dumped the potatoes into two separate bowls along with a splash of whole milk and a couple chunks of butter. She nudged one of the bowls in front of me and offered me a masher. “He’s dead, Patricia.”

I snatched the masher out of her hand. “I know that.”

“There isn’t any time left to patch up what you two lost. All that’s left is what you remember, and if all you remember is the hate you stored up after he moved out, that’s all you’re going to fill yourself to brimming with.” Margoe pounded the masher in and out of the butter, milk, and the peeled, diced, drowned, and boiled potatoes. “It’s contaminating your relationship with me, and I won’t have it!” Margoe said emphatically.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated, mashing the hell out of my own potatoes. “I don’t mean to be so angry all the time, but the good memories of him from before he left feel fake knowing that he chose to leave without me.”

“If Frank had known how much you would hate being left here and how much it would ruin your relationship with him, he wouldn’t have moved.”

I sighed. “I don’t hate it here. I never hated it here.”

“You could have seen him every day, whenever you wanted. He only lived down the street.”

“With Phil Carol,” I snapped. “I’ve heard the reasoning more times than I can stand,” I said, feeling thirteen again. The potatoes were congealing in lumpy and whipped waves. I aimed for the lumps. “He knew how I felt about Phil. He knew I’d never live with him, but Frank left anyway.”

“Alright,” she said, rotating her bowl. “Just keep what I said about Frank’s music in mind.”

I nudged my bowl back at Margoe.

“Now, tell me about this kiss.” She set the bowls on the kitchen table and peered inside the oven at the pot roast and its thermometer.

I grinned in spite of Frank, and I recanted the electrifying, brief fury of making out with Caleb. Margoe laughed and oed at the appropriate moments. I glossed over my relieved suspicions about his shady income and beefed up the good parts, like his rough hands in my hair and his tongue sweet in my mouth and that lust-distracted groan he’d released when I’d bit his neck.

“How does this affect your plans for leaving Dansbury?”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Caleb just moved here. His life is here. His brother and nephew are here. If you plan on sticking around with him, you’re going to have to stick around in Dansbury.”

“Don’t talk to *me* about sticking around. Life is more than just fixing cranky porch planks, delaying car maintenance to save for emergencies, and ducking neighborhood gossip. I can’t stay here and live, week after week, the same days I’ve always lived and experience, year after year until death, the same life I’ve always known. A part of me is holding her breath outside of Dansbury, and that’s what I’m sticking to. Our kiss doesn’t change any of that.”

Margoe opened the oven, slipped her hands into floral patterned mitts, and pulled out the roast. The heavy spice and tang of meat whirled into the kitchen. “If it counts, a kiss changes everything.”

I glowered at her in silence as my mouth salivated over the roast.

“On a scale from one to—” Margoe said, changing the subject. “How many kisses was that now?”

“Eleven, er,” I hesitated, remembering that Jerr was also a recent addition. “Twelve.”

Margoe raised her eyebrows, but she resisted commenting on my uncertainty. “On a scale from one to twelve, where does Caleb fall?”

“Hmmm.” I boinged one of my curls. “I’d have to say second only to Alexander Weidman.”

She frowned as she assembled the electric knife. “Didn’t he kiss you in third grade?”

“Yes, but it still counted. He was my first first kiss, he was wonderful, and it cursed me to search for my last first kiss for the rest of my life.”

Margoe stared at me, the knife poised over the pot roast.

I laughed a little nervously. “What?”

“You were in third grade,” she said blandly.

“That doesn’t mean it can’t count. Age isn’t a restriction.” I realized I sounded suspiciously like Isaac, so I added, “As long as the age between the kissers isn’t disgusting.” I thought of Jerr kissing my cheek and sighed. “And depending on the kiss’ intent.”

Margoe looked at me hard. “Third grade?”

“He was really sweet. I was embarrassed from having failed the school nurses’ vision test. He saw me moping at recess, sat beside me in the damp wood chips under the slides, and asked me what was wrong. After I told him about being doomed for glasses, he took off his own glasses. His brown eyes suddenly seemed too small for his round, crew-cutted head. He looked half finished without his black, coke-bottle frames. ‘I look weird without glasses right?’ he’d asked. I nodded, and he’d said, ‘Maybe you look weird without glasses too, and you don’t even

know it yet.’ The next week when I went to school with my new, silver, wire frames, he waited until reading time to sign out the big atlas with me, and when we were both lying on our stomachs on the classroom carpet, hiding behind that third grader-sized, cardboard land map of Ohio, he’d said, ‘You look like a princess,’ closed his eyes, leaned close, and kissed me.”

Margoe shook her head slowly. “How do you remember all of them?”

I spread my fingers flat over the counter top. “Each kiss is a grazing flicker of love, like holding a mug when you can almost feel the heat. They’re hope that someday one will last to keep you warm.”

“Alright.” Margoe squeezed the trigger on the electric knife on a down stroke, and it buzzed through the meat. “Alexander counted. He’s your favorite. I’ll concede to that, but practical to your future happiness, Caleb was your best kiss out of twelve damn good kisses.”

I shrugged, attempting nonchalance as my heart thudded erratically. “Alexander could have been practical to my future happiness if he hadn’t moved to Alabama in the fourth grade. You never know if he’ll stick around, but until the last first kiss, they’ll just keep not sticking. I don’t think we should put any real stock in number twelve just yet. We’re only seven hours out of being arch enemies, and he’s already stood me up. For all we know, Caleb will tuck tail back to Scotland anyway.”

“I think not. He has obligations here, and after that kiss, if he doesn’t have the courage to persuade you to, er, attempt to have, um—”

I raised my eyebrows and waited.

“Discover where things lead,” Margoe settled on, a bit ruffled, but satisfied with herself, “then he’s not worth sticking with anyway, but isn’t that the magic of the last first kiss?” Margoe insisted. She forked four slices of pot roast with a wooden handled prong, and I held out my

plate. “You don’t know it’s the last one,” she continued. “It’s not until months later, sometimes years—maybe weeks, but I’ve raised you better than that— when a girl looks back after jumping into b— em—a permanent relationship, that she realizes that one, unsuspecting kiss was her last first.”

“Maybe,” I said, feeling morose except for the fact that a fan of nicely charcoaled roast was bleeding on my plate. “Then again, maybe it’s all a crock designed to sell greeting cards, chocolate, flowers, rings, and exorbitant wedding supplies.”

“The greeting card companies, Mr. Hershey, florists, jewelers, and vendors aren’t the ones kissing these men. Those twelve ‘grazing flickers of love’ that you’ve held dear for most of your life, that you’ve hashed and rehashed to me, Cecilia, Garrett, and God knows who else—

“Misty, Jackie, Isaac, Caleb,” I added.

“— basically all of Dansbury— are they all a crock?” Margoe shook her head, tsking at me. She forked up two slices of pot roast for herself. “If you truly believed that, Patricia, you wouldn’t be counting them.”

“Maybe I’m the crock, convincing myself they were all so special and personal and symbols of hope. What if *I* never counted to *them*?” I asked, on the verge of tears, but as soon as I said it out loud, I knew how ridiculous that was. Trev had been jealously chasing me for sixteen years. Martin had waited for me even when he knew I was on the prowl for Colton. Dean kept a constant eye out for Jeep parts. Jerr had tried to force those much needed Jacksons on me even after I’d broken into his house. Caleb had saved Maxine from certain death despite my immaturity just because he knew how devastated I’d be without her. I wasn’t a crock to them. Their actions were proof of how much I counted, and I could feel that to my heart when my lips touched theirs.

“Not everything’s a crock,” Margoe whispered.

“I know. It’s just—” I bit my lip and froze with my teeth imbedded, anticipating the sharp pain I’d grown to expect in the last couple of days from Mr. Russiani’s elbow strike, but my lip only felt bruised. I sat down at the table with my plate. “Deciding who to bet your heart on might flop, crock or no crock, and as Phil, Colton, and Garrett have proven, my crock detector clearly has its own agenda. I don’t want another hard miss.” I dug into the potatoes with a rubber spatula and heaped a pile onto my plate next to the fan of pot roast.

“Would you trade in all twelve kisses to undo those three misses?”

“I wouldn’t give up my batches of Garrett’s misses for the other two misses let alone any of the kisses. Although, Colton’s miss flirts with tipping the scale.”

Margoe slid out the chair next to me and sat. “I’m glad Caleb counted. All this moping after a kiss, I can’t imagine the devastation a miss would have inflicted.”

I laughed. “Caleb definitely deserves cake. Chocolate cake with icing if he ever bothers to swing by to pick it up.”

Margoe raised her eyebrows.

“The sprinkles are on back order until someone fixes my crock detector.”

“You could probably get Dean on that.”

“I had someone else in mind.” I shrugged. “If he swings by.”

Margoe heaped potatoes onto her plate, smiling. “You’re not hopeless after all.”

“That’s debatable, but I fake it well.”

Margoe started eating, and I asked her about Harriet Carol’s most recent gossip gathering, which effectively changed the subject. We finished our pot roast and potatoes and washed and dried the dishes by seven. Margoe wandered back to her room to change into her

pajamas in time for “Criminal Minds”— “that nerdy Spencer, oh! He just tickles me in every episode”—and I was about to make coffee and scavenge for dessert— a more ardent task in Margoe’s kitchen cabinets than in most— when a cracking snap, a thud, and an, “Ouf! What the fuck!” sounded from the back porch.

I bolted into the hallway. Mama Margoe poked her head out of her bedroom, her salt and cinnamon hair freshly pulled out of a bun and waving thinly against her orange and brown striped cat glasses, over her shoulder, and down to mid-back. She glanced at the door and then back at me. I shrugged. We walked to the backdoor together, and I wondered if the letter writing, tire slashing, gas-siphoner was finally making contact. With Maxine driving full throttle these days, my stalker might feel compelled to take the harassment up a notch. I hoped so because I’d rather get the drama over with now than relive the past three days of auto abuse.

Mama Margoe reached for the doorknob. Her gray eyes met mine. I held up three fingers. She wrapped her hand around the doorknob. I held up two fingers. She tightened her grip. I held up one finger. She twisted the knob smoothly and silently. I made a fist. She yanked the door open, and I jumped forward, slapped the screen door with the flat of my hand, and braced my arm back to wale the tire-slashing bastard. Instead, I saw Garrett’s head peeping out from a jagged hole in the wooden porch like an agitated, blond, whack-a-mole.

“What are you doing under there?” I asked breathlessly, my heart pounding down from battle-ready to bemused.

“What is your porch doing breaking under me?” Garrett countered, his voice pitched in surprise.

I shrugged. “It was always just a matter of time like everything else around here.”

“Usually it’s the front porch that screeches when you tromp on it,” Margoe commented from inside, peering around my hip to get a better view.

“Obviously this one was worse off even after Jerr’s expert reinforcement,” I said, gesturing at the Garrett-size hole and Garrett in our ancient back porch. “And I do not tromp.”

“The front porch would disagree,” Margoe muttered.

I turned back to Garrett. “Are you alright?”

“For the most part.” He looked down. “But unless ground hogs like grasshopper, donkey, and lion-shaped sprinkle cut outs, many of my mom’s cookies will not be fulfilling their Aesop Fable day destiny.”

“Aesop Fable day? She baked these today? What did I do to deserve a recent batch?” I asked, excited, and then I gaped in horror as I realized what he’d said. “They’re all gone in the mulch? I don’t care. Scoop them up. We’ll blow the dirt off and eat them anyway.”

“Patricia!” Margoe screeched, on the verge of a stroke.

“Nah, I’ve still got several unmulched roosters, foxes, and wolves. There’s no need to starve the ground hogs. Mom sent me with these as a get well present for you.”

I smiled. “Aw, thanks. Your mom’s the best.”

Garrett raised his eyebrows.

“And so are you, but that’s a given,” I added hastily.

“In that case, since they’re a present and because it would be rude not to accept, and if they haven’t been contaminated, I suppose you could have *one*,” Margoe consented reluctantly.

Garrett smiled back. “Before we each indulge in our limited portion, do you think you could get me out of your porch?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Of course!” Margoe glanced around frantically, but with nothing else readily available, she settled for fanning herself with her hand. “We wouldn’t just leave you standing in the mulch!”

“Let me just go get a ladder or a chair or something for you to stand on or maybe we could—”

The hideous, dying, squawk of electric chimes whined through the house.

“— or I’ll be right back after answering the doorbell.” I turned around.

“Or you could get me out and then answer—”

The screen door slapped closed behind me. Margoe scurried through the hall and down the basement steps in search of a ladder as I followed her through the hall to the kitchen.

I stared through the screen door at Caleb and Douglas staring back at me, their expressions equally harried. Isaac peeked around his father and Uncle’s intimidating bulk, his expression mischievously amused. He waved.

I waved back. “I expected you about two hours ago and without the whole clan,” I said, tipping my head up to face Caleb, “but Garrett probably has enough roosters, foxes, and wolves that survived the mulch for everyone since we’re only allotted one each anyway.”

Caleb’s expression softened guiltily, clearly trying to get back on my good side. “I’ll pretend that I understand what Garrett has to do with furry mammals and why I’m getting one—”

“Roosters have feathers, not fur,” Isaac interjected, clearly on the obstinate side.

“— and just apologize for not calling you when I realized I’d be late. I had every intention of stopping in after work to continue our *conversation*—” his eyes focused sharply, and I blushed— “and without the clan but—”

“But I have some questions to ask, so I suggest we all sit inside and talk instead of standing on the porch where anyone may overhear,” Douglas interrupted, clearly on the side of the law.

I pushed the screen door open for them. “Good thinking,” I said, “because God only knows how much longer this porch will hold.”

Douglas eyed me as he passed and not in a fun way. I smiled, attempting to project waves of good, home town girl innocence while also trying to think of what I might have done to stir up trouble between getting caught breaking into Jerr’s house and now. Besides hitting the tree and ravishing Caleb, nothing particularly arrest-worthy came to mind. I was probably in the clear, but I kept the smile and waves going as cover anyway.

“I can’t find a ladder, but do you think this’ll work?” Margoe asked, emerging from the basement with a rope slung over her shoulder.

I frowned. “If we were going to try to pull him out, we could’ve just taken hold of his arms and heaved.”

“We’ll tie one end to the awning, so he can pull himself out,” Margoe said, implying an ‘obviously’ at the end of her sentence as she foisted the rope at me, confident in her problem solving abilities.

I laughed. “Our awning?” I threw the rope back down the basement steps.

“Hey!”

“Then we’ll need to scrounge up a crane to clean up the debris and his crushed body when the awning falls on top of him. Keep looking for the ladder.”

“Who?” Isaac piped in, curious. Caleb looked confused but unfazed. Douglas followed the conversation intently, but he looked equally lost.

I gestured to the back door. “Garrett’s stuck in our porch. It collapsed under him.”

“We can help with that,” Caleb said, sounding cheerful.

“Don’t get too complacent,” I warned, mollified by his apology but not enough to side with him against Garrett. “Porch boards aren’t picky who they break under.”

Caleb glared hotly, and I blinked slowly, concentrating on seeming unruffled.

Margoe clasped her hands to her bosom, oblivious to our tension and gazing at Caleb with uninhibited gratitude. “You would help us?”

“I’d insist, lass,” Caleb said, hamming up his accent for Margoe.

I rolled my eyes.

“And *then* we will all sit and talk,” Douglas added, but we were all already migrating to the back porch.

Margoe nudged me as she joined the parade to Garrett. “He swung by.”

“I noticed,” I said, smiling.

“Yet he still gets grief.”

“I wouldn’t want him disillusioned of the days ahead.”

“You admit there are days ahead,” Margoe hedged, the rhinestones on her cat-tipped frames glinting at me.

“Potentially. Stop fishing.”

Garret beamed up at us, and the five of us gazed down at him with various degrees of concern.

“I didn’t expect all three MacCallaghans to run to my rescue— a simple stepping stool would have sufficed— but I’m certainly flattered.”

Caleb seemed to catch Garrett's tone and coughed, its reverberations suspiciously laugh-like. Isaac's smile remained fixed and slightly dumbfounded, witness to his first whack-a-hick. Douglas remained impatient.

"We can talk over Aesop cookies and Bailey's Irish coffee after we get Garrett out," I said, trying to placate Douglas.

"Of course we need drinks! Where are my manners?" Margoe scurried off to get the caffeine and booze.

Caleb, Isaac, and Douglas turned to me, their identical, turquoise eyes looking respectively reproachful, hopeful, and unplacated in radiating focused energy.

I swallowed. "Extra Bailey's for anyone besides me?"

"You don't get Bailey's," Caleb said.

"Why? What did I do?"

"You crashed your car and got a concussion."

I sighed. "Oh. Yeah."

"I'll take her share," Isaac interjected.

Douglas clamped his hand on Isaac's shoulder as he walked toward Garrett. "No one is getting Bailey's."

I peeked in at Margoe already pouring the liquor into mugs.

Caleb joined Douglas at the porch hole, and I leaned into Isaac.

"Way to go, Izzy," I whispered. "If you'd have kept your mouth shut, you might have been able to sneak a few, but now he'll be on top of you like Margoe on manners."

"I'd have gotten busted either way," Isaac said, not looking thwarted in the least. He snickered. "Is Margoe always like that?"

“She doesn’t get to play hostess much, so be nice and let her have her fun.”

“I’m still getting cookies, right?”

I nodded. “With your choice of Aesop Fable character.”

“Playing nice will literally be a piece of—” Isaac smirked, and I had the urge to blow my whistle at him. “— cookie.”

I puffed out a breath, and a curl fluttered over my face. “Good. Make yourself useful, and help Margoe set the table,” I said, pushing him into the house.

Isaac wedged himself in the doorway with one hand on either side. The wooden framing groaned under his resistance. “But—”

“Get your hands off the house. Do you want the ceiling to collapse on top of us?”

He hesitated, apparently not sure whether I was serious, and I shoved him into the house. Margoe noticed him just as he stumbled into the hallway, looking none too thrilled at being man handled.

“Isaac, dear,” she said, “Would you mind pouring the coffee into the press?”

He looked about to protest, his expression sulky. He stared back at me for a moment, and suddenly his face smoothed. He said, “Sure thing, Mama Margoe,” and joined her in the kitchen.

Too many MacCallaghans with too many agendas and not enough distractions to go around, I thought, turning around to confront the next one coming my way.

Douglas and Caleb clamped a tight grip on Garrett’s arms and hoisted him onto the porch effortlessly. Caleb’s button down shirt had ridden up, and a strip of back dimple flirted between the shirt’s edge and the line of his jeans. The shirt was green and striped and much nicer than the torn guard shirts and wife beaters I’d ogled him in before. He’d rolled up the sleeves to his elbows, which he probably thought looked casual, but mostly looked really good. Maybe he

knew that too. Actually, they both looked good. Douglas was out of his uniform and wearing a blue polo, his faded jeans cupping his little bum appealingly, but my eyes slid back to Caleb.

Caleb turned as Douglas asked Garrett something, and he caught me appreciating his stripes. He smiled, pleased with himself. I smiled back, pleased that he was there, and he stepped forward, put an arm over my shoulder, and led me back into the house.

“I’ve got some questions that need answering, but afterwards—”

“I thought you had an apology, and Douglas was the question man.”

“I did and he is,” Caleb said, regrouping. “Douglas and Isaac plan to leave afterwards—”

I snapped my fingers. “Shucks, and I was hoping they’d stay.”

“—but perhaps *I* could stay for a little while.”

“Do the *answers* to these questions hinge upon you staying for ‘perhaps a little while?’” I asked, lightly mocking.

He bent close and breathed in my ear. “No. Your wanting me for perhaps a little while hinges upon me staying.”

My eyes fell closed, and I shivered. I opened my eyes slowly, leaned back, and looked at Caleb from under my lashes. “‘I foundest a bright *gentleman*, surpassingly fair; and didst bring him home with me in love and in charity, to shield him and shelter him from the damp air.’ I’m inviting you in, which is role reversed from how you’d anticipated, but keep in mind that I don’t wait for invitations. I just break in.”

Caleb jerked back. He stared at me like I’d grown a second, infinitely more interesting, and not wholly welcome head.

I widened my eyes and blinked, only resisting a smile with the satanic will of Geraldine herself. “What? Not sure you want to come in?”

“You’ve read Coleridge,” he stated flatly.

“Who hasn’t?”

Garrett sidled up next to me. “Fox?” he asked, holding a half-filled Tupperware container in one hand and offering me an icing glazed cookie in the other. The fox-shaped cutout cookie was reddish-brown, his little ears perked up, his nose a chocolate M&M plopped in all that creamily spread, hardened icing, and one of his front paws was lifted, alert and ready to sneak by undetected.

“Thanks,” I said, taking the fox from Garrett. I looked back at Caleb while I bit into the cookie to watch his jaw tighten as he remembered how Garrett and I sometimes ate our cookies.

Garrett offered Caleb a rooster, but Caleb shook his head stubbornly, reverting to his surly and silent state. Garrett shrugged and popped the entire cookie in his mouth.

“Oh, come on.” I said, finally letting him off the hook. I reached into the Tupperware, pulled out a wolf, and wagged it at him. “I accept your apology for standing me up. Eat and enjoy.”

Caleb considered me for a moment. He bent, my breath hitched, and his lips closed over my fingers. His teeth lightly nipped at my skin as he bit the cookie out of my hand. Caleb fixed his eyes on Garrett as he chewed and swallowed and licked the crumbs off my finger tips, which would have been less embarrassing had we not been sandwiched by Douglas giving us the stink eye and Margoe yammering at Isaac in the background.

I pulled my hand away from Caleb’s mouth, avoided the assumptions wafting from Douglas, ignored the amusement and growing interest layered in Garrett’s smile, and ducked into the house, feeling a lot less like Geraldine than a moment before. I shoved the rest of the fox in my mouth and chomped on it a few times. The flaky sugar of the icing, the light crumble of the

dough, and the sweet, rich, shock of chocolate from his nose flooded my mouth in a quick burst before Margoe looked up from her coffee press. I swallowed, forced a smile, and radiated skinny thoughts at her. She narrowed her eyes, not looking particularly convinced, but three of Dansbury's most eligible hotties were walking into her kitchen behind me— Garrett considerably less eligible in light of his recent tryst with Joe Cummings, but apparently still an option in Margoe's estimation— and she'd gathered a seemingly well-mannered kitchen helper, so luckily for me, conspicuous weight comments were on hold for the moment.

Caleb, Douglas, Isaac, Garrett, and I sat around the table as Margoe placed coffee in front of us. Garrett nudged the Tupperware for everyone to pick at. Isaac pounced on it before it could even reach the center of the table.

"I'm going to head back to my room, if that's alright," Margoe said, watching the Tupperware cautiously as if one of the cookie roosters might suddenly fly up and dive bomb into her mouth. Aesop forbid that sugar should pass her lips. "You don't have any questions for me, do you Chief MacCallaghan?"

"No, none at the moment. I'll stop by some other time if I think of anything," Douglas said. He waited until Margoe turned the corner and we heard her door click shut before he turned to me. "Caleb mentioned that you didn't want Margoe informed of the events concerning you Jeep and Lakeside's break in. I'll do what I can, but I won't sacrifice an investigation for secrecy."

"Thank you," I said, surprised that he even cared. "She's probably listening through the door, but I appreciate your attempt at discretion."

"You're welcome." Douglas took a sip of his coffee. He eyed the mug suspiciously and slid his glare to Isaac, who developed a sudden fascination with the wispy, feather textured icing

on his rooster cookie. Douglas sighed. He turned back to me as the more pressing issue, which didn't bode well if he was more concerned about me than his alcohol-slurping son. "Is there anyone else you wouldn't want involved?"

I frowned. "The three of you came here to talk to me. If you didn't want Isaac along, than you shouldn't have brought him.

"I'm already involved. I found the letter," Isaac said, sounding proud of himself.

"What letter?" I asked cautiously. I willed myself not to glance at Olive and Popeye on the counter behind me.

"The letter that was stuck under the BMW's windshield this afternoon. Caleb was livid." Isaac snickered. "Someone in Dansbury's either dirt-dumb or completely unhinged to call Caleb a 'ne—'"

Douglas clamped a hand on Isaac's shoulder. "And the letter is part of a police investigation and will remain confidential. Is there anyone besides Margoe who you would rather not be present for this interview?"

I frowned.

"I think he means me." Garrett's voice was muffled around a mouthful of fox.

Douglas nodded.

"Garrett can stay." I warmed my hands on the heat of my mug. "What kind of letter did you find?"

Douglas slid out a pad and pen from his pocket. He clicked the pen. "Did you hear about anyone writing Caleb a harassment note?"

Garrett looked at Caleb. "You got one too?"

Douglas, Caleb, and Isaac focused on Garrett. I rolled my eyes at the ceiling. Garrett pointed at me, and I could feel their eyes collectively shift their heat in my direction.

I faced Caleb squarely. “You think I wrote you a crazy harassment letter?”

“No.”

“Because the last time someone asked me if I’d heard about someone else doing something you thought I’d done, you tried torturing a confession out of me with peroxide.”

Caleb shrugged. “I was right then, and I’m right now.”

“Then where’s the peroxide? I still have an assortment of cuts and scrapes you singe. Don’t let witnesses stop you.”

Caleb looked at me, his face determined. “You did not write that note. I don’t need peroxide to know that.”

Douglas stared at me, just as determined, but he didn’t say a word.

I stared back at Douglas, boosted by Caleb’s trust. “What can I say? The man’s got great instincts. I did not write that letter to Caleb.”

“What did you do today if you weren’t letter writing?” Douglas asked.

“I called Dean around two, visited Caleb at Lakeside, read and listened to music until about five, talked to Isaac at Pebble Harbor, made dinner with Margoe, ate dinner until seven, and now I’m here being interrogated.”

“What were you doing before two?”

I chuckled lightly. “Sleeping off a concussion.”

Douglas’ face softened slightly. “I am very glad to see you well, Patty.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you still have your letter?” Douglas asked, relentless even while filled with the gladness of my good health.

I stood, retrieved my own harassment note from Olive and Popeye where it had been festering all week, plunked down into my seat, and slid the note reluctantly across the table.

Douglas didn’t say anything. He pushed Isaac back when he craned over to read it. Caleb looked back at me, and I couldn’t read his expression.

“Have you been with anyone recently?” Douglas asked.

“Sexually?” It came out more scandalized than I’d intended, and I rolled my eyes at myself, not wanting to sound like Margoe.

Douglas nodded.

Isaac looked as if he was fighting a losing battle against laughing. He had stored three of each mammal in his cheeks.

Garrett burst out laughing, apparently possessing less self-control than Isaac. “Yeah, right.” He looked at Caleb. “Unless you were in and out faster than Trev could gallop to Patty-Cake’s rescue, she hasn’t had sex—”

“Recently!” I interrupted, kicking Garrett in the shin with my heel. “I haven’t had sex recently with anyone.”

Douglas stabbed his finger accusingly at the letter. “I know what you did with him. You’d better get tested because he’s left a parade of diseased pussies since high school. Maybe next time you’ll look before you suck, you stupid cheep fuck,” implies that you have had sex with someone recently.”

Isaac choked on his chewed wad of cookie.

“Sip some of your coffee and swallow for God’s sake,” I said.

Douglas glared at me.

“The boy is choking from sheer amusement and stupidity. He’ll die from the cookie before the booze.”

Douglas looked at his son, and Isaac looked back, coughing pathetically.

“You’re ridiculous,” Douglas muttered. He nudged the coffee mug closer. “Take a damn sip.”

Isaac winked at me and gulped.

“*Sip!*”

I bit my cheek to keep from laughing, and I reached for a cookie.

“The letter implies—” Douglas began.

“The letter lies,” I interrupted, setting the cookie on a napkin in front of me. “There has been no sucking on anything, diseased or otherwise, anytime recently. The harassment letter-writer is either delusional, lying intentionally, or has the wrong person.”

“Who would want to harass you?” Douglas asked, prying himself away from Isaac, who had settled for sipping.

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “I showed Garrett the letter the day I found it—”

“She did,” Garrett corroborated, nibbling on a wolf tail.

“— and we couldn’t think of anyone who might have written the note.”

Garrett nodded, still nibbling.

“What about Trevor?” Caleb asked.

“Trev?” I scoffed.

“Yes, Trev,” Caleb said, serious but not spitefully. “He cares for you, and you don’t return his affection. He’s made his jealousy over you obvious. Perhaps you’ve rejected him too many times.”

“You think Trevor Lyons wrote me this note?” I asked, stuck on the absurdity of Trev calling me a “stupid, cheep fuck.” I shook my head. “This note sounds jealous, but it does not sound like Trev.”

“I think Trevor would do whatever necessary to win your affection, even something potentially hurtful.”

I gaped. “You think Trev is the siphoner.”

“And your tire-slasher,” Caleb added.

I shook my head. “You’re wrong. You and I didn’t meet until after I got the letter. He couldn’t have gotten jealous over us before we even met.”

“He was jealous in general before you met Caleb. You pissed him off at the party Sunday night,” Garrett said. “But I don’t think Trev wrote the letter either.”

Douglas zeroed in on Garrett. “Why’s that?”

“Because all this bullshit with Maxine has prevented Patty-Cake from meeting him on their Pebble Harbor dates two days running, counting tonight. He wouldn’t sabotage his own dates.”

I closed my eyes as guilt swamped me. “Shit. I forgot about tonight.”

“What a shame,” Caleb said.

I glared at him.

“Who would want to prevent Patty from dating Trev?”

“Misty,” Isaac, Garrett, and Caleb chorused nearly in unison.

I shook my head.

Isaac and Caleb nodded back at me.

“If she found out how upset Trev got at the party when you rejected his kiss— hell if she just found out that there was a kiss— she’d be angry,” Garrett commented.

“Misty likes me. We talk about stuff once in a while,” I objected.

“What do you talk about?” Douglas asked.

“Girl stuff. I don’t know.”

“Details, Patty. When was your last conversation?”

I frowned, thinking. “Tuesday. We talked about—” I hesitated, and then sighed grudgingly as I remembered what we’d talked about. “— she asked me to tell her about the first time I’d ever kissed Trev.”

“Tuesday?” Caleb asked. “The day I had to fill your gas tank.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. She could have just been curious. It’s just a coincidence or—”

“I’ll check her out tomorrow.” Douglas cut me off, moving on. “Has anyone been acting strange lately? Has a friend been acting distant, or someone who typically is distant been acting particularly friendly?”

“No,” I said automatically, “I told you, I don’t know anyone who might have written that—”

Garrett kicked me.

I frowned at him. “What?”

“Well, there is Cecilia.”

“What about Cecilia?” I asked carefully, willing Garrett to realize he was treading on dangerous, arrest-worthy conversation.

“Has she even asked how you or Maxine have been holding up since your accident?” He asked.

I regrouped from the incidents I had braced myself for Garrett to mention in front of Caleb and Douglas: Cecilia ditching me at Trev’s party, Cecilia stabbing me with a rusted fence, and Cecilia leaving me to break into Jerr’s house solo. With so much crap going on this week, I hadn’t even thought about her not asking about my accident, but now that Garrett mentioned it, I felt a little hurt. “No. She never asked me how I was feeling,” I said quietly.

Garrett placed a warm hand on my knee.

“In what other ways has Cecilia been acting strangely?” Douglas asked.

“Uh. That’s the only way. Just the not asking,” I said.

“You lie,” Caleb said.

Isaac slurped the last of his coffee, seemingly content with life.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I denied breezily.

“Don’t give me that bull. I know when—”

Douglas placed a hand on Caleb’s forearm. “I will arrest you for inhibiting a police investigation and interrogate you in the station if necessary. Care to try again?”

I lifted my chin. “I am not at liberty to discuss—”

“Never mind.” Douglas released Caleb’s arm and leaned back in his chair, looking weathered. “You were saying?” he asked Caleb.

Caleb zoned right back in where he’d left off. “I know when you come into work with a giant gash on your leg the morning after the stereo magically reappears and there are blood

puddle stains in the Hut that you're the one who broke in. We've already got you for breaking into Jeremy's house."

"I talked to Jeremy, and I thought—"

Caleb held up a hand. "No one is pressing charges. Whatever is going on with these letters and your car sabotages is more important than your misguided attempts to protect Lakeside from me."

I grimaced.

Douglas cleared his throat. "You broke into Jeremy Snyder's house and photocopied the maintenance logs without permission."

"Only to catch Caleb swindling Lakeside. Everyone knows that," I said, pointing my finger at Caleb.

"And you broke into Lakeside to return the sound system," Caleb reminded me. He didn't sound particularly miffed, but I felt guilt-stricken anyway.

"What were you doing with the sound system?" Douglas asked.

I took another sip of coffee, wanting to take a healthy slug, but Caleb frowned just from the sip. "I admit there have been a few incidents cooking on the side, but I pinky promise that I am not out to swindle anyone, least of all Lakeside. Well," I amended, "I was out to swindle you out of swindling Lakeside, but that turned out to be a dead end."

"Pinky promise?" Caleb asked.

"Yeah," I said, holding out my fist and offering my pinky. "I pinky promise that I'm convinced that you swindling Lakeside is a dead end."

"No, that's not, I didn't actually want you to, uh." Caleb shook his head and wrapped his pinky around mine. "Never mind."

“I have yet to see the fruits of my pinky promise,” Isaac muttered.

I kicked his shin under the table, and he winced.

“And the sound system?” Douglas asked.

I took a healthy bite of rooster since no one here would grouse at me over that, and I needed a healthy swallow of something. “We had borrowed it for a party after closing Lakeside last summer. We were going to return it before opening day this summer, but we were delayed until Monday night, which we thought would be fine because no one would notice either way.” I turned my gaze accusingly on Caleb. “But we hadn’t counted on you taking over and making inventory checklists and catching everything Jerr would normally miss.”

Caleb smiled for real, and I stared at the warm stretch of that full, fleshy lower lip against his white, slightly overlapping front teeth while it lasted.

“Who constitutes ‘we?’” Douglas asked, his gaze sliding over to Garrett.

“That’s where Cecilia comes in. She’s been—” I paused, struggling to find the words without sounding bitter, and Garrett patted my knee. “—less than enthusiastic lately, but she is not the creeper who has been writing letters and siphoning gas and slashing tires.”

“Just like Trev isn’t and Misty isn’t,” Caleb said. He shook his head, but his eyes and tone were sympathetic. “Someone is, Patty, and it’s someone who you know and who knows you and who is very jealous.”

Caleb was probably right, but I didn’t like thinking about someone I knew actually harassing me like this. I preferred thinking of him as the siphoner, like some evil phantom instead of a person. “But Cecilia has nothing to be jealous of. We just talked Tuesday night.” I turned to look at Garrett. “We were fine that night.”

Garrett huffed.

“Well, we weren’t exactly fine, but everything between us was fine. We talked for a while before you came over and before we got sloshed, and everything was just like normal.”

Garrett gave me a pat on the knee. “And yet, she still left you standing outside Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear’s house the very next morning without a call or a text. She doesn’t seem to care that you were in a car accident. She missed work today without bothering to call out. None of that is normal.”

Douglas rifled through the scribblings on his pad vigorously.

I pulled my knee away. “Don’t even tell me you think—”

“I’m simply answering the damn question. No matter what I think or you think or what really is happening, Cecilia is acting strangely.”

I relaxed slightly, and Garrett rested his hand on my leg again. “I know,” I said on a sigh.

Douglas turned his attention to Caleb. “Cecilia skipped work the day after Patty’s accident, and you didn’t think that was pertinent?”

Caleb shook his head. “No, I didn’t. No one bothers to call out except Trevor.”

“Misty called out on Monday,” I said. “She just called the wrong person.”

Caleb slid me a bland glance.

“Does Cecilia skip work often without calling out?” Douglas asked.

Caleb turned his attention back to his brother. “The only day she skipped work and didn’t call out was yesterday.”

I closed my eyes as dread stiffed my spine. “Cecilia is not the gas-siphoner.”

Douglas honed back in on me. “Then who do you think is?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. There’s been a harassment letter-writer, a gas-siphoner, a tire-slasher, and a possible tire-exploder. My guess is that they are all the same person. Dansbury’s crime rate is too low for that many people to strike at once.”

“Of course the percentage probably spiked now that you’re back in town,” Caleb commented.

I glared at him, but he smiled back at me. My temper fizzled out as quickly as he’d sparked it. I could get used to all these smiles.

Douglas leaned forward. “A tire-exploder?”

“Either that or the pothole I hit was meteor-crater-sized. Maybe I was just going too fast, but I’d just changed that tire because of the tire-slasher. It should have been safe.”

Isaac leaned back in his chair, looking smug. “Told you it was an accident.”

Douglas shot him a quelling look, which didn’t affect Isaac in the least. Caleb looked away, suddenly interested in my kitchen shelving.

“Explode as in bomb?” Douglas asked, focusing his attention back on Maxine.

“Explode as in tire pressure. I’m usually really good at cheap car maintenance, so although I couldn’t buy Maxine a muffler, I could keep her gas filled, change a tire, and check her pressure.” I shrugged. “Easy stuff.”

Garrett picked up his mug in a mock cheers. “Very true. Patty-Cake can change a flat tire in eight and a half minutes.” He took a drink of coffee and winced down the Bailey’s.

I patted his back. “I’d just changed her flat tire with what should have been a new, well maintained tire. I think maybe someone over-inflated my tire knowing how I drive over those pot holes.”

Four pairs of male eyes stared nonplussed at me, unimpressed with my logic.

Garrett cleared his throat. “You’re blaming your accident on someone over-inflating your spare tire?”

Caleb shook his head, incredulous. “You were admittedly going at least sixty over Hollander’s curves and potholes.”

Isaac reached for Caleb’s coffee. “Reckless driving does seem to run in your family.”

Douglas clamped his hand on Isaac’s shoulder, but his eyes still bore into mine. “Have you checked the spare’s tire pressure recently?”

“Sure. I checked it a last week to make sure it was still usable before attempting the six hour drive back home. I’m not a reckless driver; I just like whipping a little speed out of my turns.”

Caleb grunted.

“And even if you call that reckless driving, that’s how I always drive. Every day, every summer for seven summers, plus uncountable drives up to Trev and Colton’s houses, I’ve whipped up and down Hollander Road’s curves and potholes, and my tires have never exploded. I think it seems a little too coincidental that on the same week that my gas gets siphoned and my tire gets slashed, my tire explodes in a pot hole, the same pot holes on the same windy road I’ve sped over for years.”

Douglas tapped his pen against his notepad. “I’ll need to see both the slashed and exploded tires.”

“Dean might have the exploded tire. You could check with him. The slashed tire is in Maxine’s trunk.” I gestured outside. “Feel free.”

He nodded. “Do you have a Ziploc bag I can put the note in? I need to bring it back to the station to process and check for fingerprints. Who has already touched it?”

“Just Garrett and I. How long does fingerprinting take?” I walked over to the cabinet next to the sink, pulled out a box of zippies, and handed one to Douglas.

He pinched the very tip of the corner of the letter and dropped it in. “In the UK, three minutes. Here, maybe ten to thirty because we don’t have fingerprint development chambers to speed Ninhydrin’s reaction to the amino acid in fingerprints here in Dansbury, but that’s the easy part, assuming we actually find an unsmudged, intact fingerprint. A fingerprint doesn’t do us any good unless we find someone to match it to.” Douglas shrugged. He slid his chair out from the table and stood. “Of course, if Trev, Misty, and Cecilia cooperate, maybe that part will be easy too. We’ll let the Ninhydrin work on the letters while I work on interviewing them, and we’ll go from there.”

Isaac took his father’s cue and stood a beat later. He gazed longingly at the cookies still remaining in the Tupperware as he swallowed the last of those still stuffed in his mouth.

Garrett offered the Tupperware up to Isaac, shaking it, so the foxes, roosters, and wolves that were left trembled and jiggled in anticipation of destiny fulfillment. “You can take some for the walk home if you like.”

Isaac smiled, radiant with sugar and Bailey’s and shoved two cookies in each pocket and one in his mouth. “Thanks!”

“I’ll pass the message onto my mother.” Garrett closed the lid, looking amused. He leaned over, kissed my cheek with a loud, smacking, “Moua!” and stood. “I hate to get interrogated and run, but I’ve got another mouth to feed.” Garrett wiggled his eyebrows, so I knew he wasn’t referring to Aesop cookies. I swatted his arm, and he smiled. “See you at work.” He tipped his head at Caleb, and added, “Or not.” I tried to swat him again, but he side-stepped my hand and walked out still laughing as the screen door slapped behind him.

Douglas nudged Isaac's shoulder toward the door. "You act like you aren't fed at home."

"I'm not," Isaac said, spewing crumbs. "Not like this."

"Thank you for your cooperation, Patricia. I know how difficult that is for you," Douglas said on his way out.

"You're welcome," I said, feeling confused because his tone had been so genuine.

Isaac waved goodbye through the screen.

I frowned at their backs as they left. "Has Isaac never had cookies before?"

"He's never had homemade cookies before," Caleb said.

I looked back at the door and through the screen with renewed horror as Douglas and Isaac walked down the porch steps to the street. "My God, that's practically a mortal sin."

"I have no doubt that you'll have him fully corrupted by the end of the summer," Caleb said blandly.

"What makes you think he's all that corruptible?" I brushed my calf against his under the table.

His eyes glinted like Isaac's before an illegal flip. "It's you. You're just too corrupting for anyone's peace of mind." Caleb slid around the table to stand in front of me. He offered me his hand.

I stared at it waiting in mid-air for mine and hesitated. Trev was either still waiting for me at Pebble Harbor, or he'd left, disappointed and stood up for the second night in a row. I didn't know Caleb very well, but what I did know, I liked. Getting to know him better definitely had more possibilities than meeting Trev at Pebble Harbor, which was a nasty, horrible, selfish thought, but there Caleb stood with his hand extended, a beckoning temptation of car repair efficiency made flesh, looking slightly unsure and growing resigned rather than flirty as he

waited. Even resigned, he deserved double chocolate cake with extra icing and sprinkles. Weighing a fun, new, exciting night with Caleb over a necessary, promised, friendship Band-aid with Trev did not earn me cake, but between a casualty-free break-in at Lakeside, getting ditched by Cecilia at Jerr's, and staying mostly conscious during the car accident, I had cake to spare.

Caleb dropped his hand. "I understand if you're tired and need rest. You've had a rough week."

I wrapped my arms around his waist. He stepped closer, and I rested my head on his hip, looking up at his face. His expression lightened. "I am tired and I do need rest, but maybe we could rest together and see how far I let you get on our first date."

He laughed, and his stomach contracted and vibrated under my ear. I pushed his green, striped shirt up along his side to bare the strip of smooth, flexed, V muscle where it plunged into his softly faded jeans. Still looking up at his face— it grew less laughing and more hungry as I leaned closer— I kissed his stomach. It felt more like bone than muscle under my lips. I dipped my hands under his shirt and dragged my fingertips down his back, pressing him closer as I kissed and licked and nipped up to his waist. His skin trembled and shifted under my hands. His skin was so smooth and warm and strong against my lips and fingertips that I closed my eyes, rubbed my cheek against all that wonderfully capable muscle, and breathed in his understated, woody cologne. I'd expected coconuts again, but after a confused moment, I realized he wouldn't put on sunscreen for an evening in. His cologne reminded me that I was still only wearing my Carnegie Mellon t-shirt and faded jean shorts. *What the hell does he see*, I thought and sighed again. I caught another whiff of his cologne, felt all that muscle rippling against my cheek as his rough fingers tangling through my hair, and forgot everything besides the man I'd somehow attracted to stay for a least a little while.

“You can’t stay too late though. It’s already eleven. I have to be at work by seven thirty, and my manager is a real hard ass who gets bent out of shape when I’m late.”

“Or I could stay really late and make sure you get up for work on time for once.” He bent suddenly, cupped my ass between my jean shorts and the seat, and picked me up.

I squealed and wrapped my legs around his waist as he settled me against him. “Whatever you deem necessary to get the job done.”

He bit my neck, and I shivered. “Oh, it’s necessary.” He took a step away from the table.

I flicked his earlobe with my tongue, and he hesitated.

“Room?” he gasped out.

I pointed to the door across from Margoe’s in the hall and tugged at his wet lobe with my teeth.

Caleb carried me to my room and pressed my back against the door. I leaned my head back to breathe, and he caught my mouth with his. The smooth sweetness of icing still lingered on his tongue. I linked my left elbow around his neck and groped for the doorknob with my right hand since both of his hands were full with groping me. He squeezed my ass, and I smiled against his mouth, loving his hands and loving his taste and loving that I was driving him as crazy as he was driving me.

I finally found the door knob. I twisted it, and Caleb fell forward, suddenly off balance because so much of my weight had been propped against the door. We lurched through the doorway, dangerously close to toppling. I yelped and clung to Caleb’s neck. He lunged for the bed. We hit the mattress hard, side by side, bouncing and laughing, and Betty nervously scooted a little closer to the window and away from our flailing limbs. I fisted his shirt in my hand and jerked his lips back to mine. He groaned low and softly. I pushed him onto his back, lifted my

leg, and straddled his waist, my lips moving open and hot against his lips, his teeth pulling sharply and urgently on my lips, his hands gripping my body tight against his, our hips rubbing and grinding and pressing and wanting.

His arms wrapped around my torso, strong and sure, and he rolled on top. His chest pinned me flat and breathless against the mattress. I tried to pull back for a second to catch my bearings, but the mattress was solid behind me, and he was crushing on top of me. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move, and suddenly, time ricocheted back eight years.

I shoved at his shoulders and wrenched my mouth away from his. "Stop!"

His head pulled back slightly, but his whole body still lay flush against mine. His weight trapped me.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" I battered my hands against his chest.

Caleb pinned my hands above my head. "I have stopped!"

I tried to buck him off, but he'd already lifted himself onto his hands and knees to hover above me. We weren't even touching except for his hands bearing my wrists down into the mattress. I gasped short, dizzying breaths. I tried to take in more air and hold it longer, but my heart pulsed painfully through my chest and ears and head and fingertips. *Nothing happened*, I thought, willing myself to calm down. *It'll never happen again.*

"What's wrong, Patty? What did I do?"

My hand was still pushing against his chest. I curled my fingers into a fist and forced myself to relax. *This is Caleb*. I could feel my own fist trembling. Tears spilled over my cheeks. *This is Caleb*. I turned my head to the side, embarrassed, and they dripped over the bridge of my nose and down my temple to soak into the mattress.

“It’s alright.” Caleb leaned forward very slowly, still hovering, still not touching my body with his, and he kissed my temple softly.

“I’m sorry. I— ” A restrained sob squeaked from my throat.

“Shhh.” He kissed down to my cheek. “No, I’m sorry. I hadn’t intended for things to progress so quickly. After the day you had yesterday—”

“I liked the things that were progressing quickly.” The words were clipped and interrupted as my trembling breath sucked in sharply. I tried to breathe normally.

“Look at me, Patty.”

I took another deep, unsteady breath and met Caleb’s beautifully troubled, turquoise eyes.

“What is wrong?”

His eyes helped. I felt less on the verge of losing myself. They weren’t unconcerned by my fear because Caleb wanted me wanting him. Caleb was on top of me, and he had stopped when I’d told him to. He had stopped.

“Do you want me to go?” He leaned back, releasing the pressure on my wrists.

I shook my head. “Stay. Please, stay.” I reached up and wrapped my arms around his waist, urging him down. “I’m sorry. It’s been so long. I’ve been ready for a while, and I thought it didn’t even matter anymore.”

“What’s been so long?” Caleb slowly lowered himself down next to me. I squirmed higher on the bed, so our heads were even on the pillows; I could still look into his eyes. He placed a hand on my hip, its light weight warm and real and now as his palm grazed up and down my side. I rested my hand on the curve between his neck and jaw.

“Have you met Colton Deitrich?”

Caleb frowned. “I’ve heard the name. I don’t think I’ve seen him at Lakeside.”

“You wouldn’t. Trev would go berserk. We dated for two weeks the summer before freshman year in high school, a month before Mrs. Dougherty sold the lot next to their house to Mrs. Webber. Frank had just hitched up with Susan Carol, and I was so angry. I wasn’t just prone to anger like I am now; I lived with it churning in my gut. I couldn’t breathe without feeling the anger steam up and practically singe my nose hairs.

“That was a summer for a lot of firsts. I started sneaking out past curfew to smoke at Pebble Harbor. I went cliff jumping in the creek where it’s higher and shallower. Dean and Sydes were the only creek kids besides me who were stupid enough to test it out. That was also the summer I flirted with Colton. I’d had a crush on him since elementary school. He’d never noticed me even when I blatantly tried to attract his attention, so I made him notice. I’d hoot at him if he passed by my stand at Lakeside. I’d slap his ass if I passed him while I changed stations. I’d slowly lick my spoon at him if I caught him glancing at me while I was eating lunch on break. I was so stupid.”

“Why is that stupid?”

I twirled Caleb’s thick, black hair around my fingers. My face burned. “If a guy treated me like that, I’d punch his lights out and file a police report.”

Caleb smiled. “If a girl treated me like that, especially if that girl was you, I wouldn’t involve the police, but I might ask to borrow Douglas’ handcuffs.”

“Exactly,” I whispered.

Caleb’s smile faded, which made me feel even worse. “I wanted to kiss Colton for so long, but he never even looked at me until I started flirting like a hussy. I’d push how far I could flirt before someone noticed or I was reprimanded or he pulled my hand away. I loved pushing Colton because he was so much taller and stronger than me. He was risky just like cliff jumping

and late-night smoking. I might've gotten caught and I might've gotten hurt, but I wasn't angry when I was freefalling and sucking nicotine and leading him on. I'd always wanted him in that vague, middle school kind of want. I'd thought about kissing him and dancing with him and eating at his lunch table. I'd never actually thought about sex. It didn't take long, maybe two weeks at best, before he started chasing me. For the first time in what felt like a long time that summer, I finally had control over something."

I took a second to breathe, but my throat clamped anyway. "It was a Tuesday afternoon, and I'd stopped by his house to show him my new gauges before work. Cecilia had pierced her nose, so I'd wanted to pierce something too. They were only eighteens, but I knew he'd like them. He'd said they turned him on. We started making out, and after a little while, he tried to undo my jeans. I'd told him, 'I don't think so, babe. Maybe next time,' but he unzipped them anyway. I pushed him away, and I told him to stop, but—" I shrugged. "He was taller and he was stronger and I didn't have nearly as much control as I thought I'd had."

Caleb's hand stilled on my hip.

"I stopped seeing him after that. It's been eight years. I've dated a few guys and kissed plenty of guys since. Sydes and I got a little rough when we made out, but Sydes was only an inch or two taller than me and all lean muscle." I stroked my thumb across Caleb's cheek. "I'm sorry. You don't remind me of Colton. I want you like I'd never wanted Colton, like I've never wanted anyone, but when you rolled over and pressed me down with all of your weight and I couldn't breathe, I'm sorry Caleb, I panicked. I—"

Caleb kissed me softly. His lips brushed against mine as he spoke. "Don't apologize. That never should have happened."

I tightened my hand in his hair and kissed him back. Most of the tension sighed out as I relaxed into him, relieved that he was kissing me. “It was my fault. I shouldn’t have acted like such a slut.”

Caleb pulled back. I leaned in to keep his lips against mine, but he cupped my face firmly with both his hands and held me a few inches from him. “However you acted doesn’t matter, Patricia. He should have stopped.”

I shrugged. Caleb opened his mouth. The frown between his eyes creased almost painfully deep. I placed two of my fingers over his lips. “Believe me. It’s something I’ve thought over again and again for years, and I know that the way I treated Colton was wrong and really stupid. People can’t lead other people on like that, and then act all surprised and victim struck when things turn sour.”

“When things turn sour.” He laughed derisively. “That’s one way to put it.”

“I’m not saying that I deserved what he did. I just think that I’ve got a portion of the blame too.”

“I don’t think you’ve got any of the blame,” Caleb said, sounding defensive.

“I put myself in that situation. I should have known better.”

“You think you know better now?”

I hesitated, not liking where he’d turned the conversation. “I don’t want you making this into something about us. This doesn’t have anything to do with things now”

“I’m not making this about us, but it certainly does have everything to do with things now. What happened then with Colton affected what happened now with me. Answer the question.”

I shook my head.

“I promise that I am not making this about us.”

I pursed my lips, feeling tense and cold again. “I know I know better now.”

“So if I hadn’t stopped, if I had kept kissing you and grinding on you and pushing you further and if I had progressed into sex while you screamed at me and pounded on me to stop and I had you anyway knowing full well that you didn’t want it, you’d have to take some of the blame because you know better now?” Caleb’s tone begged me to agree.

“No. That’s completely different.”

“Why, Patty. Why would I be different? You’ve flirted with me. You groped all over me earlier today, and when we banter back and forth, you imply that you want sex. You’ve led me on so horribly,” he scoffed, “that my urges can’t be denied. I must have you, you tempting witch.”

I rolled my eyes. He was trying to smooth the harshness of the conversation, which I appreciated, but my throat still felt clamped and sore. He was ravaging everything I’d tidied in my mind and convinced myself of years ago.

Caleb smoothed my curls away from my face. “You did nothing wrong.”

I sighed heavily. The solid pressure on my heart made it hard to keep my voice steady. “I was so obvious and blatantly dirty. I—”

“You’ve matured and become a more experienced, more subtle flirter. You and everyone else after they hit their twenties. You did nothing wrong,” he insisted.

“If I didn’t do anything wrong, if everything was his fault, and I don’t take any of the blame, then how do I prevent it from happening again? It had to be partially my fault, Caleb. It had to be, because otherwise, what was the point? I fucked up. I acted like a stupid slut, and I got

what I was asking for, but I know better now. It won't happen again because I don't act that way anymore."

"Why does there have to be a point?" Caleb's hand smoothed my curls away from my face. "Terrible things happen to people even when they don't deserve it, and good things happen to people even though they don't deserve it. Colton should have stopped just like I stopped."

I swallowed.

"If you reacted to him the way you just reacted to me—"

"It wasn't you that made me panic. It was him."

"If that was how you reacted, he knew exactly what he was doing whether your flirting led him on or not." Caleb leaned in closer, but I looked away stiffly. "Not having any blame to claim doesn't make you a victim."

I shook my head. I stared past him at the ceiling. "I was never a victim because things like that don't happen in Dansbury. We don't have victims here because whatever happens to people happens because of who they are and what they deserve. The Buckbur yuppies will always be rich. The creek kids will always be poor. The biddies will always gossip, and the sluts get pregnant before graduation because that's what they deserve. The good kids graduate and go away to college and look forward to coming back on holidays and summers and eventually they settle down, happy with their sweetheart at home, right where they started, right where they belong even if it's not where they were meant to be, right where no one will let them down from or out of because no one changes in a small town. No matter how much you change, you can never change how they see you. I am a good creek kid, and I knew it wasn't my place to slut it up with a good Buckbur yuppie's son. I know better now even if Frank didn't know better, but everyone knows he got his."

“No one thinks that,” Caleb whispered.

“I did.”

Caleb was silent for a moment as he watched me fight to keep the anger in a hard, impenetrable fist clamped around my heart. Even stored up, self-righteous, stale anger tasted better than grief.

“You don’t believe that’s all Dansbury is,” He said. “I know it might feel like a prison now, like staying is holding you back from everything you’re destined for, because that’s how I felt back home too, but you still love this town. You wouldn’t have gone up against me in defense of it if you didn’t.”

“But I feel so trapped,” I whispered.

“After you escape and burst free from all those expectations of place and just desserts, you’ll realize that the trap and all you ran away from was only yourself.”

“I don’t think so,” I said, but I melted back into him anyway because he sounded so bitter and alone; he didn’t have to be alone tonight because I didn’t want to be alone either.

He kissed my forehead and cradled me into the curve of his body. “Neither did I.”

Ten
Friday

A calloused, warm, suspiciously Scottish hand was shaking my shoulder and urging me to “wake for work,” but the hand was obviously mistaken because I’d squinted through the half darkness at my alarm clock which had smugly glowed six-thirty. Life didn’t even begin until nine. I had unwillingly resurrected at seven-fifteen for the past seven summers only because

parents gave their children water wings instead of swim lessons, but beyond a matter of preventing someone's certain death, I was sleeping for another forty-five minutes.

The hands yanked my pillow away. My neck cricked backward as my head bounced down on the hard mattress. Two legs and a nicely muscled bum straddled my waist. I smiled even though the pillow was bashing my shoulder because Caleb's body was lovely, and he took care to avoid the tender stitches on my forehead. The quilt whooshed off in a windy rush.

"I am not waking up," I said and shivered.

"Aye, you are because we have work soon."

I squinted one of my eyes open. Caleb hovered over me, a pillow at the ready, the quilt bunched at his knees and my waist, and his hair tied back from his smooth, smiling face. I opened both eyes because he was there and gorgeous and irresistible even at six-thirty.

"Work is not soon," I garbled.

"This is the attitude that makes you late every day."

"I don't care. Go on without me. I'll catch up."

"No, you'll be late." He enunciated patiently.

I closed my eyes, and my head fell limply to the side as I succumbed to exhaustion despite the immense appeal of him sticking around for the morning. "You can yell at me about it when I get to work."

His hands gripped my upper arms firmly. Gravity suddenly shifted as one hand scooped under my ass and plopped me with an ungainly grunt onto a shoulder practically the size of and as hard as my head.

"Put me down, you Neanderthal! I'm sleeping!"

“Actually, you’re whining.” He carried me out of my room even as I pounded on his back in useless outrage. My half-hearted efforts probably weren’t emphatic enough to do all the other feminists proud because I was distracted by the very much enjoyed bum he’d straddled me with a moment ago, although not enjoyed as thoroughly as I would have liked. Tonight is another evening.

“What the hell am I going to do for an entire hour before work?”

“Eat.” He dumped me onto a kitchen chair. “Your breakfast is getting cold.”

“Uh,” I said, confused by the sunny side up eggs sidling against the crisp, wiggly bacon on Margoe’s blue, flower-trimmed plate. The eggs gleamed at me with more pizzazz than I’d ever be able to muster, and they were about to be munched on. An English muffin and taters were dished on the side, browned and golden and wafting heat. “You made me breakfast?”

“No.” Caleb sat next to me. He pointed to my food. I picked up a bacon strip, and he continued. “Your grandmother said breakfast was necessary if you were actually going to wake at a decent human hour.”

I choked on my bacon, which didn’t particularly worry me because death by salted, meltingly crispy, unchewed bacon was a decent way to go, more decent say than being gossiped to death. “You talked to Margoe?”

Caleb stiffened. “Is that a problem?”

“We probably won’t find out until later today when the phone starts blaring. I give it twenty, thirty minutes tops, but mark my words, they will call.” I flipped one of the eggs onto a buttered English muffin sunny side down, and I bit into all that yummy, optimistic, gooey goodness.

“I’m not sure I follow. Are you mad at me for talking to Margoe, or are you mad at Margoe?” Caleb asked carefully.

“I’ll be annoyed at Margoe when the entire town knows our business, but this egg goes a long way in cushioning my wrath. If Margoe wasn’t such a busybody, you two getting to know each other would be fantastic,” I said between chews.

The corner of his mouth twitched up. “I think it’s fantastic you’re getting to know Isaac.”

I swallowed the English muffin and egg and attempted to discern whether Caleb was being facetious, but his expression looked amused.

“I’m not exactly the model citizen,” I said as I nibbled on a piece of bacon. “Aren’t I a bad influence?”

“One would think, but Isaac only started two fights this week. When he comes back from the creek for dinner, he’s always in a good mood. He’s actually finished every meal without Douglas sending him to his room. The only difference in his life is you.”

I shook my head. “Dansbury is just having its effect on him.”

“I doubt Isaac was in anyway positively affected by those hooligans he hangs out with,” Caleb scoffed.

I smiled. “Dansbury will take credit for his sudden turn around anyway. It’ll be on their list of things to talk about right up there with the MacCallaghan I woke up with this morning at Fluffernutter Friday or whatever that Harriet Carol wench has brewing this morning.”

“Friday Fondue, actually.” He leaned forward to rest his elbow on the table. “I don’t care what anyone says.”

“I do. Rumors will run rampant. People like Mrs. Lewis will think we did the nasty.” I jerked a bacon strip in and out of my mouth a few times before pursing my lips carefully around it and snapping off its tip. “Not everyone’s gossip is as accurate as Harriet Carol.”

Caleb’s eyes glinted. “We can just confirm said rumors if we must, in the interest of keeping gossip accurate.”

“Alas, but then we’d be late for work. We can’t have that now, can we?” I crammed the rest of the bacon strip in my mouth. “I still can’t believe I’m awake this early,” I muttered. “I hope the rumors flay you alive.”

“I doubt they will. Margoe and I talked over Bengay. She seemed quite taken with me. She even asked me to program caller ID into your house phone.”

I covered my mouth to keep the food in as I laughed. “She made you rub in the Bengay? I hope it was just her knee.”

Caleb raised his eyebrows. “Of course it was just her knee.”

“She may be seventy, but she’s single and you’re walking around like—” I waved my fork at his biceps and chest and everything that was beautifully bulging. “Well, you know what you look like.”

“The only thing she offered me was her knee,” Caleb said, looking bemused.

“Lucky you.” I swallowed the bacon. “What’s the weather report for tomorrow?”

“Mostly sunny, but they’ve been calling for storms all week so—”

“Ah, ha! Yes!” I closed my eyes to visualize the heightened buzz of lightning blowing in from the valley and the thick, sizzling, musk of cooling asphalt. “Finally! I was beginning to think we’d never get to Hub in the Hut.”

“Hub?”

I opened my eyes. Caleb didn't look particularly excited. "You know, to wait out the storm in the Hut. We bring games and food and booze and wait for the storm to let up before we reopen the pool."

Caleb stared at me. "You reopen Lakeside and guard after drinking?"

"Not me personally. The storm hardly ever lets up, and even if it did, Jerr goes home. We usually don't reopen." I sighed. "I don't think you're grasping the whole Hub in the Hut concept."

Caleb leaned forward. "I think I'm grasping it just fine. Some of the guards have at least once reopened after drinking."

"We don't reopen."

"Usually."

"Never mind." I took a slug of orange juice, and its tang washed the bacon flavor fresh.

"At least I won't have to deal with any of this anytime soon," Caleb muttered.

"Sure you will. A storm is coming."

"But the weatherman—"

"Is always wrong," I interrupted around a mouthful of tater. "Margoe put you on Bengay rubbing duty because her joint pain is acting up. 'Mark my words, there's trouble a-brewing!'"

Caleb stared, nonplussed.

I suppress a sigh. "So what's with breakfast? I've had to fend for myself for five days. You stay over, and suddenly it's a party."

Caleb shrugged. "I told her we were getting up for work, and she made us breakfast."

"'Us?' I see no 'us' eating," I said, moving on to the second egg.

"I ate with Margoe."

I grunted, my mouth too full of tater, English muffin, and yoke to properly communicate my displeasure. I swallowed. “Suck up.”

He flashed a brief smile. It faded, and he cleared his throat. “About last night—”

Spare me, I thought, and I put down my English muffin.

“I’d like another chance. May I see you tonight?”

“Oh,” I said, obviously awake too early to gracefully maneuver through unexpected turns in the conversation. “You weren’t—” *pissed, aggravated, frustrated, disappointed, annoyed*—“turned off that we didn’t finish?”

“Finishing is usually preferable—” Caleb flashed that brief smile again —“but I’m up for whatever you want.”

“Even if it’s just another sleepover?” I asked, swallowing my bacon doubtfully.

Caleb zeroed in on me with those turquoise laser sights. “Whatever you want.”

The fist around my heart unclenched slightly, and I smiled. He smiled back, and it held as I leaned over the table and kissed him smack on the lips. “Sounds like a second date.”

“Good.” He wrapped a hand around my neck and hooked me in for a longer, lingering kiss. He tasted minty, and I cringed inwardly, glad I’d at least swallowed my bacon. Just when my toes started to curl and my breath started to go, he pulled away before we started something more.

He scooted his chair back. “I need to pick up my guard pack and lunch. Finish eating and change into your guard suit while I’m gone. If you’re passed out again when I return, you’re fired.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. Jerr loves me more than you. I’m a permanent thorn in your side no matter what time I show up, so I’ll pass out if I want to pass out.”

“Cocky wench.”

“He-man bastard,” I shouted after him. The screen door had already snapped shut, but he turned on the porch and winked at me through the screen before walking down the steps to the street.

Interesting, I thought, and then I ate the rest of my bacon, eggs, tater, and English muffin with glee because even though I was awake at— I glanced at the microwave clock and groaned— six-fifty in the morning, I wasn’t as miserably exhausted as I should be. Caleb demanded a heap of wit and mental and physical fortitude to keep up, and keeping up was turning out to be exponentially more interesting and necessary than sleeping in.

I rinsed the dishes in the sink and changed by seven-ten. Caleb hadn’t returned. I eyed my bed longingly. *Screw it*, I thought, *I like fighting with him anyway*. I reset my alarm for seven-twenty and sank back into my soft, orange creamsicle bed.

Ten minutes later my alarm buzzed obnoxiously, and Caleb still hadn’t returned.

“He’s chock full of shit, Betty. They’re always so damn genuine in the moment, but they never stick around.”

Betty soaked up the morning sun on the window sill, unconcerned now that the flailing had ceased. I turned her around, so she’d fill out evenly. Her leaves and buds bobbed in thanks, and I slapped my alarm clock harder than necessary to shut it up. If Wednesday had taught me anything, I’d learned that angry driving was not safe driving, so the alarm clock, my bedroom door, Popeye and Olive, and the screen door endured my wrath as I stormed out of the house. By the time I reached Maxine, I didn’t feel much better, but I did feel unproductive and immature for manhandling innocent, inanimate objects.

Maxine turned over without protest. I sent grateful thank you vibes to Dean and then remembered whose money had encouraged Dean and allowed me to feel grateful toward anybody except a tow truck. The anger fizzled out. Caleb was reliable. He'd only stood me up yesterday after work because the harassment letter-writer had struck again. I thought of what had happened to Maxine the day after I'd received a harassment letter and paused with my hand on the gear shift. A reluctant, nervous ache which didn't bode well for the Yuppie Mobile tightened in my gut. I pressed on the clutch and coaxed Maxine down Hazen Street only to park in Jerr's driveway to avoid the commotion of Dansbury's entire police force as all five of them bustled around the Yuppie Mobile, snapping pictures, dusting, jotting notes, and talking and nodding calmly to a quietly seething Scotsman. I hopped out of Maxine.

Caleb glanced at me, and I was really glad he was my alibi for the entire night, gossip be damned. I wondered if I should speed up Buckbur Mountain without him, but he stalked away from Officer Lewis after another couple words. We met at the curb.

"What happened? Did someone break into the Yup, er, your car?" I asked.

"Nothing so mundane as that," Caleb scoffed. "Her gas tank is empty."

I nodded. "I don't suppose you forgot to refill her recently."

Caleb shook his head.

"Well, that figures."

"We should have foreseen this possibility." His jaw flexed.

"Oh, how the tables have turned," I said dramatically. "I've heard being late for your shift is punishable by firing these days, but don't worry. I'll sweet talk Jerr—" I bit my lip. "— for a price."

A weary smile tipped one side of his mouth. He wrapped an arm around my waist and walked with me back to Maxine.

My heart fluttered as the tips of his fingers slid under the hem of my shorts and grazed my skin. “Remember to check the pressure on your new tires.”

Caleb nodded. “Douglas will stake out the lawn tonight. If he catches anyone so much as slinking through the streets with a sewing needle, he’ll arrest the bastard.”

I laughed. “He’s not taking this well, is he?”

“Douglas is an efficient man. He doesn’t let much get past him, but this is the third time he’s slipped up.” Caleb chuckled ruefully. “If anyone could ruffle Douglas’ composure, it would be you.”

I blinked. “Me? What does Douglas’ composure have to do with me?”

“You broke into Lakeside on his watch, literally since he was on the premises when he thinks you might have been there, and he didn’t catch you. He watched you climb through Jerr’s window. He actually witnessed the crime in action, and you still faked your way out of getting arrested. You should have seen his face when I told him that the photocopies were a scam. He nearly burst a blood vessel. He thinks he’s losing his edge.” Caleb snorted. “Nine years with the NYPD and little Miss B and E a lot from Hickville, PA makes him second guess. You’re something else, Geraldine.”

I shooed my hand at him. “Douglas isn’t losing his edge. He’s just confused because he’s a seasoned cop used to staking out and arresting hardened criminals who run and shoot back to avoid arrest. I’m just a seasoned small town punk who’s been peacefully avoiding arrest my whole life. What’s he gonna do: throw me in the slammer for protecting Lakeside against the

selfish intentions of a money grubbing city slicker? I'm not the criminal he needs to worry about."

Caleb shook his head. "Careful. Your hick is showing."

"I think Douglas is doing a great job as far as I'm concerned, and I have every confidence that he'll nab the gas-siphoner with due haste."

"I'm sure he'd appreciate your support, but he hasn't done anything as far as you're concerned."

I winked. "And I plan on keeping it that way." I hopped into Maxine. "You coming?"

He reached an arm up to hang on Maxine's door frame, so his muscle was flexed and centimeters from my face. I fought the good fight and attempted to keep my eyes focused on his, but my eyes succumbed to the lure of tanned, smooth, muscle and drifted sideways for a moment.

"No," he said. "I'll be up later with Douglas when he interrogates Trev and Misty."

"The biddies are going to gorge on that. Poor Jerr."

Caleb jerked a thumb at himself. "Poor me. I'm the one whose gas was just siphoned."

"Oh, boo hoo. Been there, done that, and gone through worse." I teased, but then I remembered what had happened the day after my gas was siphoned. "If Douglas can't nab the siphoner and the pattern of auto abuse I went through continues, you'll go through worse in the next couple days too. Garrett and I will be looking out, but the siphoner was able to get past us all week. He might get past us again. You watch yourself."

He suddenly looked cocky, like he was trying not to smile. "I'm touched, Patty-Without-The-Cake. 'In the field we had a code of honor: you watch my back, I watch yours.' Nice to know honor isn't dead."

I lost my breath. “Unbelievable. You watched *First Blood*?”

“How could I resist?”

“But you’re not into movies.”

Caleb did smile then. He leaned in close. “But I am into you.”

I fell against his lips and against all his sure strength. He smelled like coconuts again, and I breathed deeply. He lingered for a few seconds longer before letting go of Maxine’s door frame and my lips. “I’ll see you at Lakeside in a few hours once we process this mess.” He hitched a thumb at the crime scene behind him, looking murderous.

“If you wait until the storm hits to rub out the bastard, you can dump his body away with the rapids. It’s easy to get caught in this town with so many biddies spying. Who the hell will post my bail if you’re on your way to the slammer?”

“Why will you need bail?”

“If your brother ever gets his act together, I’ll be there soon enough.”

“I know how difficult it is for you to resist anything arrest-worthy, but try to restrain yourself.” He cocked his head down the road. “Drive carefully.”

I twisted Strawberry Shortcake, and Maxine roared to life. “I always do.”

Caleb stared at me.

I wiggled my fingers as I pulled out of Jerr’s driveway. When I passed Douglas steaming over the Yuppie Mobile’s gas door and a smudge of discernable black powder, I beamed sympathetic eyes and a thumbs up at him for good measure. He waved back, but his face remained rigidly determined.

The drive up Buckbur Mountain passed faster than I expected considering I was slumming it at five under the speed limit. I dreaded going to work. After last night’s suspect

discussion with the MacCallaghans pointing fingers, Trev and Misty and Cecilia's presence at Lakeside loomed uncertainly.

I parked Maxine next to Coraline, trudged up the stone steps to the locker room entrance, tossed Olive and Popeye in a locker, and walked cautiously across the grass to the Hut. Misty twirled her hair at five feet. Her roots were nicely filled in. Garrett glanced up as he saw me walk in. He smiled genially, waved, and returned his attention to the Russianis, Jehiel Moyer, Luke, and Ryan splashing in five feet. Trev glared at me from across the pool at ten feet, and Cecilia focused intently on the empty diving boards from her stand at twelve feet. A thin layer of clouds dampened the intensity of the sun. Lakeside was dim in its shadow.

I was already more than half way to the Hut when Misty turned away from the delinquents playing chicken. She nailed me with her distracted, uncertain gaze from her perch on the stand. I forced a smile, and she waved me over.

It's a ruse, I thought. She just wants me within arms' reach to ice pick me. As I walked closer, I realized how ridiculous I was being. She was not hiding a weapon on her bikini-clad body. She was barely hiding herself. If Misty was the siphoner, I didn't have to worry about an immediate confrontation.

"Hey Misty." I leaned on the bottom of her stand to appear casual.

"I broke up with Trevor," she stated.

I blinked, stunned. Misty had broken up with Trev, and she seemed completely certain about it. That could potentially be my fault. I shifted my eyes across the pool to glance at Trev. A chill tingled up my spine from the hostility in his eyes, so I turned back to Misty. "What happened?"

"He wasn't anything like you said, and I like your version better."

“My version of what?” I asked.

“Your version of kissing. Trevor and I have dated off and on for two years, and we’ve been—” Misty glanced both ways, leaned down, and whispered, “—*intimate*—”

I suppressed rolling my eyes only by the enormous will of my survival instincts; Trev was still radiating uninhibited loathing from across the pool.

“— this summer for weeks, but in all that time, not once has he kissed me and made it count. All of our kisses are like your panda paws kiss. He ruins it. I never noticed because it’s always been that way, but he doesn’t want me in the moment the way I just want him.”

“You shouldn’t take things like kissing and counting to heart,” I said, trying to patch up whatever damaged I’d wrought. “I’m sure that eventually he’ll—”

“I think he thought of you whenever he was with me,” Misty said, still genial but with an undercurrent of frustration.

I winced. “I’m sorry, Misty. You don’t deserve that.”

Misty’s face hardened as if there wasn’t much room for complex emotion, but whatever room she had was filled to bursting. “I want what you have.”

“And what do I have?” I asked slowly, thinking, *buy your own damn Wrangler and leave Maxine alone.*

“A man who makes it count.”

“Oh.” My agitation deflated.

“I want a man who kisses me because in that one perfect moment he wants me more than you or watching the World Cup or making those stupid silent films. I want a man who thinks I’m worth making a moment more than just filling space in his day.”

“Trev’s films are classic twenties remakes. He’s going to be famous someday— hell he’ll be famous in a few months while we’re stuck barefoot, birthing out babies in the Hut between guard shifts,” I said, indignant.

Misty stared at me and blinked with ill intent.

I bit my lip. “I’m sure that Trev wanted you more than just to fill space.”

“He stopped making out with me to pick you up at Lakeside Monday night,” Misty said, an edge creeping into her voice. “Whatever film talent he supposedly has does not make up for being a crappy boyfriend.”

I nodded, helpless to think of how to salvage the conversation in the face of such unexpected certainty from Misty. It felt wrong to argue when she was so obviously right, and her rightness made any arguments in his defense insignificant. Trev was my friend— assuming he wasn’t the tire-slashing siphoner— but I’d warned him about knowing people and not being selfish. I did not owe him this argument especially knowing I’d be on the wrong side.

“No, it doesn’t. Trev didn’t know what he had.”

“He didn’t care if he had me or not. I was just there. I want someone who realizes that my feelings and my wants matter too, and I’m going to find him.” Her cupid bow lips curved up like a naughty Bo-Peep on the prowl, the journey of searching just as appealing as finding one to stay. Trev was an idiot.

I shook my head, attempting to keep my face neutral and failing— not that Misty would notice me twitch, but Trev might— when I noticed who was striding with purpose and carefully leashed frustration towards us. Damn, that man worked fast. “Good luck making them count,” I said, edging away from Misty’s guard stand and a fast approaching, overworked, Scottish police chief.

Misty turned back to the pool. “With these as my options I’m going to need it.” She scanned over a dangerously flopping Mr. Russiani in almost desperate need of a flotation device, an oblivious Madeline floating with water wings in ten feet without a care, and Isaac creating a tidal wave with a perfect double flip cannon ball. Madeline took the tidal wave with surprising grace, popping out from under the water gurgling and laughing, and Mr. Russiani trudged along, his eyes trained with insane focus on the wall. I kept an eye on them, feeling on edge and less than warm toward Isaac, as Misty kept scanning, looking unsatisfied.

“Maybe I should take a vacation and start my search where there’s more variety.”

I shrugged. “A man with counting potential is probably not going to be hanging around Lakeside on a Friday morning unless he works here unless your age-range is considerably broader than mine. Maybe you should hang back and let someone notice you.”

Misty cocked her eyebrow doubtfully. “Is that something you’ve tried?”

“Er.” Kisses whizzed by with me doing the noticing, but after a moment, I remembered Bernardo Morales. “Yeah, I let a guy notice me once.”

“How did it work out?” she asked, sounding skeptical.

“So, so,” I said, tipping my hand side to side. “I broke it off in the end because he noticed someone else. It lasted for a while though before he wondered. Five months, and every moment counted. Bernardo was a very passionate man, even in high school. He left me mushy love notes in my locker between classes every day, and sometimes they even had chocolate kisses taped to the inside over the heart next to his name.”

Misty’s eyes widened. “Bernardo dated you for five whole months before cheating?”

I nodded, proud of myself for being that girl.

“Wow,” Misty said, suitably impressed. “Good plan. I’ll give the first man who notices me—”

“Um,” I said, eyeing Douglas from where he’d paused at the Hut.

“— and strikes my fancy—”

Douglas bent down to examine the patch of blood stained grass that had survived Garrett’s amateur bleach job, his tightly uniformed butt looking extremely fancy striking.

“—a chance to make it count.”

“Right.”

“You should talk to Trevor. He could probably use a pick me up,” Misty shouted after me as I walked away from the catastrophe about to collide. I noticed Trev roll his eyes.

I moseyed around the diving boards toward Trev’s stand despite his obvious distain and my reluctance. Isaac smirked at me from beside the diving board ladder. I bopped him on the head as I passed, and he scowled at me from under his wet, swooshed, blond bangs. Douglas’ deeply lilted voiced intoned, “Miss Misty Lewis. A word?” from behind me, so I bumped the pace up a notch to avoid any direct cross fire. Cecilia concentrated on Isaac at the diving boards with the same focus she’d displayed when no one was diving off them.

I swatted Trev’s stand platform. “You look like you could use a pick me up.”

Trev ignored me.

“I heard about you and Misty.”

Trev turned away to scan the pool. He hadn’t done anything about Madeline who still floated unsupervised and oblivious of the unswimable ten feet below her, so the scanning was probably a ruse.

“Are you ok with that, you know, er, losing Misty?”

He continued to ignore me.

I bit my lip. “Well, if you want to talk—”

“Like you give a fuck,” he said, continuing the pretense of scanning.

I blinked. “Why wouldn’t I?”

He laughed, and it sounded horrible and bitter and grating. “You obviously didn’t give a fuck last night when you stood me up at Pebble Harbor for a cheap thrill with that overbearing meat head.”

I winced. *Shit. I forgot that I’d forgotten him.* Misty giggled from across the pool. She squeezed Douglas’ shoulder, and Trev stiffened.

“Caleb is not a meat head. He’s much more than just brawn and he-man muscle. He’s—”

“I don’t give a fuck what he is.”

Harriet Carol shot us an admonishing glare from where she lounged on her chaise behind her *Home and Garden* magazine. *Stop eavesdropping and watch your damn grandchild before she drowns.* I glared back at her, but she didn’t back down. Other people were staring too, albeit more subtly than the queen gossip biddy herself. “Stop saying ‘fuck,’” I whispered, “The peanut gallery is not taking your profanity in stride.”

“Fuck the peanut gallery,” Trev hissed. “Isn’t that what you’re all about? Isn’t that what you hate the most of everything that you hate about Dansbury?”

“I don’t hate anything about Dansbury.” I whispered even more softly, hoping Trev would take my cue, at least subconsciously, and calm down. “I just think there are things that we could improve, like social unity and less gossip and quieter profanity, but overall—”

“Why didn’t you meet me?” Trev cut me off, abandoning all pretense of scanning the pool. He swiveling his chair to face me straight on.

“There has been, uh, stuff happening in my life right now that—”

“I know what kind of stuff is happening in your life. I can’t believe you would use him as an excuse to blow me off.”

“The stuff that’s happening in my life doesn’t have anything to do with Caleb. You’ll understand when Douglas talks to you after he finishes interrogating Misty.” I gestured across twenty-five meters of water to Douglas interrogating Misty to corroborate myself, but Douglas smiled up at Misty, his cleanly shaved cheek dimpling endearingly on one side as Misty rested her chin on her armrest and gazed down adoringly at Douglas’ dimple. “He will probably use different interrogating tactics on you.”

Trev considered Misty and Douglas carefully. “What does Chief MacCallaghan’s investigation have to do with you standing me up?”

“Douglas dropped by unexpectedly yesterday right before I was supposed to meet you. With everything that’s been going on, I forgot about our date. I’m sorry, Trev.”

His eyes widened with alarm. “Do they know about Monday night? Is that what this is about?”

“No. Well yes, they know, but that isn’t what this is about.”

“Then what is it about?”

I sighed. “I don’t know if I should say anything until Douglas—”

“Am I implicated in something?” Trev’s Adam’s apple bobbed as the rage started to build again.

“I really shouldn’t—”

“After everything that I’ve risked for you? After everything that I’ve kept hidden? Are you kidding me? I broke the law for you! I put my ass on the line to save yours, and you ratted me out?”

“No, actually, I defended you, but my opinion doesn’t mean squat. I’m a little biased, us being such close friends and all,” I spat, not feeling particular friendly.

“You’re a little something.”

I leaned in. My eyes darted to see who was still listening. Everyone within a twenty foot radius had given up on subtlety and were blatantly staring. “Keep your voice down. Douglas isn’t that far away.”

“The apocalypse could strike, and he wouldn’t notice a thing past Misty’s tits. She’s practically swallowed him whole with her cleavage.”

I glanced across the pool, and when my eyes focused on what was actually happening on the ten foot guard stand instead of how it appeared, I struggled not to laugh. Misty was showing Douglas her new tattoo. Better Mrs. Carol and her biddy clan get an earful of profanity and relationship drama than an eyeful of one of Dansbury’s finest getting a sneak peek at Misty’s butterfly. Trev might not be right, but at least he had good timing.

Misty giggled, and every curvy inch of her bobbed and shifted under her overworked bikini top. Douglas looked as if he was still asking questions and jotting in a note pad— a little cleavage and sway wouldn’t stop an investigation on Douglas’ watch— but his eyes wandered occasionally to notice other things as well.

“I guess they just hit it off,” I said mildly.

Trev eyed them for a moment longer. I wondered if Douglas had considered how provoking Trev’s jealousy would affect his investigation. Misty flipped her hair over her

shoulder and tipped her head back slightly to bare the lush, plumpness of her mounded breasts and the length of her long smooth throat. Douglas stared, transfixed. I even stared, a little transfixed myself. I glanced at Trev. His jaw tightened, and he looked like he thought he was an idiot too. Douglas was lucky to have inherited the sense of humor in the family, or at least lucky to have caught Misty on the rebound. Recalling Douglas' quiet seriousness at Jerr's and during the interview last night, my bet was on the rebound.

“I'm sorry.”

Trev snorted. “No, you're not. You thought I was a scum bag of a boyfriend to Misty.”

“Well, you were. I'm not sorry she's trying to find someone who actually wants to date her, but I'm sorry you aren't happy.”

He didn't say anything for a while. Douglas looked as if he was wishing Misty a reluctant farewell by the time Trev turned to look at me. “Normally, I'd make a comment about how you could make me happy, genuinely hoping that you'd reconsider and actually be with me—”

“Trev—”

He raised a hand, and I shut up to let him finish. “—but I'm not going to because I trust that when you say I'm ruining our relationship by pushing you into something you don't want, you mean it. As much as I want you as more than a friend, I'd rather have you as just a friend than nothing at all. I accept your apology—”

I smiled.

“—and I'm willing to reschedule our rain date.”

I strained to keep the smile. “Good. I'm glad.” I didn't think genuinely good friends made it a point to highlight when they were being a good friend, but his thick, dirty blond eyebrows curved up over his deep brown eyes. He looked distressed and hopeful and half sure he'd said the

right thing. I couldn't stomp on that hope when what I really wanted, more than another date to miss, was to straighten the tangle between us. "Thank you for understanding."

Trev nodded, appeased for the moment. "Then I'll see you tonight before sunset."

I forced my smile wider. "Right."

Douglas was rounding the diving boards toward Trev's stand, so I ducked while the going was less than good before it plummeted.

The rest of my shift was half baked. Madeline floated her way back to the shallow end without anyone's help. Mr. Russiani climbed out of the pool, much to my surprise and relief. He was hacking and gasping and winded on the verge of having a heart attack, but every time I had offered the rescue tube, he'd waved me off and persevered on his own. Douglas left before my break, but he returned to drop off Caleb. I ate lunch alone in the Hut. Garrett would have eaten with me, but Misty was clearly daydreaming instead of watching the pool. Dumping the entire pool on Trev and Cecilia just so I could have conversation with Garrett over my pizza was unnecessary, although I could have used the company.

Jackie breezed into the Hut unapologetically late at one o'clock as I finished eating and tucked the leftover pizza slices back into the fridge. I heard the door squeal open and slam shut behind me.

"About time you showed up to save someone," I said pertly. "People may start to question whether you're leaving a mess of victims for other guards to clean up, start thinking you're not pulling your weight."

"I've got less weight to pull, isn't that so babe?"

My hand convulsed on the refrigerator handle.

"Isn't that so?" Jackie asked, her voice icy.

I shut the fridge, my heart pounding erratically, and turned around.

Colton's nostrils flared. "Yeah. Light weight."

Jackie's hand clamped possessively around Colton's waist. She dug her nails into his hip.

He didn't wince or pull away or deck her, but I remembered that look, how his upper lip curled slightly, the tendons in his neck protruded, and his left fist clenched like mine.

I restrained myself from offering him my stress ball. "Caleb is just outside the Hut."

"Of course. We past him on our way," Jackie said silkily.

"And Jerr and Chief MacCallaghan and Trev and half of Dansbury."

Jackie frowned slightly. "Obviously."

"Just so we're on the same page." I skirted around the table, refusing to indulge in the almost overwhelming need to lunge as I walked past him to the door. "I'm relieving Garrett at five feet. You can have the diving boards."

"I don't want to the diving b—"

The door slammed shut, and I walked to the stand, my hands clammy and trembling.

I'd already settled myself at five feet when Colton left the Hut. Trev had seemed mildly annoyed after talking with Douglas, but that didn't compare to the hostility his expression radiated when he spotted Colton. Jerr conveniently needed help carrying supplies into storage despite having completed inventory last Monday, and Colton escaped unscathed after dumping Jackie off on us. Caleb watched the drama unfold from his vantage at ten feet, his face rigid.

Trev emerged from inventory without the murderous hostility darkening his expression and cast a few concerned glances my way. Maybe after talking to Douglas and being reminded about Colton, he was a little more worried about the siphoner killing me than about being implicated as the siphoner, which meant he probably wasn't the siphoner unless he was trying to

dupe me into thinking he was concerned. I twirled my whistle vigorously as the various scenarios of him being and not being the siphoner played out in my mind. By the time Cecilia walked to the stand to relieve me at the end of my shift, I decided to leave fruitless, head-aching speculation to the detectives and do a little more hands on detecting of my own.

Cecilia stood stiffly under the stand. She ignored me as she'd been ignoring me all day, so I remained in the chair, continued to scan the pool, and ignored her.

Cecilia had sturdier nerves than Garrett. She lasted ten minutes before bursting. "You know I'm here to relieve you. Stop being a bitch and get off the stand."

"I'm being a bitch?" I asked, incredulous. "Who ditched who at Jerr's? Who doesn't care that someone was in a car accident?"

"Who got who interrogated by the police?" Cecilia hissed.

I lifted my hands, palms up, to weigh her complaints against mine. I lifted my right hand. "In a horrible, life-threatening, concussion-sustaining car accident." I lifted my left hand. "Interrogated by a hot, small town police chief for something you didn't do." I tipped the balance up and down, and I ended with my right hand up in the air. "I'm not seeing your point."

"Karen is having a fit! I may never do anything besides work and count tiles on my bedroom ceiling for the rest of my life!"

I waved my hand dismissively. "She'll get over it. They always do. Something juicier will come along and—"

"I'm not talking about you and Mama Margoe and gossip," Cecilia interrupted. "I'm talking about me and Karen and her punishing fetish. Not everything works in other people's lives how it works in yours. Not everyone will just 'get over it.' Maybe if you thought of other people besides yourself, none of your friends would be getting interrogated."

“The interrogation isn’t my fault. Out of all the dumb things I’ve pulled over the years that I could have dragged people down with me over, this is not it. Why did you ditch me at Jerr’s house? You were supposed to meet me there, but you never showed.”

Cecilia glared up at me, livid. “I never wanted to do any of the shit you dragged me into. I didn’t even want to return the stereo. That was my last B and E. I’m done.”

I frowned. “You could have texted me that instead of letting me wait for you. An ‘I’m not coming’ would have been appreciated.”

“I told you. I’m done.”

I hesitated. “You’re done with the B and Es, or you’re done with me?”

Cecilia looked down at the concrete.

“You didn’t seem to mind all that much when we broke in to borrow the stereo last summer,” I snapped. “I haven’t even seen you since Tuesday night. We were fine that night, but suddenly you don’t care that I was in a car accident and you don’t care about Caleb’s extra paycheck and you don’t care about me. You’re just done.”

She stared at me in numb silence.

“What’s going on, Cecilia?”

“If you expect me to fess up to all that bull Douglas tried to pin on me—”

“I expect you to talk to me! I know you’re not the siphoner. Something happened that you’re not telling me, something between us.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I turned the chair around and climbed off the stand. My voice was low and tense when I said, “You’re full of it. The Cecilia I’ve known my entire life wouldn’t just leave me high and dry to fend for myself during a break in. The Cecilia who loves me would visit my hospital bed

when I totaled Maxine. The Cecilia who cares would have asked about Caleb by now. Why don't you give a shit? What happened to change everything?"

Her eyes widened slightly. "I don't know what you're talking about," she repeated, but her voice broke into a whisper at the end.

My throat tightened. "Well, when you figure it out let me know, so we can be friends again because this totally sucks."

I turned away, and Cecilia climbed up the stand. As I walked toward the locker room, I could hear her breathing hard and sniffing. I walked faster, so I could reach the locker room before she could hear me too.

I escaped through the locker rooms, stomped down the stone steps, slammed my bag onto the passenger seat, and climbed in Maxine. My hand was attempting to jam the key into the ignition for the third time when a hard slap rocked Maxine.

I dropped Strawberry Shortcake onto the floor mat.

"Sorry," Caleb muttered, sounding amused. "You forgot something."

"What?" I patted the mat for my keys.

"Me."

I brushed my fingertips closer to the pedals, still searching. "So hop in. No one's stopping you."

A moment passed. I touched something long and fuzzy. I yanked Strawberry Shortcake off the floor mat by her yarn hair.

"Patty-Without-The-Cake?" Caleb's voice was soft and low.

I gulped back the tightness still constricting my throat. "Mmm?"

"I'm sorry you and Cecilia aren't getting along."

“Me too,” I whispered.

Footsteps scattered rubble on the pavement, and Caleb’s arms suddenly wrapped around my shoulders. I let myself lean against his chest. I felt like a pansy, but I stayed warm surrounded by his arms and chest and chin anyway. “How did you know I needed cheering up?”

“Are you kidding? You don’t exactly strive to keep your private life private. PHEME only knows how they’ll decide what to talk about: you and me, you and Trev, you and Cecilia, or you and the investigation. For a person who hates being talked about, you happen to display a lot of public, dramatic scenes.”

“It’s not like I display them on purpose,” I said, snuggling further into his shirt because he’d added cologne to the coconuts. “Who’s PHEME?”

“Greek Goddess of rumor.”

“What are you, a closet mythologist?”

He shrugged, and his muscles shifted under my cheek. “I’ve been known to read my fair share of Ovid.”

“Quote something pretty,” I said. My breath still sounded a little ragged despite the distracting comfort of muscles and cologne.

“Something pretty, hmmm. There isn’t much pretty between the Creation and Caesar’s bloody death.” He rubbed my back.

I traced little figure eights and stars on his chest. “Quoting isn’t easy, you know. You have to actually think about it.”

Caleb laughed. The rumble under my cheek vibrated firm and deep. “Alright. I’m thinking.” He continued rubbing my back in smooth, pressing circles as I waited. A minute passed. Just when I was about to let him off the hook, the rubbing stopped, and he said, “The

track climbed upwards, steep and indistinct,/ Through the hushed silence and the murky gloom;/
And now they neared the edge of the bright world,/ And, fearing lest she faint, longing to look,/
He turned his eyes— and straight she slipped away./ He stretched his arms to hold her— to be
held—/ And clasped, poor soul, naught but the yielding air./ And she, dying again, made no
complaint/ (For what complaint had she save she was loved?)/ And breathed a faint farewell, and
turned again/ Back to the last of spirits whence she came.”

I let the silence fill with the faint, devastating wisps of nearly regained love and the
deeply lilted timbre of Caleb’s voice.

When I didn’t say anything, Caleb leaned back. “Well?”

I shook my head, amazed. “For there not being much pretty, you sure nailed it.”

“It’s from Orph—”

“I don’t want to know where it’s from. Just let it be.”

He hesitated. “Did you like it?”

I nodded.

“Then what’s wrong?”

“You’re too damn good for my peace of mind.”

“Good. Your mind at peace only leads to trouble, and speaking of trouble—” He lifted an
eyebrow, “I’ll be over after my shift.” Caleb tucked his head down for a kiss.

I pulled back slightly. “I’m not driving you back now?”

“No. I just wanted to say goodbye.” He let go of me for a moment, put his hands on his
hips, and puffed out his chest. “There’s still important head lifeguard duties that demand my
attention.”

“Oh!” I gasped and quivered dramatically. “A man of action and responsibility. You’ve got my knickers all in a twist.” I grabbed the front of his shirt in my fist, yanked him down, and rocked my lips hard against his. After a hot second, I pulled back, so just our leaning foreheads touched. “Take your time, Sugar. I wouldn’t want our tryst to impede your—” I lowered my voice in a cheap imitation of Marlene in *Morocco*, but without the boa I probably just sounded congested, “—other obligations.”

The boa must not have been a pivoting factor because Caleb’s eyes glinted. His hands slid around my back to urge me closer. He bit my ear and whispered, “I’ll show you what I’m obliged to do all night while we’re together and you come until the sun rises.”

Yes, I thought as the heat in Caleb’s hands flashed through me, and then I remembered my own obligation at sunset with Trev. “And I’m excited for all of that, but if you swing by my place a little later, say eight forty-five, about fifteen minutes after sunset, that would prolong and heighten the anticipation until we burst together in a fiery dance of lust.” I suppressed a groan and blazed a mental note to leave the poetry to Ovid and Caleb.

Caleb narrowed his eyes and stopped urging. “What’s happening before sunset?”

“Nothing.”

He stared at me hard, unblinking.

I sighed. “I have a Pebble Harbor date with Trev.”

Caleb closed his eyes, looking pained.

“It’s not a real date. It’s a friend date,” I hurried on, patting his chest to dampen the blow. “We’re trying to rebuild our friendship after everything that has worn it down in the past few years.”

“You mean after everything he’s done in the past few years,” Caleb said. He opened his eyes. He didn’t look angry. I wasn’t sure what he looked like, but he wasn’t angry. “He’s trying to seduce you with friendship.”

“What?”

“You haven’t yielded to his seduction attempts, so he’s giving you what he knows you want in order to get back in your good graces and under your skin and in you.”

I recoiled. “Well, that was unnecessarily explicit.”

Caleb’s arms tightened. “He’s pretending this is a friend date because he knows that’s the only way you’ll meet him.”

“Or this is actually a friend date.” I frowned. “You don’t want me to go on my Pebble Harbor friendship date because you think he’s trying to take advantage of my friendship, but you’re not angry that I’m going anyway?”

“You’re not listening. Trev is not competition. Do whatever you want with Trev.”

“What do you mean, ‘Do whatever I want with Trev?’” I huffed. “What if I—”

“You won’t,” Caleb interrupted. “Because you don’t want to.” He leaned closer, his eyes trained on my lips, and I lost my breath. “The only man you want right now is me.”

I bit my lip. “Don’t you think you’re being a bit presumptuous? It’s been a rough day. Maybe I’ve changed my mind.”

“You haven’t changed your mind,” he said, urging again.

“How do you know?” I asked, the flood of heat rising in a simmering rebound.

“Everyone knows. You look at me, and they all know.”

“They do?” I whispered. “Well, that’s embarrassing.”

“Nah.” He closed his eyes just before his lips touched mine and said, “It’s the same way I look at you.”

It’s not real, I thought. *After five days it can’t be*, but his mouth pressed light and lingering until I didn’t care about anything besides how his tongue swept so smooth beside mine and how his teeth dragged my lower lip out taught and how he groaned when I bit him back. He stepped up into Maxine, crowding me with the delicious press of his warmth.

“Tonight,” I murmured against his mouth.

“Not soon enough.” He pressed firm and insistent. “After my shift.” He eased away and flicked his tongue in a quick wet line.

I pulled away, frowning. “Not now?”

“That was an option?” he asked, looking a little mind-whacked.

I rolled my eyes, pushed him out of Maxine, and clicked on my seat belt. “Tonight.”

Caleb stumbled back petulantly. “I really do have things to finish up at Lakeside.”

I smiled slowly. I’d mussed his hair, so the left side clumped out of his ponytail in a ratty swoop. I licked my tongue slowly over my lips and blew him a kiss.

“Tonight?”

I nodded.

Caleb smile back, and it held as I slid Strawberry Shortcake home, revved Maxine, and pulled out of Lakeside’s parking lot, worlds happier than I’d imagined leaving this morning.

Eleven

I spotted Mama Margoe craning her neck over the porch swing and peering at me as I rounded the corner onto Hazen Street. She looked breathless with anticipation. As Maxine

hummed toward her— as opposed to puffed, rumbled, backfired, or chugged on the brink of death— Margoe twisted back around in her seat. When I parked, cut Maxine, and walked up the drive, she tapped a pen against her lips, completely absorbed in adjectives and verbs as she hovered over a half-finished Mad Lib, the faker.

“Hey Margoe.”

“Dear Lord!” she shouted dramatically and clutched her heart. “You know better than to sneak up on me like that. I’m liable to have a coronary.”

“Sorry,” I said, dryly. “I can’t help it now that Dean exorcised the beast from Maxine. No one gets warning when I’m about to arrive. You’re not alone.”

Margoe stubbed out her cigarette on the swing’s arm rest and sighed heavily. “Maybe you should try stomping up the steps next time. Your Jeep wasn’t the only one sneaking silently. You must be losing weight.” Margoe scrawled *teething ring* in the nouns’ blank.

I narrowed my eyes.

“You and Caleb certainly sounded like you had a wonderful evening.”

“We didn’t—”

“Don’t bother denying it,” Margoe interrupted. “Like I told Caleb this morning, I heard you—”

I groaned in mortification.

“—giggling like school children and slamming the door and squeaking your bed, so I slept downstairs before I could hear anything really exciting.”

I grimaced. “With the dust bunnies?”

She put her hands on her hips. “I’m sure that I didn’t sleep in any filthier sheets last night than you.”

“You imagine things like that, but you think I’m crass?”

“I don’t need to imagine anything. I wash your sheets.”

I frowned. “Well, I don’t know whose sheets you’re washing, but if you would have stayed in your proper bed, you would know that nothing really exciting happened. We—”

Margoe put a hand up. “Don’t. I promise not to tell anyone.” She made a zipping motion with her fingers across her lips. “Not even Harriet.”

I inhaled, about to correct her again, but I let the air seep out unused. She wouldn’t believe me any more than the rest of the town, and she’ll probably be right, if not by tonight, than in a few days anyway if I could resist that long. I tucked my hair behind my ear and thought, *If I want to resist that long.*

Margoe settled herself more firmly on the porch swing. She panned *coo* in the verb’s blank.

“Thanks, Mama Margoe. That means a lot.” *Even if the only secret you’d keep was the one that the whole town already knew*, I thought, but I tried to appreciate the sentiment anyway. “Is there a specific reason why you asked Caleb to program caller ID into our phones? Picking up the phone and saying hello to find out who’s calling really isn’t that bad.”

She shrugged. “You’re very welcome. Now, about leaving Dansbury—”

“Mar-goe,” I said, stretching out her name in warning.

She held up a hand. “I’m not going to ask you to stay. I don’t think you should stay. I do think you should come home more often though.”

“I’m home right now.”

“You know what I mean. I want visits, lunches, afternoon tea, late night cookies!” She counted out with vigorous finger chops, nearly taking out my eye on the last.

“You want me to eat cookies?” I asked skeptically.

She closed her eyes, rubbed them under her thick, burgundy and pink polka-dot specs, and opened her eyes with a sudden, calming surety. “Great grandchildren may not be in my immediate future, but after this summer, visits will be whether I have to put up with you eating cookies or not to get you here. If you want to stay with Caleb, you’ll have to—”

I shook my head, in awe about the cookies. “Not everything in life revolves around men. Whether or not I want to stay with Caleb, I want to keep in touch with you.” I knelt in front of Margoe with my arms folded on her lap. “You don’t need to Shanghai me with some boy to keep me around. You’re enough reason to visit all on your own.”

Margoe opened her mouth for a confused moment. Her face flushed. “Oh. Alright.” She placed her hand on mine.

I sandwiched our hands in a stack, moved forward in an awkward leaning crouch, and kissed her papery cheek. Her hand tightened on mine. I tightened my top hand on hers, and when I leaned away, she was smiling. She would probably agree to help me organize the basement if I asked. She wouldn’t want to refuse and risk ruining our moment even though she would rather preserve Frank in his basement room forever. If anything in the boxes was worth salvaging, I had to discover it on my own because Margoe could keep him close and only ache from his loss. The pieces of Frank that I still needed to find didn’t belong between Margoe and me, so I let our moment exist unburdened except by us.

Margoe returned to her Mad Lib when I stood. I walked into the house, plopped Olive and Popeye on the kitchen table on my way to the basement, and descended into the unfamiliar, damp, cheese-ball permeated basement. The last plank creaked and strained as I stepped down into Frank’s unfinished bedroom. Margoe hadn’t bothered to clean the boxes after they’d been

sitting on the curb Wednesday night, so in addition to dust bunnies, mold, and dry rot, the boxes now sported pavement grime and grass cuttings.

I scrounged a bucket, a ratty, blue dish rag, and soap from the back laundry room, filled the bucket with water, and sat down amid the stacks of boxes to vanquish the stains and grime. The water was cool and sudsy as I drenched the rag. I twisted the extra water back into the bucket, faced the first stack, and swiped the rag down the side of the nearest box. A streak of damp, dark brown cardboard was revealed through the dust. The water made the dust a little sludgy on either side of the streak. I shook out the rag and grimaced. Half the rag was caked brown. I dipped the rag back into the bucket water, twisted out the water and sludgy dust, and continued swiping.

Once the sides of the first stack was clean, I reached up to unstack the four boxes to clean their tops and bottoms; the dust had breaded into the cardboard's pores. I scooped the top box to the edge, balanced my hand on the box's center, heaved it off the stack, and staggered under its weight. I hadn't packed any of the boxes that heavy.

How the hell did Margoe stack this up here? I thought a moment before my fingers gave, the box slipped, and it crashed onto its side on the unyielding cement floor. The top flaps had only been tucked under each other, so the box's insides spilled out of the top next to the other boxes and under the bed. Something marble-smooth and clanky slid out along with the cheese-puff cologne, three hideous ties— worse than the brown paisley even before being soaked and stained—some blotchy jeans, a load of wire hangers— the rubber band I'd stretched around them snapped, broken and useless next to the unbroken and equally useless ties— and a leaking, red plastic gas can.

“What the hell?” I rightened the gas can before the growing puddle stained anything else and used the rag to sop up what had already spilled. Assuming this was Caleb’s siphoned gas— I refused to contemplate that I was being outsmarted by someone who would frame me with my own siphoned gas— I had probably just contaminated evidence. I rinsed out the rag in the mucky bucket water. Explaining this to Douglas without incriminating myself would be interesting especially if my prints were the only prints on the can. I stopped twisting mid-rinse, the water gleaming temptingly on the rag and looked back at the dirty gas can.

To clean or not to clean, I thought.

Kenneth Branagh had taught me three things about Hamlet: good looking men with silly triangle beards are increasingly attractive the more psychologically unstable they become, avoid relationships in which one believes avenging the dead is more important than protecting the living, and waiting may be annoying and indecisive, but acting on impulse in the heat of emotional turmoil only creates more turmoil.

If I cleaned my prints off the can, Douglas would puzzle out that I had intentionally destroyed evidence and arrest me. Caleb would probably laser me with his eyeballs, phone lines would clog with “I-told-you-so’s” and “What do you expect; she made out in public again!” and Mama Margoe would die rather than face another mid-morning gossip gathering with Harriet Carol and whoever else gets invited to those damn things, but I still really wanted to clean that can.

I shoved the ruined jeans, ties, cologne, and hangers back into the cardboard box instead and ducked under the bed to soak up any more gas that had leaked. Something flat and pointed had slid to the far wall. Crawling under the bed was probably a no no— police tend to frown upon smearing evidence and contaminating a crime scene— but I wasn’t sure if I was calling

Douglas yet anyway. I stretched out on my stomach, reached for whatever had clanked and slid out of the box, and brought it carefully out of the shadows. A thin, cylindrical, pointed rod pressed coldly into my skin as I picked it up and pulled it close to get an eyeful of the level of screwed I'd just twisted myself into, and I came face to face with a ten inch ice pick soaked in spilled gas and my freshly imprinted finger prints.

“Snickerdoodle?”

I jerked up straight and cracked my head on the bed frame. My hand squeezed into a fist on reflex, and the tip of the ice pick bit into my thumb. “Fuck.”

“I'm taking that as a yes.”

My body was completely hidden under the bed from the knees up, so I craned my neck to glare at Garrett while still sprawled on my stomach. He had hunkered down next to me and was bobbing a snickerdoodle temptingly close from a proffered hand. Keeping the anger and panic freshly churning was nearly impossible while he dimpled at me. His wispy blonde hair was waxed into a carefully spiked fohawk. I tucked one of my curls behind my ear, and my hand came away with a dust tail attached to it.

“We ate all the leftovers already?” I tried to shake the bunny off, but it clung stubbornly, its long, fluffy tail wagging airily in the wake of my frustration.

“Mom thought you might need a pick-me-up. Snickerdoodles are still your number one, right?”

I crushed the tail under my knee and yanked my hand away from its cloying disgustingness. “That's very considerate of her, but I'm doing something important at the moment.”

Garrett wiggled the cookie closer to my face. I could smell the cinnamon. “Me too,” he said. “Get out from under there, take this damn cookie because we both know it’s just a matter of how much cajoling I have to go through, and tell me about last night.”

My eyes slid left. “What about last night?”

“Fine. Have it your way.” Garrett opened his mouth and brought the cookie threateningly close.

“No! I’ll come out! I’m coming out!”

Garrett closed his mouth and offered me the cookie again, smirking, but when I turned around and emerged from under the bed like a mangy creature from the black lagoon, he lost the smirk. I swiped the cookie out of his hand while he knelt stupefied by the ice pick and my general unkemptness, sat on the floor with my back against the bed frame, and munched down on all that sugary, crumbling, cinnamon deliciousness.

Garrett raised his eyebrows.

“It’s been a confusing day.”

“I’ll bet,” Garrett said, eyeing the ice pick.

I held it up for his inspection. “My days in the free world are numbered.”

Garrett took stock of the half clean boxes, the misshapen, open box, and the leaking gas can. “Hiding evidence?”

I didn’t say anything. The snickerdoodle scraped all the way down as I swallowed.

“Because you’re typically a lot more proficient than this.”

I smiled. “Finding evidence.”

Garrett shook his head. “If you hadn’t touched it, you could have called Douglas.”

“Technically, I still could. Caleb would back me.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“No, but I’m supposed to be working on trust. He has yet to disappoint.”

Garrett stared at the ice pick, considering. “That might be, but I think you’d be setting him up to disappoint.”

I set the ice pick down next to the red plastic gas can, a row of damning siphoning, tire-slashing paraphernalia. “You know me too well.”

“Well, on a more interesting note, how did last night turn out?”

I shrugged.

“Do you want to talk about it, or did I only come over to feed you? Not that I’m opposed to feeding you. I just figured you’d want to talk.”

“You figured right.” I licked a crumb off my lip. “What have you heard?”

Garrett eyed me uncertainly for a moment before biting into his own snickerdoodle. I wondered what cookie Garrett would remember his mother by when she died. “I’ve heard a lot,” he said. “Harriet Carol is, of course, the only authority worth listening to, but according to my sources, you are doing the dirty with both Caleb and Douglas— go, you!— you’ve found time to boink Colton Deitrich between MacCallaghan sessions—”

I grimaced.

“—you’re apparently offering sexual favors for car parts— Dean is damn fly, so no foul there— you’re obviously neglecting Cecilia—”

I choked on a laugh.

“— and you’re completely cock blocking Trev.”

I shook my head in disgust. “Well, they got one thing right. Who the hell is your source? Doesn’t he care about the break ins?”

“Luke, Ryan, Evan and Isaac could probably break into Jerr-the-Gummy-Bear’s house, loot the fridge, and get out of Dodge faster than you could scope out an entry. You’re not the hottest kid on the block anymore, Patty-Cake. Isaac said it took you a good two minutes to wiggle through that side window. You’re really losing your e—”

“Isaac?” I screeched, dumbfounded. “You got this gossip from Isaac?”

Garrett blinked. “Well, Harriet Carol only said that Caleb stayed the night and ate breakfast with Mama Margoe. That’s boring compared to ménage à trois and lesbian sex triangles and jealous love affairs.”

“He saw me climbing through Jerr’s window,” I said, stunned. “I can’t believe he ratted me out.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” The darker blond of Garrett’s thick eyebrows scrunched together. “His father is the chief of police.”

“What does Douglas’ occupation have to do with anything?” I snapped.

“It’s likely that Douglas caught Isaac watching you and beat it out of him, or maybe Douglas noticed Isaac watching you and decided to take a look for himself. Or maybe—”

“Or maybe Isaac’s a rat.”

Garrett rolled his eyes. “You’re the one who’s been hanging out with him every day this past week. You know him better than I do, not that you’d listen to my judgment anyway, but before you condemn the little bugger, I’d like to point out that you’re being a bit hypocritical, my dear Watson, because your elementary is way off. Cookie?”

I shook my head, stubbornly annoyed, and I planned on staying that way.

“More for me.” He popped a snickerdoodle in his mouth whole, chewed, and swallowed before I had a chance to snatch it back. “You’re pissed at Mama Margoe for telling her friends

about your life, you're pissed at Harriet Carol for telling the town about your life, and you're pissed at Isaac for spreading rumors about your life. Did I miss anyone?"

"I'm not pissed at Margoe anymore, but you missed Trev and Cecilia."

Garrett waved my comment away. "That's a different issue. We're talking about gossip."

"I thought we were talking about being pissed and me being a hypocrite."

"We are. I just told you gossip about Isaac telling gossip, and you're pissed at him. You haven't even talked to him about it yet, and you're already tying the knot in my noose."

"That's different. You talked to him yourself."

"So because it's reliable, accurate gossip, like Harriet Carol's, it's ok? Because I was always under the assumption that you were completely anti-gossip no matter the accuracy level, but please, correct me if I'm mistaken."

I opened my mouth to let him have it, but I realized I had no 'it' to have at. He was right. I was no better than the Grand Mistress Gossip Bidy, my God.

Garrett stuffed a cookie into my gaping mouth. "I knew you were going to need that."

I bit the cookie in half. "'Ot the 'ell is 'ong wi' me?"

Garrett patted my knee. "Chew before you choke. You're stressed. Someone really is out to get you, and you're seeing boogie men in everyone. I'm not saying you should ignore Isaac's mouth, but I think you should talk to him about it before you pounce."

I swallowed. "I do not pounce."

"Like I saw you so subtly not pouncing on Cecilia today."

My anger came back in a swift rush despite reason and the placating effects of the snickerdoodle. "I so did not start that. We were due for a chat after everything that's happened."

“Yes, you were due, and she did deserve it, but you pounced all the same.” He dimpled.

“As I’m sure Caleb deserved his pounce last night.”

I crossed my arms with indignation, but the smile that crept in probably ruined the effect.

“One track mind.”

“Only on what counts. Stop avoiding the subject with talk of gossip and picking fights, and tell me that at least one of Isaac’s rumors is true.”

“Sorry to disappoint.” I laughed. “Carol Harriet’s gossip radar is uncannily accurate. Caleb was the only MacCallaghan to spend the night, and the closest he came to eating anything in my house was breakfast with Margoe.”

“Closest he came to eating anything in your house?” Garrett said, considering. “Was he close to eating something outside your house?”

I rolled my eyes. “No. That was just my attempt at clever word choice.”

“There’s nothing ‘just’ about it. Tell me what happened. In detail.”

“There’s not much to tell,” I lied. Garrett’s face smoothed into that cold, indifferent expression I knew meant he was actually getting angry with me, so I swallowed my pride with the other half of my snickerdoodle and told him the details. His face wrinkled appropriately with concern and sympathy by the end.

“I’m a ridiculous, sexless, wreck but he wants to see me again. Yay for me. What does that say about him though, eh?” I joked, but Garrett didn’t laugh.

He focused on what mattered. “When does he want to see you again? Did he say he wanted to see you again in a vague, unsure, cowardly, ‘I’d like to see you again soon’ but not actually specify—”

“He wanted to see me tonight right after his shift, but I promised Trev I’d have a Pebble Harbor date with him— which I am dying to ditch in favor of Caleb and his perceptiveness and strength and outdated jokes which, by the way, are only hilarious because they’re so rare and he has no concept of what country or time period we’re living in, but if Trev really is the gas-siphoning, tire-slashing maniac, than I should probably stay on his good side— so Caleb is coming over tonight, after my Pebble Harbor date, but he’s not happy about having to wait.

“I’ll interpret that as specific,” Garrett said mildly, and I was impressed that he’d kept up with my ramble until his eyes narrowed with that same mischievous glint I’d seen in Isaac and Caleb’s eyes. I wondered if the look was more of a male thing than a MacCallaghan thing.

“When did his abilities to perceive and his strength and hilariously not funny jokes replace his intense turquoise eyes, firm muscles, and stoic lack of humor?” he asked, blinking innocently.

I stood up. “Don’t.”

“Oh, but I do because he’s coming over tonight, and it’s going to go where it did last night unless you confront yourself about this now. You can have fun if only you’d get out of your own way.” Garrett offered me a cookie to dampen the fire.

I knocked the snickerdoodle out of his hand, and it landed on the floor, scattering a dust bunny and God knew what else.

“That was a perfectly good cookie!”

“Last night was because of Colton. I don’t know what’s going to happen tonight—”

Garrett scoffed.

“I don’t know *exactly* what’s going to happen tonight, but whatever happens, I won’t let Colton be a part of it again.”

Garrett picked up the cookie and flipped it over to examine the filth-dipped side. “You can’t even say it.”

“Yeah, Freud would have a field day, but he flushed his one solid theory because of social pressures and the advice of a child molester. No one’s putting stock in him these days.”

“Repeat after me: I will probably have sex tonight.”

I rolled my eyes.

“See? If you can’t even say it, you’ll never be able to do it. You’ll be a sexless wreck for the rest of your life.”

I heaved a tortured sigh. “Alright.” I swallowed. “I might have sex tonight.”

“Again. And try not to sound like Misty ‘Miss Question’ when you say it.”

“She is surprisingly confident these days. Did you know that she—”

“Again.”

I huffed. “I will probably have sex tonight.”

“Good job. Now there’s actually hope.” Garrett blew on the cookie, shrugged, and offered it to me.

“Ew!”

“It’s still a good cookie.”

“It’s been on the floor,” I said, ducking away as he tried to peg me with it.

“So have you.”

I patted at my rear, cringing. “Yeah, but no one’s trying to eat me.”

“Sure he is.”

I laughed. “Maybe, but he’s blinded by lust. I am not eating that thing, so get it away from me.”

Garrett stuck half the cookie in his mouth. “Not even if we share it?” His smooth lips moved around the flaky baking cracks, sugar, dust particles, and cinnamon as he spoke.

I hesitated, glancing to the side to avoid his lips and his teasing, confident eyes and the temptation of cookie flavored Garrett. I opened my mouth, closed it, opened it again and infused my voice with as much light as I could muster as I faced him. “Your saliva doesn’t disinfect the dust.”

He didn’t say anything. He didn’t move, but his eyes weren’t sure anymore.

“The amoebas that fester on that floor are in your mouth, you know.”

I tried to pitch my voice in mock disgust, but it sounded forced and embarrassed and strange. He took the cookie out of his mouth and stared, serious but not indifferent, and I felt a rush of urgent confession sweep over me.

“This isn’t about saliva or amoebas,” I whispered.

“I know, but it’s okay. Falling in love with him doesn’t change what we have. You don’t count.”

I took a deep breath. “I don’t count for you, but you always count for me.”

He stared for a moment, blinking in confusion. His face suddenly went slack. “I was a hard miss?”

I looked away.

“I’m in the same category as Phil Carol and Colton Dietrich?” His eyes widened in horror.

I shook my head rigorously. “No! God, no. Well, yes, but it doesn’t even compare. This has nothing to do with my misses-to-kisses ratio and everything to do with loyalty. I don’t want to mess up whatever might happen between Caleb and me. I’m sorry.”

“How did I not realize this? I always knew how you felt, but we always share cookies. I never really thought—” he shook his head and looked down at the soggy, dust matted cookie in his hand. “I don’t know what I thought.”

“Sure you did because I thought the same thing. You like me and you like sharing cookies and it shouldn’t be something you had to think about.”

“I was just having fun, but you—” Garrett closed his eyes. “I’m sorry I teased you like that. We’ve been sharing cookies for years, my God.”

“I’m not sorry.”

Garrett wouldn’t look at me.

I clenched my hands into fists, but I thought of Garrett walking me home from Cecilia’s Monday night and Garrett falling through my back porch and Garrett bearing my favorite cookies when he knew the kind of day I must have had and him doing all of that without once getting in a snit. *This is not him leaving. He’s stuck through worse*, I thought, and my fists relaxed. I refused to push him away because he’d let me for my sake. Never again. “Nothing’s going to change.”

He glanced up, incredulous. “You think nothing’s changed?”

“Besides sharing cookies, no. I can’t share cookies with you anymore because for me they count, and I’m solo counting with Caleb right now, as far as I’m concerned.”

Garrett smiled ruefully. “I’m sure it’s as far as he’s concerned too. Harriet Carol would have been all over that news.”

I nodded, accepting the undeniable truth of Harriet Carol’s secondhand testimony. “But you and I are more than just sharing cookies.” I grabbed the ravaged snickerdoodle, not quite believing I was even touching it let alone about to eat it, focused my eyes on Garrett instead of

the unmentionables mingling with the sugar and cinnamon, and took a healthy bite. He was right; the cookie was still damn good. It just had a little grit on the bottom. I chewed and swallowed and didn't even gag: chocolate cake with sprinkles and icing and a syrup-drizzled Caleb for me. "We're about fulfilling cookie destinies too."

Garrett's gaze snapped up to mine, wide-eyed for a moment before smiling. "That we are."

I offered him the other half of the snickerdoodle. His dimples deepened as he took the cookie and ate the rest of it.

"Now that we've reaffirmed our deep and long-lasting friendship and are about to contract some horrible, mangy, basement dust bunny disease, I say we blow this popsicle stand and enjoy the last rays of the sun and my dwindling emotional stability before I meet Trev." I shoved the ice pick and gas can under the bed to deal with later, stacked the box easily on top of the other three now that its weight was back to normal, and walked toward the basement steps.

Garrett followed, his steps enunciated by the rhythmic rustle of snickerdoodles sliding against other snickerdoodles within the walls of their plastic container as they jostled. "I thought you were doing something important at this popsicle stand."

I hopped up the steps. "The boxes and evidence can wait until I return. My emotional stability can not."

"Why should sun set affect your emotional stability?"

I stopped on the steps and turned to pin a glare on Garrett. His expression remained innocently curious. I rolled my eyes. "We've hashed my relationship with Caleb and my relationship with you. I think that's enough hashing for my side of the conversation. How about

you recant whether or not Joe Cummings upholds his Greek god physique in bed, and I'll eat another snickerdoodle?"

Garrett sighed the gusty, wistful sigh of the thoroughly ravished and dove into the wonderfully gory details while we sat next to Popeye and Olive at the kitchen table. I pounded down the rest of the snickerdoodles and listened, fascinated. I thought of regaining emotional stability by reenacting some of Garrett's uninhibited craziness with Caleb after Pebble Harbor, and my stomach fluttered.

"I'm glad you two hit it off so well," I said, impressed with myself that I truly was.

Garrett smiled back. "I'm glad you finally asked about him." He stood and walked to the door. "I'll leave you to get the dust bunnies out of your hair before your date."

I touched the top of my head. Grit and clumps sprinkled my hair. I flinched. "Thank your mom for the cookies for me."

"I always do. Adios, chica," he said, and the screen door rattled shut behind him.

I watched Garrett step gingerly over the porch in anticipation of falling through. He made it off safely this time, and I chuckled. At least this one could withstand a max of one forty-five without buckling. As long as five extra pounds doesn't exceed its limit, I should make it over safely too. All bets were off when Caleb and his extraordinary league of muscles crossed the threshold though.

Twenty minutes later, I'd taken a shower, washed my hair thrice, threw on a pair of green-and-pink plaid shorts and a white baby-tee, and was staring at my hair in frustration. I'd attempted to French braid it out of my face, but my layers were still too short to stay tucked in. When I Dutch-braided my bangs to the side, the rest just looked poufy and clownish. I ran my

fingers through the braids in defeat, crimped defrizzer into my hair in the endless, futile battle to tame curls, and let my hair air dry like always.

The sun was waning over the mountains as I left the house. I skirted around the Garrett-sized hole in the back porch— shoot, I still needed to call someone with lumber about that— and ambled up the dike toward Pebble Harbor. I tried to look forward to Trev and brownies, but my stomach flutter for tonight clouded everything else.

When I rounded the last curve and Pebble Harbor came into view, Trev’s yellow, Brazil soccer jersey— outside-in this time— wasn’t the only distinctive shirt I made out as I hustled down the dike. Isaac stood next to him, his arms crossed over the gleaming horseshoe and angry, skewered skull of a gray .38 Special t-shirt. Trev smiled hesitantly at me, probably confident in the knowledge that the Tupperware of brownies in his hands would potentially seduce me or at least mellow my temper— a waste of an hour of baking either way— but his eyes kept glancing cautiously at Isaac as if he expected Isaac to go berserk and knife him. Isaac was a gutsy kid, and although he certainly seemed irritated enough to whip out a switchblade, Trev wouldn’t be the one getting shanked. Isaac’s hard, inherited, sniper glare was aimed at me.

“I see you’ve developed an appreciation for Eighties rock. Cake for me,” I said when I reached the pebbles.

“Cake for your da. It’s his music, not yours, but then, you’re used to saying things you don’t actually mean.”

Trev opened his mouth, but I hedged him off by saying, “Someone put on their grumpy pants this morning.”

“I didn’t put them on until this afternoon, after I waited a few hours for you to show up like you always do. We had a deal.”

I shook my head. “The deal’s off.”

“It’s the end of the week, and I didn’t break one pool rule. I get one of your cigs.” Isaac’s glower remained unwavering. “I waited all afternoon, but you never showed.”

“One of *your* cigs?” Trev asked, zoning in on me.

I ignored Trev, but I was starting to feel the heat with four agitated, male eyes boring down on me. “You spread rumors about me sleeping with your dad, your uncle, Colton, and Cecilia, and you think you deserve a cig?”

“The cigs have nothing to do with rumors.”

I crossed my arms. “You’re lying and spreading rumors and not being a good friend. I’m not in a very giving mood at the moment.”

“You don’t have any to give,” Trev insisted.

Isaac’s sharp cockiness suddenly turned serious. Even Trev shut up despite being invisible in the conversation. “Is that why you didn’t come to hang out today, because ‘you’re not in the mood’?”

“I didn’t hang out with you today because I still have an entire life’s worth of leftovers collecting dust bunnies in my grandmother’s basement. I don’t have time to escape to Pebble Harbor every day.”

“You always have boxes in your basement! That’s why you come to Pebble Harbor, to get away from the boxes.” Isaac raked his gaze over me, looking disgusted. “Uncle Caleb thinks you’re so smart and ballsy and goofy and sexy with your wild hair and those thighs, and I wait for you here for hours, thinking that he’s never going to be the same, just like Dad. I thought—” Isaac’s voice trailed off. His lips pressed together in a straight, unmovable line.

“You thought what?” I prompted.

“I just thought you were coming today.” Isaac jerked his thumb at Trev. “Instead, I get this bozo compensating with pathetic, icingless brownies.” He spared a reluctant glance at Trev. “Even I know that if you want a prayer at having at Patty-Cake you need icing, dumbass.”

Trev stepped closer, using the brownie Tupperware as a shield as he turned toward Isaac. “Watch it.”

“No one is ‘having at me,’ icing or no icing,” I said, truly annoyed.

“Don’t act all offended,” Isaac spat at me. “Everyone knows you’re having at Colton.”

“I am especially not having at Colton. I’m not having at anyone!” I said and automatically thought, *yet*, until the ‘everyone’ sunk in, and I froze. With Isaac blabbing this nonsense to everyone and their grandmother— dear God— Caleb probably ‘knew’ who I was ‘having at’ too. Margoe was going to Norman Bates me with her Mad Lib pen.

“Now who’s lying?”

“I’m not lying, Isaac. I pinky swear.”

Isaac sneered. “Harriet Carol said you were.”

I laughed. “Bullshit.”

Isaac stared, unmoved.

“You started that rumor,” I said, and when Isaac didn’t respond, I nudged Trev’s shoulder. “Isaac started the rumor that I’m having sex with Colton, right?”

Trev glanced over his shoulder at me. He hesitated. “Rumors are just rumors, Patty. I don’t care what most people say anyway.”

“Harriet Carol started the rumor that I am currently having sex with Colton Dietrich?”

Trev’s mouth opened, but he didn’t say anything.

“Did she say the other stuff about Douglas and Cecilia too?” I whispered, shocked.

“Of course not,” Trev scoffed. “Harriet Carol wouldn’t spread rumors that weren’t true.”

I stared at Trev.

His eyes dropped down to the pebbles.

Isaac smirked. “Harriet Carol doesn’t get props on that one. The rumors about Cecilia and my da were all me.”

“Because you were mad at me about Colton.” I said.

His face scrunched in disgust. “I don’t care what you do with Colton. You were supposed to be here. The last time you were late—” Isaac cut himself off. He looked away.

Ah ha. The anger swept away with sudden understanding. “You thought something had happened to me again, like the car accident, but when Trev showed up instead of me, you knew I was fine. I just wasn’t coming.”

He still wouldn’t look at me.

“I’m sorry, Isaac. I should have told you that I was busy. I didn’t mean for you to worry.”

“But you’re here now.”

I frowned, confused.

“You were so busy before you couldn’t escape to Pebble Harbor to hang out with me, but you have time now for icingless brownies.”

“I, um—” *I forgot*, I thought. “I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have worried. Next time—”

Isaac finally looked at me with his cold, unmovable stare. He nodded. “Next time I won’t worry.”

He turned away and started up the dike.

I moved to chase after him, but Trev cut me off. He opened the Tupperware container, offering me a brownie. “Kids,” he said, shaking his head.

My stomach churned. “No thanks, Trev. I’m kind of full.” I said, warding the Tupperware away gently.

Trev frowned. “You’re full?”

“There are other more important topics of conversation occurring at the moment than my stomach capacity.” I side-stepped Trev to catch up with Isaac before he rounded over the dike. Trev backed a step and blocked me again.

“Garrett stuffed you full of cookies before you came, didn’t he?”

I rubbed my temple to stave off the coming anger.

“He’s always between us. He’s deliberately sabotaging us, so we—”

“There is no us,” I said as rationally as I could muster. Trev’s knuckles turned white as he clenched the neglected, naked brownies. I focused on breathing and keeping my voice gentle. “We are friends. There is nothing to sabotage or come between or take from us because people can have more than one friend. That’s allowed.”

“Of course that’s allowed,” Trev said, sounding impatient. “But you were never just a friend to Garrett.”

“You don’t understand,” I said, trying to keep my breath from catching. “because even when I used to want Garrett more than anything, I knew he didn’t want me, and I respected that. I didn’t beg for him to reconsider. I just let him be, but you’re always pushing. Even this charade of rekindling our friendship is just another attempt at you pushing me into something more serious. We’re not even really in each other’s lives anymore. We see each other over the summer, we lifeguard together when you decide to show up, and we catch up when we can, but our friendship is more about convenience than a staple in life.”

“I want our relationship to be more than convenient. I want to be a staple in your life like I used to be.”

“But I don’t.” The words dragged out stilted and reluctant, but they were necessary. I touched his cheek. “You’re like a breeze that comes, unexpected but welcome— you’re always welcome Trevor— and always fleeting.”

“If you would just give me another chance, I could—”

“You don’t need another chance. There’s nothing to redo or fix or improve. I’m sorry Trev, but I don’t want to be with you.”

“You’re giving Colton another chance even though he raped you,” Trev said, furious.

I breathed, and behind us, the creek flowed effortlessly around the pebbles and boulders and hanging limbs diverting its current. I let my hand drop away from his face and back to my side.

“I’ve been there for you all our lives,” Trev said when I didn’t respond. “When you ask me to back your ridiculous Nancy Drew expeditions, I’m there. When you ask me to keep your secrets and your ass out of jail, I do even when you drag me down with those schemes and lies and I take the rap. After all this time, after all I’ve gone through, after everything, I deserve a chance too.”

“He wasn’t the person I had expected. I made a mistake, and I never saw him again. There’s a difference.”

Trev frowned for a confused moment before his eyes suddenly widened, and he realized he was six feet under. “No. I didn’t mean it like that. He, I just,—” He sighed harshly in frustration. “We were different together. You actually liked me, and I don’t know how to get that back.”

I looked at Trev and the jealous hopelessness in his hands as he still held the Tupperware lid off, half hoping I'd relent and take a brownie anyway even though he knew I didn't really want one.

"Stop trying," I whispered. "You cling to me so tightly I can't breathe."

My chest ached, but when I turned around and walked away, I didn't have to swallow and snuffle back the tears. The burning well didn't overflow. Trev could keep the part he'd wrenched from me and twist it and stab it and bleed it all he wanted. It was his to do with it as he wished, and I refused to miss it anymore.

Twelve

By the time I crested the dike, Isaac was gone. I thought about walking to his house and attempting to smooth everything over, but Douglas and Caleb would probably be there too. The rumors and our fight and my feelings about all of it were still too raw to deal with the three of them simultaneously, so I trudged back to my house feeling like a heel. Trev let me go without foisting any more uniced brownies at me. I don't know if he'd have the balls to regroup for a counter strike, but there'd be no more consensual Pebble Harbor dates from my end. As much as it burned to admit, Caleb's theory about seducing me with friendship had been right, the perceptive jerk, so when Isaac's rumors snipped our tryst in the bud, I wouldn't even have a minute or an irrelevant soap box to stand on.

When I got back to my house, Margoe had returned from the rumor forge surprisingly unfazed, and she cloistered herself in the basement again, "For tonight," she had said with a wink. My heart clamped. Caleb wasn't going to show. With Isaac on the rumor rampage, I'd have a better chance of having sex with Garrett than I would have of luring Caleb back. *I've only*

known him five days, I thought, chiding myself, but I felt the hopes Garrett had bolstered wilt. Despite how long I'd known him, losing what might have been still hurt.

At least I had other, less thrilling, more potentially devastating matters to distract myself from the gloom of disappointment. I yanked my hair back into a ponytail, changed into black, jean shorts, a plain black baby tee, and Pumas. I paced in front of my bed as I flipped open my cell to call the Dougherty house.

"Hello, dear." Mrs. Dougherty's voice was filled with strained cheer.

"It's alright, Mrs. Dougherty. You don't have to pretend. I know what people are saying about me."

"Oh, it's awful!" she shrieked. I angled the phone away from my ear. "I don't know what has gotten into Harriet Carol these days, but some things are personal and should not be discussed, I don't care how true they are."

"Actually, I—"

"Whatever you do in your private life, Patricia, is no business of hers, and frankly, she should be congratulating you on your good taste. That daughter of hers rustled up a whole heck of a lot more trouble seven years ago with your father if you don't mind me saying so."

I shook my head. "Not at all, but I—"

"You, on the other hand, rounded up available men, every one of them. Except for Colton, of course, but being in a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship doesn't have the sanctity of marriage, which Susan Carol *defiled*, and Harriet Carol didn't have one word to say about that."

Mrs. Dougherty spat "defiled" with trembling, righteous rage, and I struggled not to remind her that my mother had died years before Susan defiled anything. "Colton's available. He broke up with Jackie Sunday night, not that I—"

“Oh, no dear! Did Colton tell you that? That boy was always a lousy, no good womanizer, I don’t care if the late Mrs. Deitrich was president of the PTA for sixteen years or not. He gets it from his father. The newest Mrs. Deitrich came about a little too quick for comfort if you ask me. Probably had her on the side for years before the late Mrs. Deitrich passed away, rest her poor soul. The PTA hasn’t been run correctly ever since. If Mrs. Lewis doesn’t get her act together soon, I just don’t know how we can continue.”

I frowned. “So Colton didn’t break up with Jackie?”

“He most *certainly* did *not* break up with Jackie,” Mrs. Dougherty said, sounding scandalized. “Mrs. Webber saw them at Russiani Car Repair just yesterday holding hands, acting smoochy and fake if you ask me, but they then were always that kind of couple who displays an uncomfortable amount of public affection. You and that Jehiel Moyer would have given those two a run for their money, I’d say, but that was years and years ago when you were in high school and didn’t know any better. Thank the Lord that family moved to New York. Let the city have them.”

“He was beat at home by his dad. He was beat at school by that snot-head Bruno—”

“Officer Lewis always was more brawn than brains.”

“—and when he started lifting weights and joined the football team and finally didn’t take shit from anyone—”

“Language, dear.”

“— he broke his arm, had to have surgery, and couldn’t sculpt for an entire year.”

“And that’s why making out with him under the bleachers for the entire third quarter was forgivable, dear. Colton and Jackie, however, are adults, and it’s just unseemly. A few weeks

ago, your own grandmother saw them at Weidman's Gardening and Gazebos and you would not believe..."

Why the hell did I think Colton had given Jackie the boot? I thought as Mrs. Dougherty continued ranting. *Cecilia*. I sat heavily on the edge of my bed.

"...not that kissing in public should be completely banned, but some reservation, by God."

"Mrs. Dougherty, I have to get going, but I have a quick question."

"Anything, dear."

"Is Cecilia home? She won't answer my calls."

"I did hear that the two of you had a bit of a spat. You normally get along so well; I was surprised when Mrs. Webber told me about it. I'm sure once you talk things over, everything will go right back to normal."

"I hope so. Could I talk to her now?"

"Sure thing, dear. *Cecilia!*" She shouted, not bothering to cover the receiver, and I jerked the phone away from my ear again. "Cecilia?"

Mr. Dougherty grumbled in the background.

"She never told me that," Mrs. Dougherty snapped.

Mr. Dougherty grumbled for a good minute as Mrs. Dougherty's breath quickened to near pants over the receiver. "Well I never! When she gets home she will have some explaining to do!"

I stifled a laugh. *Lucy, you have some s'plaining to do.*

Mr. Dougherty grumbled faster this time.

“I don’t care. She needs to tell *me*. You know she’s not aloud to leave the house when she’s punished! Patricia?”

“Yes, I’m still here, Mrs. Dougherty,” I said, my voice starting to hitch and wiggle.

“I’m sorry, dear, but Cecilia’s not home at the moment. Maybe you could try again tomorrow. I’m sure she’ll be back from wherever she is by then,” she said, the ‘or else’ clear in her voice.

“Thank you, Mrs. Dougherty. Have a good night.”

I flipped shut my cell phone. Maybe Cecilia had truly thought Colton had broken up with Jackie— which seemed unlikely to have that kind of misinformation while living with Mrs. Dougherty, but Cecilia didn’t communicate with her mother as well as Mrs. Dougherty probably thought they did. Still, odds were not in Cecilia’s favor. Even if she had deliberately lied about Colton and Jackie’s relationship, she’d lied before our fight, before she’d ditched me at Jerr’s, before she’d sliced my leg open with the fence, before all of it except for the STD harassment note under Maxine’s windshield wiper.

No, I thought, but my body felt numb anyway. I took a deep breath, shoved my phone and house key in my pocket, and stood up to prove myself wrong for the both of us.

Walking to Cecilia’s house would normally only take five minutes, but after our phone conversation, Mrs. Dougherty’s binocular surveillance would probably rival Douglas’. I’d have to take the long way, a solid fifteen minutes without any hiccups. After some of junior high and all four years of high school spent sneaking home from Hollander Road after a night of sharing our parents’ booze or sneaking home from Pebble Harbor after a night of shared cigarettes, and that one Tuesday afternoon of sneaking home from Cecilia’s after stumbling half blind into

Cecilia's from Colton's, I knew that being invisible when sneaking was more important than breaking records.

I caught myself writing Mama Margoe a sticky note just in case she woke up and wondered why I wasn't having sex in my room with Caleb, but I got up to *Caleb is probably permanently turned off by my rumored slutness anyway, so adding another B and E to my resume of sins won't damage our relationship* when I realized that this was not a diary entry and Margoe was not Mrs. Dougherty— thank God. I ripped off the sticky note, crumbled it, tossed it in the trash, wrote *Went for a walk* on the next sticky, and slapped it on the kitchen table, the postal service of home communication.

I took my pack of Blacks and the Rolling Stones lighter along for the adventure. I felt a pang of guilt at that because of how badly I'd handled everything with Isaac, but I'd need the nicotine if I found what I suspected in Cecilia's diary.

The sun had completely set by the time I rushed out the back door, skirted around Garrett's hole, and climbed over the dike to the other side. Crickets chirped and Cicadas rattled over the smooth, sandpaper flow of the creek. I walked parallel to Hazen St. sandwiched by the steady flow of the creek on my left and the rise of grassy dike on my right. The dike would block Douglas from spotting me as I crept past the MacCallaghan house, but it also blocked the streetlights, so I flicked the lighter to flame to better navigate over loose gravel and deep mud patches. A flashlight would have been easier, but Douglas might notice its beam even from over the dike.

I reached Pebble Harbor. The stones were more cumbersome than usual because the bottoms of my Pumas were slick with caked mud. My left foot slipped and jammed in a mud pocket. I grimaced— my poor pumas— curled my toes to keep my sneaker from suctioning into

the mud, and yanked my foot out with a wet pop. My left foot slipped easier than my right on the rest of the rocks as I left Pebble Harbor. I could just make out the tip of the MacCallaghans' tan, shingled two-level over the grassy dike as I passed. I tried to walk under the background noise of the night, but my left sneaker was wheezing and the crackle-crunch of gravel under my step echoed downstream.

The mossy, fish smell of the creek warred with someone's grill. I pictured Isaac armed with a spatula, flipping burgers. The charcoal smell mixed with the fish smell and made my stomach churn. I upped my pace despite the squeaking and crunching, but my heart still pounded against my chest until the bend in the dike blocked my view of their shingles.

The stones and mud and sediment gradually turned into boulders, and the creek's meandering flow swirled and foamed in what would be rapids if it ever rained. At the moment, the would-be rapids were barely lumps in the water. I could probably make out the boulders underneath if the sun was up, and if I could see anything beyond the five-foot radius from the Zippo. The trees on the other side of the dike began to thicken as the woods fought against rural development, so I climbed up the dike. I peeked over the top to get a bearing on how far I'd walked.

I'd overshot Garrett and Cecilia's backyard by twenty-five to thirty meters, but I hadn't walked all the way into deep woods yet. I could just make out her screened-in sun porch and gabled roof dormers backlit by Garrett's garage light through the oaks.

I squatted with my back leaning against the dike, snapped the Zippo closed, dug my phone out of my shorts' pocket, and called Garrett. I drummed my fingers on my knee as his cell rang.

“Hello, this is Garrett's—”

“Finally. Listen, you need to turn off—”

—“cell. Please leave your name, number, and a brief—”

I jabbed the end button and dialed again.

On my fourth redial, Garrett answered. “You had better be dying again,” he growled.

“Negative, but you can significantly reduce the risk of imminent death by turning off your garage light.”

He paused. “I can’t do that.”

I frowned. “Are you home?”

“Yes,” he said on a sigh.

“Then you can.”

“I *can’t*.” Garrett sounded torn. “Mrs. Dougherty asked us to put them on. She’s on the hunt for Cecilia again. I heard you released the hounds. Way to go.”

“Bully for her. If she’s off doing what I think she’s doing, then I hope the hounds find her oil-handed and rip her to shreds.”

“Uh. Has there been—” he hesitated, “—new developments?”

“Yes, but I don’t have time to tell you everything right now. I’ll debrief you later. Just shut off your garage light for five minutes, and keep it off for at least fifteen.”

A rustling shuffle moved in the background. Garrett didn’t answer me.

“Hello?”

“Uh,” he breathed.

“Garrett!” I whispered shrieked. “This is no time for distractions! Is Joe Cummings there with you?”

“Kind of.”

I rolled my eyes. “Tell him to take a two second break, and turn off the damn garage lights!

“Alright. Alright. One undercover light dousing coming up.”

I flipped my cell closed, turned on all fours to peek over the dike, and waited.

Two minutes later, the woods disappeared into sudden darkness. I vaulted over the dike, shuffled down the other side, and ran on its base next to the woods toward Cecilia’s back yard. The trees tapered, and I hid behind one of the closest that lined the border between her yard and the woods. Mrs. Dougherty had done a little landscaping this past spring. The trellis was still propped against the right side of the awning closest to Cecilia’s dormer window, but instead of planting an army of tightly lined pansies next to the trellis— their disgruntled, old man faces upturned at the trellis with distain as it blocked their sun for part of the day— Mrs. Dougherty had spiced up the bed with three neatly trimmed, obviously stunted lilac bushes. An Aesop Fable-themed wreath hung on her back door.

The lights inside the house were off, but I could just make out Mr. Dougherty’s feet propped up on his chair in the living room from the glow of the television. The rest of him was blocked by the wall. I glanced over in Garrett’s house. Mrs. Webber was talking animatedly on the phone in her kitchen, which meant Mrs. Dougherty was probably in her kitchen, harassing Mrs. Webber for turning off her garage light, which also meant that as long as the receiver was against her ear, Mrs. Dougherty couldn’t reach the foyer to look out her back window.

I walked briskly through the backyard, careful to avoid stray twigs, and climbed up the ivy trellis onto the slatted, aluminum awning. The awning wasn’t very steep, but its slates were difficult to find traction on especially since my Pumas were slicked with mud. I slid my feet on the awning slowly, hoping the Doughertys wouldn’t be able to hear anything over their TV. I

reached the rough shingles of the roof, my cell vibrated, and Garrett's garage light flashed on before I could get into the house.

I froze. *That was not fifteen minutes, Garrett,* I thought. Mrs. Webber wouldn't be able to see me any clearer if she had caught me in her headlights. My heart beat drummed through my ears. I held my breath, gently knocked Cecilia's window screen onto her fuzzy bedroom carpet, and ducked into her room. I pressed against the corner wall of the dormer and focused on breathing instead of gasping. After a few minutes, when no one stormed into the room to throw me back out the window, I flipped open my phone to read the text.

Get in now.

I typed: *A little late, but no foul. Give me ten minutes and douse the light again.*

I eased my cell shut, stood, and scanned for Cecilia's work bag, a Vera Bradley look alike that Margoe had sewn for her last Christmas. It hung over her bed post where she'd hung it all year in our dorm room. I roll-stepped to her bed slowly and opened it: pocket mask, tissues, chapstick, sun lotion, half-empty Nalgene bottle, three Durex packets, and a box of mini Tampax. Cecilia had hemmed the split lining and sewn a thin strip of Velcro under the flap, so it lay flush against the bag's side as it should. It took me a moment to notice the faint seam in the fabric, and I knew where to look. Mrs. Dougherty might not find it by the end of the summer, but knowing Mrs. Dougherty, she would eventually.

I slid my index finger between the rough and fuzzy strips of Velcro, holding the bag closed with my knees to muffle to noise. Cecilia's diary was slightly larger than my palm and slid easily out of her makeshift pocket. I roll-stepped back to the corner wall of the dormer to crouch in the beam of Garrett's garage light, bit my lip, and flipped to the day she left me to break into Jerr's alone.

Wednesday, June 4, 2008

Karen went ballistic when she saw how little Smirnoff was left in the cabinet. She never drinks it anyway, so I don't understand why I'm on dishwashing duty for two weeks straight when it would have just gone bad anyway. Patty-Cake only had three. She probably could have packed down three more if Garrett wasn't such a buzz kill. He was too concerned about getting Patty-Cake home safely to have anything but coffee. If Sunday night hadn't been such a shit show, the three of us could have actually enjoyed the night together, but since the party, it's been harder and harder to face them. I can't imagine Colton caring for me the way Garrett cares for Patty-Cake. He doesn't care about any of us.

I stopped reading. I stared at the two pages of cursive and curlicues, not wanting to believe she was doing something besides siphoning and tire slashing, something infinitely worse, so I wasted a full minute staring at his name until I gathered the balls to flip back to the night of the party.

Sunday July 2, 2008

I lasted three hours before getting punished. I didn't separate my whites from my colors, and Karen had a conniption. It's my laundry. She shouldn't give a shit, but now I'll be doing everyone's laundry for weeks. Patty-Cake agreed to go out like I knew she would, and it's a good thing because I couldn't take this damn house another hour without going berserk. Garrett wanted to reunite with Joe

Cummings anyway, so we crashed Trev's party, not that Trev would ever mind Patty crashing something of his. Garrett went gaga over Joe and abandoned us almost instantly. It was mostly Patty and I shooting shots and the breeze until Colton got a break from behind the bar. The stars had smattered the night sky in bright swirls, and Colton's hand was so firm and warm as he'd tugged me into Maxine, and I was so drunk, I thought that maybe Patty had been mistaken. He had been her first, she'd had nothing else to compare it to, and maybe he just hadn't known she was a virgin. Then he'd gripped my neck in his firm hand and shoved my head down, and I knew that first time or not, whether he'd known or not, it wouldn't have mattered. I promised myself that it would just be once in the Jeep, but when we got back to my place, he pinned me against the dining room accent wall after a lazy, "Heya there Cee." His hand ripped at my panties, and I couldn't say no. He'd pushed so deep, I could feel myself tear and ache behind my belly button. No one has ever wanted me like that before. Garrett doesn't even want women. He doesn't even want Patty-Cake, but he never offers to share cookies with me. Colton doesn't know how to share either, but at least he doesn't share with anyone. I wouldn't be surprised if Garrett shared with—

The garage light flicked off. I only had the time it took for Mrs. Webber to notice the lights were off again to replace Cecilia's diary, crawl out the window, scale down the trellis, and high-tail it to the tree line, but I stared at the blackened diary-shaped blob on my lap, immobile. I traced the edges of the paper. They were flimsy and thin. I skimmed my fingertips over Sunday's entry, and I flipped three pages forward to Wednesday where his name was written just once.

My front pocket vibrated, and I twitched back to reality. I pulled out my cell as I stood.

I don't see you leaving. You are good but not invisible. Exit. Now.

I left the diary on Cecilia's bed in plain sight— served her right— shoved my cell back in my pocket, lifted my leg out the window onto the roof straddling the sill, and pulled myself out of her room. Climbing from the roof was more difficult than climbing up because the drop always looked higher from the awning than it did from the ground. The ivy trellis wasn't the most stable piece of garden decoration to monkey around on to begin with, let alone in the dark with a blind landing and a time limit. I crab-walked to the edge of the roof. The loose shingle debris embedded in my palms, and I took care not to knock over the spouting as I crawled over it onto the awning.

My cell vibrated.

I pushed off the roof and slid down the aluminum awning on my ass. Forgoing the trellis, I hooked my fingers into the slated strips of aluminum. Their edges bit into my fingers as I slid off the awning. I'd planned on hanging for a second and dropping to my feet, but I didn't have much of a grip. My fingers slipped. The free fall lasted only long enough for me to think, *fail*, before the I hit hard on my back. The ground punched the air out of my lungs.

The garage light clicked on.

I rolled under the lilac bushes, too stunned to attempt to stand. I scraped air back into my chest. It felt tight and shaky and wrong to breathe. I fought not to cough, and tears spurted up, dampening the limp curls that had fallen out of my ponytail onto my cheeks. The dirt was cool and fluffed from being freshly turned, although considerably more packed now that I was rolling around on it. That would be a potential problem when Mrs. Dougherty noticed, which she undoubtedly would, except she'd also undoubtedly blame Cecilia, so assuming Douglas doesn't

stick his nose under Mrs. Dougherty's lilac bushes— not the most sure fire bet I'd ever risked—the dirt imprints wouldn't be my undoing. The clatter I'd made with my dive off the roof might be though.

I strained to listen for the released spring of Mr. Dougherty's easy recliner, his heavy footsteps on the living room carpet, Mrs. Dougherty's clip-clapping on the kitchen's hardwood, her politely agitated voice, or the screen door rattling open, but I didn't hear anything besides my hushed, labored breathing, insect chatter, and the crunch and rustle of leaves. My neck ached, and a pounding headache started at the back of my skull. I squirmed into a crouching position and peeked through the lilac's branches and leaves at the stretch of back yard between the woods and me. Maybe I could risk a forty-yard sprint to the treeline while the garage light was still blaring. Maybe Mrs. Dougherty wouldn't notice.

What's the worst that could happen? I thought. Then I realized I was rationalizing getting arrested and Margoe's subsequent social exile. I flipped open my cell phone to text Garrett. A message was already waiting for me from a few minutes ago.

I can't hold her off any longer. Jump ship and run already.

I wrote back. *You need to give more than a one-second warning.*

The screen flashed a moment later. *You're lucky I was able to warn you at all. Are you out?*

Barely. I typed. *I didn't make it past the lilacs. Douse the lights.*

They'll know something's fishy for sure if I do. Mom's giving me the hairy eyeball as it is.

I bit my lip. *Do it anyway. I need some cover.*

Just run for the dike. I give it sixty: forty you make it.

I rolled my eyes. *That's sloppy. Douglas and Mrs. Dougherty are staking out the neighborhood with binoculars and desperation. Either of them would squeeze a squirrel if they thought it would squeal. I need to be smart, not quick.*

A minute passed, and Garrett wrote: *Good luck with that.*

I eased my phone shut and stuffed it back in my pocket. A straight run from the bushes to the treeline would be suicide; every sun-browned, dehydrated blade of grass was highlighted in bold relief from the garage light. I might as well run through a mine field. A direct line to the dike, on the other hand, was partly dimmed by the shadow of Cecilia's house. The light cut into the house's shadow at the hump of the dike, but if I stayed low, Douglas probably wouldn't notice me from his house. Mrs. Dougherty might, but unless I planned to sleep in the flower bed until the Doughertys' left for work, I risked them seeing me no matter which direction I ran.

I retied my ponytail, took a deep, full breath, and army-crawled into the kill zone toward the dike. The grass was colder on my bare forearms than the dirt. Goosebumps tightened over my arms and legs as I inched steadily toward the dike. I clenched my teeth against the headache and the cold, but by the time I reached the shadow's edge, my head throbbed through my temples and down my neck. I stuck my tongue between my teeth to keep them from clanking together.

The space between the end of the house's shadow and over the hump into the safe zone was a little over ten feet, depending on Douglas' angle from his house and how far down the other side he could potentially see. I could probably scamper over that on all fours in five seconds. I glanced behind me at the Doughertys'. Their TV still glowed from the living room. No one was peering back at me through the window. I looked left, but the MacCallaghans were too far away to tell who was doing what inside.

I wasn't going to get another shot at not getting caught. *Three*. Chances were that of the three hundred and sixty degrees Douglas had to cover, he wouldn't be looking at my slice in the next five seconds. He could be snooping on the street, my house, Garrett's house, Jerr's house, or anywhere else on the dike. I was not going to get caught. *Two*. The faster I got up and over the dike, the faster I'd get home where there was a warm shower, Ibuprofen, and my bed waiting. Just up and over, and no one would have the time to spot me. *One*.

I sprang up and climbed the side of the dike on all fours. My muscles ached and my head pounded and I was still a little winded from my nine-point-five landing off the awning, but I tried to move fast and keep low and silent and invisible. I made it just shy of the dike's hump in two seconds. I was only three seconds away from the safe zone, six feet away from being back under cover, four bear-crawls away from not getting caught when I peeked over the dike, and my heart dropped in sickened horror. Caleb stood a few feet to my left in the damn safe zone, his feet planted shoulder width apart, his arms crossed in front of a thin-striped button down.

I froze, hunched mid-bear crawl.

He stared at me with quiet, calm expectancy, as if he'd been waiting.

"Hi," I whispered.

Caleb raised his eyebrows.

I stood up straight. "I'm not making photocopies this time."

"Unless you've folded them into a microscopic square to fit in those mini short shorts pockets you're wearing, I should say not."

I looked down at my black low-rise shorts. "I like these shorts."

"The shorts like you. I was only commenting on their inability to hide evidence."

I touched the pockets with the flat of my hand as if I was thinking about their shortness as I felt the lumps of my cell phone, a cigarette, and Frank's Rolling Stones lighter. I didn't have much to work with. I searched the smooth outline of the wandering dike and the faint, round bumps of Pebble Harbor in the darkness behind Caleb. We appeared to be alone, but Caleb wouldn't leave out Douglas if he planned to bust me.

"Where's Douglas?" I asked.

"At home, overdosing on coffee. Why?" He looked back where I'd glanced.

"He's not here?"

He turned back to me, frowning. "Why would I bring Douglas?"

"Why wouldn't you bring Douglas?"

Caleb pinched the bridge of his nose. "I never said that we should make *all* the gossip accurate."

"You know the gossip isn't accurate?" I whispered.

"Of course I know the gossip isn't accurate," he said, exasperated.

"But Harriet Carol said it. Everyone knows that what Harriet Carol says is Scripture."

"I don't care if Harriet Carol carved it into the stone of Buckbur Mountain with her hat pin. I was there. I lived it. We were alone last night, as I was hoping we'd be alone again tonight." Caleb narrowed his eyes on me. "What were you doing under the Doughertys' Lilac bushes, Patty?"

I focused on not twitching.

"You do realize Douglas is performing a criminal investigation? Police officers don't like it when their so-called victims break the law. If you botch things up, and Douglas finally pins something on you, he's not going to look the other way because I said please."

I eyed his striped shirt, similar to the button-down he'd worn last night. It clung against his chest, but Caleb was efficient. He wouldn't put a recording device where I could easily notice.

"What have you done? Whatever it is, let me help you fix it."

I squinted behind him at the dike and at their house beyond that, frustrated and unsure.

"Are you expecting someone?"

"Yes."

He sighed. "I'll cross my fingers that it's not Trev. We've all had quite enough of him to last the rest of the summer."

"You forget that your brother interrogated him this morning. He has good reason to act less than lukewarm toward you."

"I forget nothing. Douglas has little to do with why Trev feels lukewarm towards me, although I'm sure the interrogation didn't help." Caleb turned to look behind him without me glancing first.

"At home my ass," I murmured.

I stepped in close and tore open his button-down shirt, yelling "Ah ha!" to reveal the wire Douglas must have planted on him. Two of the buttons sprayed off into the grass. His chest was broad and firm and his abs were defined as always, and all that smooth, warm, thick skin gleamed temptingly in the moonlight, wire-free. I looked up sheepishly, and Caleb stared at me as if I'd lost my mind.

"This isn't exactly how I'd envisioned us beginning, but I'm certainly willing to improvise."

I tried to close the flaps of his shirt. Since some of the buttons were missing, I patted it into place over his stomach instead and stuck my hands in my pockets to keep them from reacting on impulse again. My fingertips touched the cool metal of the Zippo.

“What were you doing in the flower bed?” he insisted, the epitome of patience.

“I’d lost my lighter, and the last place I remembered having it was Tuesday night at Cecilia’s.” I dug the Black— a little worse for its wear but still usable— and Frank’s Rolling Stones lighter out of my pocket. I snapped the lighter to flame. “I must have dropped it walking up the steps.” I clamped the cigarette between my lips, took several short pulls with its butt glowing in the Rolling Stone’s long, orange flame, and snapped the lighter closed.

Caleb stared at me, his jaw clenched.

I took a long drag, sucking down the sugary, delicious smoke of cloves, and the pounding ache in my neck and tension everywhere eased almost instantly as my head swam from the sudden nicotine rush. I puckered my lips and blew the smoke to the side.

“You are deliberately trying to distract me from the flower bed.” Caleb wrapped his arm firmly around my waist, plucked the cigarette from my lips, leaned down, and sealed his lips over mine. He pulled away before I could get over the sudden shock of him and really enjoy the kiss. He licked his lips. I stared, dumbstruck, as his attention shifted to the cigarette, and he took a quick drag from the Black. He nodded appreciatively.

“My favorite,” he murmured.

He flicked the cigarette into the grass and smashed it out in the dirt with the toe of his Reebok.

“Hey,” I said, staring at my flattened cigarette.

“What were you doing in the flower bed, Patty?”

I clamped my lips shut tight and glared at him.

He leaned in and kissed me again, longer this time until my mouth opened to his, so I could taste the sugary smoke on the heat of his lips and on the slide of his tongue and on the hitch of his breath. A rush of hot need left over from the disappointment of thinking I'd lost my hopes for tonight swept through me. His mouth moved to my neck. I shuddered. He nibbled over the tender skin just under my jaw, and I smoothed my hands over the ridges of muscle on his stomach to his chest.

“Tell me, or I'll stop,” he said between bites.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, urging him closer.

He straightened out of reach. I tried to wriggle myself higher for a kiss, but he resisted.

“Just kiss me,” I hissed.

“Stop being stubborn, and I will.”

“The flower bed doesn't even matter,” I blurted, frustrated. “I wasn't there for the flower bed.”

Caleb leaned down, and I inched higher on my toes to meet him halfway. His mouth rocked against mine. His arms wrapped around my waist, pressing me against his front, bending me back, holding me tight. I clung to his neck.

His hand slid under my t-shirt and over my stomach. I pressed closer, biting his lower lip. He hesitated for a fraction of a second when his fingertips reached the underwire of my bra. I stretched his lip, let it slip from my teeth, and kissed him hard, and he wedged his hand under the underwire.

I inhaled sharply.

He pulled his mouth away. “Why were you there?”

“Where?”

“Cecilia’s.”

I leaned in. “It doesn’t matter.”

Caleb pulled further away, and I opened my eyes.

“I swear. It doesn’t have anything to do with the siphoner now.”

“But it did?” He bit my neck and squeezed his thumb across my nipple.

I ran my palm back down his chest and abs, my left arm still hooked around his neck. I unzipped his jeans. “I thought so, but I was wrong.”

“How were you wrong? What did you—”

I wrapped my hand around him, and he shut up as I stroked.

“Why were you waiting on the dike?” I asked. “Does Douglas know you’re here?”

“He knows, uh—” He took a second to breathe. “—I’m with you but not that we’re—”

He swallowed. “—here.”

“He thinks you just came over to my house, and that I was home like I was supposed to be?”

Caleb nodded. He unclipped my bra with his other hand.

“How did you know where—” My eyes rolled back as both his hands cupped me and squeezed.

“Your note was on the table,” he ground out. “We should go back to your place.”

I pulled my t-shirt over my head and flung it behind me. My bra slid off my shoulders.

“Here is good too.”

I fumbled with the edges of his shirt, trying to push his sleeves down his arms as he reached for me, both of us wanting and touching and warring over each other’s clothes and body

parts as we kissed. He unzipped my shorts and slipped his fingers under the rim of my purple, ladybug G-string.

“Did you break into Cecilia’s house?” he asked, moving his fingers in steady, pulsing circles.

“I can’t, uh—” My legs trembled. I tried to lock my knees to keep them from buckling, but I swayed against him anyway.

“You can tell me. I know you trust me, Geraldine. We wouldn’t be here if you didn’t.” He bit my neck after calling me Geraldine. I smiled from the name and shivered from the bite, going crazy with the opposite pulls of lust and indecision. “Trust me with everything.” The whisper of his breath was hot on my ear.

“That’s not—uh! I can’t stand with you doing that.”

“Oh.” A slow, satisfied grin spread across his face, and we half bent down, half tipped over onto the grass, both our jeans sagging around our knees. He hunched away from me for a second, fiddling in his pocket for something, and then he leaned over me on his elbows, careful of his weight now that he was on top. The button-down shirt had disappeared sometime after he’d unzipped my shorts, so his bare chest brushed mine as he hovered. His skin was so warm.

“Patricia,” Caleb whispered, suddenly hushed as he looked down at me. He brushed his knuckles over my cheek. I traced the impossibly smooth line of his jaw to the dip in his chin to his lips with my fingertips. He moved his face, so his cheek nuzzled the palm of my hand.

“Cecilia’s been having sex with Colton,” I said in a whispered rush. I took a deep breath and plunged ahead. “I snuck into her room and read her diary to find out what the hell’s been going on, but instead of reading that she’d siphoned our gas and slashed our tires like I thought maybe she had, I read about how she gave Colton head in Maxine.”

Caleb was still for a moment. He opened his mouth and closed it and finally said, “Do you make a habit of sneaking onto other people’s private property on a regular basis, or has this week just been exceptionally busy?”

I smiled, relieved that he wasn’t making Colton more important than the B and E, even though he knew he was. “The week certainly hasn’t been a study of normalcy.”

A grudging smile flashed and faded. Caleb looked down at me, still holding nearly all his weight off my body. “Thank you for telling me.”

I leaned up and kissed him, thinking, *And Christabel carries Geraldine into the house herself*, even as I kicked off my shorts, wrapped my legs around his back, and pulled him fully on top of me. He kissed me softly, his tongue slow and his lips moving and urging and wanting against mine. I skimmed my fingers down his back, feeling his muscles bunch and shift under my touch. His smooth skin vibrated warmth. The clean, outdoorsy cologne he’d worn instead of sun block masked the faint, moldy, fish smell wafting from the creek. I buried my face in the thick slope of his neck and shoulder, took a deep breath full of only him, and bit his skin. He moved his hand between my legs and touched me again and my toes curled and I arched my back in a sharp gasp as all that lust from before it had turned serious burned through me. I squeezed his ass, feeling tight and aching and needing him now, and his kiss deepened and grew more insistent.

Caleb shifted his hips, and suddenly he was there, pressing against me and into me, my body stretching and accommodating him. He eased out and pressed in again just how I had wanted and imagined after seven years, how I had convinced myself could happen and still want more. I locked my legs around his waist and moved with him. The pressure built slowly at first—I had time to notice him kissing my temple as I thrust up to meet him, his hand on my thigh,

pressing me deeper, the quickening pant of his breath— until our pace accelerated, I strained desperately under him, and he slammed into me almost frantically, his face slack and sheening with sweat above me. I was mindless and breathless, scraping my nails down his back to find something solid while we collided and everything else— the woods, the creek, the gossip, the diary pages— swirled into dark, insignificant, nothingness. The pressure broke. I arched under him, helpless against the scream that ripped suddenly— the thought of Mr. Dougherty peering over the dike and stumbling onto us not as horrific as it should have been— but Caleb closed his mouth over mine to muffle the noise as he gave three more pounding thrusts, shuddered over me— the mussed strands of his long, straight hair fluttered over my face— and collapsed suddenly, exhausted.

His weight flattened me on the ground. I concentrated on breathing, more labored now with his body constricting my air flow. I squirmed a bit, trying to get more air. He rubbed inside of me, hitting an especially good spot, and the waves of pleasure twitched through me again. I fell back, the slight claustrophobic panic of being trapped under him washed away in the after glow.

After a minute, he pulled out, discarded the condom— I bit my lip against reprimanding him for littering because I certainly didn't want to take care of it and where else did I expect him to put it— and he lifted himself onto his elbow over me. His bicep trembled. "That was incredible."

I nodded. "We should definitely do that again."

"And often." Caleb smiled, his front teeth overlapping slightly in the shadowed glow of Garrett's garage light. "Back to your place?"

"Oh, yes." My voice rasped out a little overenthusiastically, and Caleb's smile widened.

We scavenger hunted for our clothes, dressed, and walked along the dike hand in hand back home. Caleb muttered, “Got to get planks for that,” as we shimmied around Garrett’s hole in my porch. The screen door latched behind us, and I snuck him into my room by the square patches of the streetlamps’ light through the kitchen windows.

Thirteen
Saturday

I woke in the morning facing Betty and spooned by Caleb. His arm was limp over my waist. I closed my eyes against the dappled sun piercing my lace curtains and shimmied under the sheets with my pillow.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Caleb slurred.

I buried my face in the pillow. “Hiding from the sun.”

“Oh.” He yawned. “Anything else you want to do while you’re down there?”

“Yeah.” I curled into a ball. “Sleep.”

Caleb ducked under the sheet with me, enveloping my body with his. “We did that already.”

I smiled as I remembered him on the dike and in the bed and in the shower and on the floor and in the bed and in the bed. “We did everything already.”

“I can think of several things that need doing,” he murmured, kissing my shoulder. “When does Margoe typically wake on a Saturday?”

I opened my mouth, trying to think up something dirty to whisper back to him, and realized that Margoe had slept in the basement again, on Frank’s old bed, over the incriminating gas tank and ice pick.

“What’s wrong?” Caleb asked, sounding wary.

“Nothing. I don’t know. I, er—” *Crap* “—might have something to tell you, but I’ve been advised not to. You’re probably going to get angry because I didn’t tell you before, and I probably compromised what could have been evidence, and if Douglas knows I have it, he’ll probably arrest me, and you—”

“Will probably die of anticipation. Just tell me.”

I swallowed. “I found a plastic gas tank and an ice pick in one of Frank’s boxes that had been sitting on the curb for the garbage truck. I stashed them under Frank’s bed.”

Caleb sighed. He kissed the back of my neck. “You’re impossible. Why didn’t you call Douglas when you first found them, before you touched them.”

“The gas was spilling everywhere. I touched it before I could think not to, and I didn’t even know what the ice pick was until I dragged it out from under the bed.”

He kissed down to my shoulder. “Does anyone else know?”

I started to relax. “Just Garrett. Promise me you won’t tell anyone.”

“We have to tell Douglas.”

“No. He won’t believe that someone’s framing me. My prints are on that gas tank and that damn ice pick.”

“So might the siphoner’s. Douglas will be able to compare the hole in your tire to the ice pick and make an I.D.”

“He’ll make an I.D. on an ice pick with my prints on it. I’m not telling Douglas.”

Caleb’s lips stilled against my shoulder.

“The siphoner doesn’t know I found it. Let the bastard sweat it out a day or two. He’s bound to get anxious when nothing happens. Maybe it’ll force his hand, and we’ll be watching this time.”

Caleb relaxed against my back. I snuggled my bum into the etching of his stomach. “I don’t know if we can survive higher stakes, but I’m game.” He yawned again. “I’ll wait two days, but then we’re telling Douglas. In the mean time, no more late night shenanigans unless you’re shenaniganing with me.”

“Maybe.”

We dozed for a while. The sun’s angle shifted. It lit the wall instead of my eyes, so we escaped from under the sheets. I stretched and wiggled my toes over Caleb’s feet. His callused hand scraped in a warm, shivering line up my thigh to my hip. “Patty-Without-The-Cake?”

“Mmmm?”

“Once the summer is over and we close Lakeside after Labor Day, I’m moving back to Scotland.”

I stiffened. “To visit?”

“To live. Probably not permanently. I’m not sure, but I miss home. I’ve missed the moors, the teeming rain, stopping in McPhails for a draft with Connor after working the docks, betting on the tourists with the other caddies at Scoonie Golf Club.” His voice lingered faintly as he remembered, and I wanted to shrivel under the mattress. “Some of our conversations about home made me realize that I don’t have to miss those things anymore. Isaac will be in high school next year, and Douglas isn’t the grieving, emotional train wreck he was nine years ago. I can go back to Scotland. I can go wherever I like, wherever I need to be, without hurting them.”

He kissed my shoulder blade, and I thought, *Why didn’t you tell me this before the sex?*

“You’ve been gone for more than a decade,” I said. “I’m sure things have changed.”

“Not Leven.”

I nodded, my throat tightening.

“Come with me.”

I stilled.

“I know it’s not fair of me to ask. You’ve just come home after four years at school, and you’ve unfinished business with Margoe and your father and Dansbury. I don’t know how long I want to stay in Leven.” He wrapped his arm around my waist and over my stomach so his weight and warm arms surrounded me. “You don’t have to decide right away, and if you decide to come, you don’t have to stay. You could visit Dansbury or you could leave after a bit and visit me or maybe we could visit one another depending on—”

I turned in his arms to face him. “Seriously?” My voice scraped hoarsely.

He frowned and wiped the tears off my cheeks. “What’s wrong? I thought you wanted to see more of the world than Dansbury.”

“I do. It’s just—” I shook my head in awe.

Caleb smoothed one hand over my hip, and with his other, he picked up my hand where it rested on the pillow. His fingers were damp from my tears. Our hands entwined between us, so the back of my hand was pressed against his chest. I stared into his turquoise eyes. He stared back and drew his fingertips up my spine. My nipples tightened against his arm. I wondered if he noticed, and my cheeks heated.

“You didn’t think I was sticking around.”

I took a deep, unsteady breath. “I didn’t expect you to. I want you to do what you want even if that means leaving.”

He frowned. “You would let me go, just like that, without even a fight? I know it was only one night, but I thought the night was extraordinary.”

“I can’t make you stick around, Caleb. Most of the guys I’ve dated couldn’t help leaving: Alex’s family moved; Martin died; Jay was shipped overseas; and being a hound is in Bernardo’s genes. But I asked the last few to stay. Sydes swore that I was the one, that we’d call and write and visit regularly to keep what we had alive through the winter until we could be together again after we graduated. He didn’t even make it last through October. At least William Sherman had the decency to be up front before he left.”

“I’ve never heard of the Shermans,” Caleb said, his voice measured.

“I met William at Carnegie Mellon my junior year. He was great while we were together, but we weren’t together as long as I had hoped. I’m not going to fight for us and beg you to stick around because I’ve done that scene already, and it sucks. I want you to stick around because you’d rather be with me than be anywhere else. If you see me and feel me and want me and you’re still not sure if you want to stay, than maybe you should leave because I can’t convince you to see and feel and want what’s not there.”

He leaned in, brought our hands up to his lips, and kissed my knuckles. “I’m not letting go of this, Patricia. I want to stick around with you; I just don’t want to stick around in Dansbury,” he whispered. “Come with me to Leven. Let’s stick around together and find out where it leads.”

I squeezed his hand tightly, the damn tears still wetting my cheeks. “I’d love to stick around with you in Leven.”

Caleb smiled. “Good. Now, about those things that need doing.” He bounded to all fours and pounced on top of me.

I squealed.

The mattress rattled and bobbed under us, and Caleb ducked his head into my shoulder. I tipped my head to the side, sighing with satisfied anticipation. He blew a raspberry into my neck.

“Ack!” I swatted at his head, laughing.

I tried to buck him off and squirm out from under him and block his access to my neck, but he grabbed my wrists mid-swat. He pinned them above my head into the mattress.

“Tell me you want me, Geraldine.”

I smiled and shook my head.

He came at my neck and blew. The vibrating tickle of his lips goose-bumped down the right side of my body.

I shrieked.

“You want me more than cookies and thunderstorms,” he said between raspberries and over my squealing laughter. “Admit it, or I’ll eat you up.”

“Not, ack!—” I flailed. “—much of a threat!”

The bedroom door creaked. “I’d be happy to whip up something for you to eat if you’re hungry. It’s already eleven.”

I screamed. Margoe’s head floated between the door and its frame as she leaned in the room, the rest of her body presumably behind the door as she peered at us through her zebra-striped glasses.

“Dear God! Some privacy, please!” I squirmed further under Caleb, mortified.

Caleb turned his face to the doorway, not bothering to squirm under anything, and smiled. “Thank you, Margoe. Your breakfasts are scrumptious, but unfortunately, I must decline.”

“Are you sure? While you’re eating, I could wash the sheets.” She leaned further in the room, and she pointed her spatula at us, its flat, rubber head quivering with repressed purpose.

“The man said no, Margoe. Please, get out,” I said, my entire body blushing, which Margoe could probably see glowing through the thin, cotton sheet.

Margoe huffed. “They were so dirty last time. It took three loads before—”

“Out!”

She left reluctantly, shutting the door gently behind her.

I looked up at Caleb. His lips were pursed and trembling. “What?”

He shook his head, but a muffled, rhythmic, huffing squeezed pasted his clenched lips.

“Don’t you dare laugh.”

He smiled.

“That was not funny,” I said, smiling back.

He collapsed next to me, and we both laughed until my sides ached.

Caleb cleared his throat. “When did Margoe say she last washed your sheets?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yesterday. It’s not like I don’t wash my own sheets. Extra washings between regular washings are completely unnecessary.”

Caleb looked questioningly at the mattress. “We didn’t have sex in these sheets yesterday.”

“Believe me. You don’t have to remind me how much we didn’t do yesterday.”

“Then why does she think we did? Gossip?”

“No.” I frowned. “She said there were stains. Like we’d, well, you know.” I looked down at the sheets, starting to feel slightly contaminated.

Caleb leaned back on his pillow. “Margoe wouldn’t make something like that up.”

“No, she wouldn’t.” I threw my leg over Caleb to crawl out of bed and scrub myself raw. He grabbed my hips as I tried to lunge for the floor, and he hauled me back to straddle his waist.

“Leaving me already? We were just in the middle of things.”

“I want out of this ABC bed.”

Caleb smirked. “Already been chewed?”

“Already been cummed on, but chewed probably works too depending on the position,” I hissed savagely, struggling out of his hold.

He clamped down on my thighs. “You heard the lass. These sheets have been washed thrice since—”

“I don’t care how many times they’ve been washed or how thick you lay on your accent. You and I should be the only people staining these sheets. Ugh!” I knocked Caleb’s hands away. “I can’t believe someone broke into my room and—” I stared at the bacteria around me, rubbing off on me, and I shuddered— “Ugh!”

Caleb scrunched his face. “You break into people’s houses all the time. You just broke into Cecilia’s house last night.”

I slammed my hands on the mattress on either side of his head. “I broke into Lakeside to return what I had borrowed. I broke into Jerr’s house to protect him from you, and I broke into Cecilia’s house to find evidence of her betrayal, which I did, thank you very much, just not the betrayal I had expected.”

“Return what you had borrowed;’ that’s one way to put it. The other way is that you returned it to cover your ass,” he said, but he stroked his palm up my thigh as he said it.

“I have never broken into someone’s house just for spite!”

I scooped my other leg over him, climbed off the bed, and stood on the carpet. “Who would have sex in my bed?”

Caleb propped himself up on one arm, staring after me as I stomped to the bathroom. “Who would siphon your gas, slash your tires, sabotage your spare tire, weaken your porch boards—”

“I think you’re giving the siphoner too much credit,” I shouted from the bathroom. I put on my teal fleece robe with the counting sheep, squeezed toothpaste on my brush, stuck it in my mouth, and leaned my head back into the bedroom. Caleb looked very *Lifetime* lounging in all those creamsicle swirls. Betty approved from her view behind him as well. “Those porch boards should have been replaced decades ago,” I said around the toothbrush and paste.

“I don’t—” Brian Johnson’s raspy, lust-frazzled voice shouted that he was already there as Caleb’s jean pocket danced on the floor.

I turned back into the bathroom to spit.

The bed springs whined, something snapped, and Caleb over-jovially forced out a hello. I turned on the faucet to rinse my mouth out, and Caleb eventually said, “I’m doing very well, thank you, and you?”

I caught water into my cupped hand.

“At home. Yes, I’m sure. I don’t care what Douglas says.”

I smiled.

“No, you may not call out today. You should have been at Lakeside four hours ago.”

I gargled with faucet water and plunked my brush back in its holder.

“No, we need you actually guarding at Lakeside. It’ll only be you, Trev, and Jackie on duty. Everyone else has worked forty hours. Yes, including me.”

I washed my face, fluffed my hair, and walked back into the bedroom.

“Yes, including Patty. She missed Thursday because of her accident, but she stayed late on Monday. I don’t see—” Caleb pulled his cell away, and he stared at it, perplexed. “She hung up on me,” he said, and he snapped the slide shut. He glanced up at me as he sat on my swirling bed, looking like a disgruntled Greek God without the fig leaf, and his frown deepened. He gestured at me with the flat of his hand. “What’s with the robe?”

“Well, you obviously weren’t giving her the answers she—” Justin Hawkins hit a high C on, “It’s love!” before jamming out on his wicked guitar solo.

Caleb glared at my cell. “Do not answer that.”

“She’ll be suspicious. You’re home, remember?”

“I didn’t say whose home.”

I rolled my eyes and flipped open my cell. “Heya, Misty.”

“How did you know it was me?”

“Cell phones have caller ID,” I said, smirking at Caleb.

“Oh.”

I waited a second, but Misty didn’t elaborate. I sighed. “Is there something in particular that you wanted?”

“Guess what?”

“Ummm—”

“I counted with Douglas!” Misty shouted, clearly jubilant. Someone whispered in the background. “It means we had sex, and we both really want to have it again.” Someone who was probably Douglas whispered in the background again, and Misty giggled.

I peeked up at Caleb. “Congratulations!” I said, infusing my voice with pep. I wondered how Caleb felt about Douglas shacking up with Misty, but I couldn’t discern whether his frown was directed at Misty for being with Douglas and calling out, or at me for answering the phone instead of being with him.

“Can I ask a favor?”

“Sure,” I said.

Caleb shook his head vigorously.

“Could you cover my shift for today?”

“Didn’t your shift already start a few hours ago?” I yanked out a suit bottom from my dresser.

Misty sighed. “Well, yes, so you’ll only have to actually cover half a shift, if that’s alright? Please?”

Caleb stood up with ill intent gleaming in his turquoise eyes.

“Yes, I’ll cover you.” I backed up a couple steps.

Caleb lunged forward and snatched the suit bottoms out of my hand.

“Are you sure?”

“Don’t worry about it.” I jumped forward to snatch them back, but he held them over his head. “Oh, real mature.”

“What?” Misty asked sharply.

“Sorry, I wasn’t talking to you. You just have fun.”

“Thank you! I’ll cover one of your shifts sometime soon, I promise, as long as Douglas isn’t here or I don’t get another perm or highlights or—”

Caleb plucked the phone out of my hand and snapped it shut.

“Hey,” I said, turned on that he was so close and annoyed that he’d taken my suit hostage and hung up on Misty.

Caleb tossed my suit back in the drawer and slammed it shut. “What do you think you’re doing?”

I snatched my bottoms out of the drawer again. “I need to get to Lakeside. I’m already two hours late for Misty’s shift.”

“You should have said no. Misty didn’t get all her hours in this week.”

“Let her have her fun. She hasn’t had much lately.” I stepped into my suit bottoms.

“You girls have to stick together?”

I pulled the bottoms up around my hips and smiled up at him. “That’s right.”

He pushed aside the flaps of my robe. His fingers flirted with the edge of my suit bottom.

I batted at his arm. “There’s no time for that. I have to leave.”

“You’re already late. What’s another hour?” Caleb asked. He knelt in front of me and pulled my suit bottoms down to my ankles.

“I thought you hated when people were late to work?”

He parted my robe and leaned closer. “Your evil ways must be rubbing off on me, Geraldine.”

I opened my mouth to complain about trying something new when his mouth covered me, and all I could do was lean on his shoulders, lock my knees, and focus on standing as throbbing, spiraling need licked through my body.

Twenty minutes later, I changed into my two-piece guard suit— Caleb told me to wear it more often, and I said, “No,” on account that I wasn’t Misty. Caleb said, “Thank God!” emphatically enough that I knew he’d meant it, and I gave him a proper thank you. Maxine and I

finally zoomed up to Lakeside fifteen minutes after that, and once there, I had infinitely more things to complain about, none of which anyone intended to satisfy.

The incessant tweet of Trev’s nasally plastic Fox Classic— why he didn’t splurge the extra dollar for metal was beyond me; his parents could probably stock every lifeguard in north-east Pennsylvania with whistles— should have been my first indication that the morning was going to be harrying, but parents usually like to spend time with their children on Saturdays doing fun-filled summer activities in places where their children don’t hang out every week day, like an outing to Knobles or a disappointingly uneventful road trip to White Castle or bribes to cheat Grandma at pinochle. Even with the forewarning of Trev’s sporadic whistles as I shoved Popeye and Olive into my locker, I had to pause and take stock immediately after exiting the changing rooms.

Trev was the only guard on the stand. He hovered on the edge of his seat, looking about ready to swoop from his stand and strangle Ryan, which would be the first time in public, and Trev would lose the vantage of watching Luke cartwheel into three feet.

Tweet. Tweet. “Feet first!”

“I did!”

Ryan laughed hysterically.

“No cartwheels!”

Everyone’s younger sibling, child, and babysitter in Dansbury were either on a lawn chair, in the pool, or breaking a rule somewhere in Lakeside. Patrick and Sue Winneski were bickering across the ping pong table. Kelly, Emilie, and Val Russiani splashed and dunked each other in five feet. Emilie waved Lori over for a game of chicken, which Trev blew his whistle at, and Val subtly gave him the finger as she adjusted her bikini top. Lou Sydes back-flipped off the

diving board. Trev missed it because he was blowing his whistle at Luke again. Isaac inched toward the tube slides. Adrien waddled off with Madeline toward the zero degree entry, and Lori kept her sparkle-shadowed eyes trained on them under the guise of reading *Glamour Girl*. Ben Moyer eyed Lori from where he stood in line for the left diving board under the guise of blatantly staring. Luke ignored Trev in favor of sneering at Ben.

I jogged over to Trev.

Tweet. “No run— oh. It’s you.”

“What the hell is going on?”

“Damn Harriet Carol and her Saturday Hibachi and Sake Cookout is what’s going on.”

“I thought she was more exclusive than this.” I waved my hand at the menagerie of creek kids and mountain yuppie offspring, their parents enjoying equally snooty treatment at the Carol household, Mr. Carol excluded since he was a darling for giving me stitches instead of staples even if my bangs did cover the cut on my forehead.

“She usually is, but she can’t have a gigantic cookout without people there to eat. My mom, Mrs. Deitrich, and Mrs. Lewis haven’t eaten more than a celery stick at a time in twenty years.” Trev blew his whistle at Ryan as he ran across the deck. Everyone but Ryan looked up. Trev shook his head in exasperation. “Where have you been?”

I scanned the pool, but there were too many rules to enforce for us to have a conversation and correct them all. “I’m not scheduled to be on duty.”

“Didn’t Misty call you this morning?”

“Yeah, forty minutes ago.”

Trev leaned back in his seat. “Typical.”

Ryan splashed into three feet.

Tweet. “No cartwheels!” A vein in Trev’s neck pulsed out like a Star Trekian Cardassian.

“It was a round off!”

Trev’s knuckles whitened as he gripped his cheap plastic whistle.

“Get down. I’ll cover five feet,” I said.

Trev continued to scan the pool. Either he missed Sue chucking the pong paddle at Patrick’s head and Ryan pulling Luke into the pool, or he realized his efforts were futile because his eyes passed over all of them without a tweet.

“Ignore your dumbass brother and go across the pool. I’ll make the save when he and Luke slip and break their necks.”

“Don’t bother. Just let the little bastards drown,” Trev muttered, but he swiveled his chair and climbed off the stand. “Thanks for coming and not letting me hang out to dry.”

“You know I wouldn’t.”

Trev reached for his water bottle. He avoided my eyes. “After yesterday—”

“You know I wouldn’t,” I said.

—“I’d deserve it.”

I shrugged. “Well, yeah.”

Trev did look at me then, and I smiled.

He smiled back and walked across the pool, blowing his whistle as he went.

I put my left foot on the first rung of the stand when Kelly convinced Sue to play chicken instead, Patrick slumped over to the diving boards, Jerr shuffled out of the Hut and raised his forefinger at me, and Ben did a haphazard gainer off the diving board which was completely lost on Lori anyway; he’d risked being maimed and paralyzed for squat.

Jerr inhaled, and his mustache did a little jig.

I waited and scanned.

“Patricia. It’s wonderful to see you, as always, but where’s Misty?” He glanced at his watch.

“She called me to cover her shift.”

Jerr nodded several times. “Yes, I see that, but she hasn’t gotten her forty hours. You have, Patricia.”

“It’s alright, Jerr. I don’t mind working overtime.” Ben surfaced by the empty chaise that Lori had been sitting in. I blew my whistle.

Jerr jumped, and Ben didn’t bother looking. He was craning his neck over the pool edge.

I gave two more sharp tweets.

Ben jerked his head around, surprised.

“No gainers!”

Ben nodded. He continued his search for the elusive Lori.

“You don’t understand,” Jerr continued, shaking his head several times. “You can’t work again until Monday. Caleb’s management plan was very clear on that.”

I frowned. “Caleb’s management plan was clear that I not work weekends? That’s a bit presumptuous of him.”

“No one is allowed to work overtime. The money we’re saving on time and a half can go towards hiring pool attendants next summer.”

Thrifty bastard, I thought, smiling. “You don’t have to pay me time and a half.”

Jerr opened his mouth and closed it. He raised his finger, and his mustache quivered.

“But you’re over forty hours, and—”

Isaac had wedged himself down the tube slide. He was staring at me as he stood on its lip.

“I don’t care. Don’t worry about it.” I blew my whistle and shook my head at Isaac.

Isaac smirked, turned his back to me, leaned forward, swung his arms, and back-flipped straight up into the air. The slide rumbled from the pressure. Trev stood suddenly on his stand at ten feet. Isaac arched his back mid-air, lifted into a tuck, and hit the slide with a slapping crack. He smacked into the water on his side.

Trev blew his whistle hard three times, so everyone looked at him. Isaac sank below the surface. His arms drifted up as he sank lower. My heart clutched. I ran past Jerr toward the Hut to get the backboard, and Trev shouted behind me as I opened the Hut door. “Everyone stop what they are doing and SLOWLY exit the pool. Every one SLOWLY EXIT THE POOL!”

The backboard was propped between the wall and first aid cabinet. I picked it up— its smooth handles were awkward because the board was heaviest at the top— and ran lopsidedly out of the Hut. Trev had already eased into the water and was performing a submerged passive drowning victim save by the time I reached the edge of the pool. I could see Trev through the wiggling ripples in the water as he lifted Isaac’s arms carefully into streamline to stabilize his neck. I breathed a little easier, glad he wasn’t doing the chin-neck support again.

I ran the backboard down to three feet, placed it on the concrete, and unclipped the belts. Trev surfaced with Isaac at ten feet. Isaac looked secure— Trev’s hands were tight on his forearms which were squeezed around his ears to lock his neck in place— and his face was out of the water, but Trev hadn’t caught a breath yet. I ran down the pool deck, swiped the rescue tube off the five foot guard stand as I passed, and slipped carefully into the water. I moved slowly and deliberately, trying not to disturb the water too much as I breast-stroked to Trev. Isaac was unconscious. His hair was slicked over half of his smooth, pale face, and his legs dragged limply as Trev egg-beater kicked them toward the shallow end. Trev’s kick was

speeding up as he tried to reach five feet before his breath completely depleted. I swam alongside, pressed the rescue tube under the water, and wedged it under Trev's arms, so the tube carried both their weights.

Trev's head popped out of the water next to Isaac's. "Took you long enough," he gasped.

"Less than thirty seconds. You should practice your underwaters."

"You're one to talk," he panted. "You still smoke."

"And my lungs can still out-hold yours. The backboard is at three feet on the right. Is he breathing?"

Trev leaned closer to Isaac, so his ear was next to his mouth as he continued kicking toward three feet. "Yes." He turned his face to Isaac's. "His forehead is cut from the edge of the slide where he hit."

"Is it deep?"

"I'm not sure. His hair's in the way. It just looks split, but we're in the water. They always look cleaner in the water."

"I know." I left Trev to murmur encouragements to Isaac and swam ahead to three feet. A few stragglers were still walking out of the zero degree entry, but the pool would be clear soon. Jerr was on his cell phone. "Jerr!"

He said something into the receiver, and then said, "Yeah, Patricia?"

"We need gauze."

Jerr jogged into the Hut.

I reached three feet, picked up the backboard from the deck, and placed it gently in the water. Jerr came out of the Hut with a handful of jumbo gauze pads already ripped out of their anti-bacterial seals.

“Thanks,” I said. “Can you hold them on Isaac’s head while we strap him?”

“Of course,” Jerr said. He handed me another rescue tube. “Joe Cummings and Bernardo are on their way. How does he look?”

“He’s unconscious, breathing, and his forehead is split.”

“Ok then.” Jerr relayed what I said to the dispatcher.

“Someone needs to call Douglas,” I said as Trev touched down on five feet. He walked Isaac to me.

Jerr pointed across the pool. “Lori’s already on it.”

I looked up. Lori held Madeline on her hip with one hand and talked into her cell with the other. Her face was scrunched and hiccupping as she watched us. My throat started to clog. I turned back to Jerr, swallowed, and said evenly, “Is she telling him to go to the hospital or to come here?”

“I don’t know.”

I pressed my back against the wall for support and dipped the backboard under the water.

Trev guided Isaac over it. His voice was low and steady as he said, “Good job, buddy, you’re doing great. Just got to get on this back board, and you’ll be ready to go. You’re looking good, Isaac. Looking great.”

“It’ll be—” *horrible, upsetting, awkward, disturbing*—“distracting if he comes here. Do you remember the Mrs. Webber incident my first day?”

“Douglas is a good police officer. He ain’t gonna lose it.”

“Isaac is his son. He might.”

“Alright,” Trev said. He was still holding Isaac’s hands in a secure streamline. “He’s over the backboard.”

I let the backboard float to the surface under Isaac's back. His lower body started to shift to the right. I tried to correct it by pushing the board under and adjust his weight dispersion, but I couldn't press it too far under the water with him already on it. His face would go under, and only his neck was stabilized.

Trev didn't lose his grip. "He's tipping."

"I know."

"His back might bend if half of him falls off the board."

"I know, Trevor."

"Sorry."

I hooked my foot under the end of the backboard and jerked it to the right. Isaac's lower body slipped, but I caught him before he could sink or bend or die. My hands were starting to shake, but we still had to strap him and get him out of the water. I took a deep breath to calm down. He was floating on the surface and in line with the backboard. He was breathing, and his cut wasn't gushing. He was as good as he was going to get for now. I hadn't made the situation worse, and sometimes that's all you can do.

"Nice," Trev said. "I think that did it."

I wedged the board between my elbows. "I think so. You're doing great, Isaac. I'll take over stabilization in three, two, one."

I placed my hands on either side of Isaac's neck as Trev guided Isaac's arms out of streamline and down to his sides. Jerr knelt on the pool deck and swiped Isaac's hair to the side. The cut on his forehead was seeping, which was odd for a head wound, but the pool water was probably diluting most of the blood. Jerr placed pressure directly on the cut with the gauze pads as Trev moved slowly through the water. He snapped and tightened the backboard straps.

Isaac groaned.

“Don’t move, Isaac.” I said. “You’re looking real good. Just stay still, and let us get you out of the water.”

He squinted. “Patty-Cake?”

I swallowed before speaking. “Hey, Izzy. How are you feeling?”

“My head is pounding.”

“Can you feel this?” Trev asked.

“Ouch! What the—” he looked down at Trev as he clicked another strap in place. The weight shift made the foot of the backboard dip under the water.

“I said not to move. Lay back and relax before you tip,” I said firmly, wanting to throttle him, but that probably wouldn’t be good for his neck either. “Are you nauseous?”

“Why is Trevor pinching my feet and strapping me?” Isaac glared at Trev.

I sighed. “Lay back, and I’ll tell you.”

Isaac grunted reluctantly, but he laid back. I secured his neck as the backboard floated up to the surface again.

“Are you nauseous?”

“No.”

“What day is today?”

“Saturday.”

“Do you remember doing a back flip off the tube slide?”

“Yes,” Isaac snapped in a tone that conveyed my idiocy.

Jerr replaced the pressure on Isaac’s forehead with fresh gauze, and Isaac flinched.

I continued. “You didn’t jump out far enough, and you hit your head on the slide.”

Isaac glared up at me. “Obviously.”

“Well, that’s why Trev is strapping you to the backboard,” I snapped, welcoming exasperation over stomach gnawing terror any day.

“Why aren’t you strapping me in?”

“Because I am stabilizing your neck. Does anything else hurt besides your head?”

“No.”

Trev clicked the strap tight around Isaac’s chest, and Isaac turned his head to refocus his glare on him.

“Stop moving,” I hissed.

“Here.” Trev replaced my hands with the neck pads to hold Isaac’s neck. I cinched Isaac in place, so he couldn’t move even if he wanted to.

I propped the head of the backboard with Isaac fully strapped onto it on the gutter.

“I’m going to fall off,” Isaac whined.

“No, you’re not,” I said.

“I can feel myself falling.”

“That’s just gravity. You won’t fall.” I climbed out of the water.

“Patty-Cake?” Isaac asked, but the whine trembled at the end.

I gripped the handles on the head of the backboard. “I’m right here, Izzy. No worries.” I braced myself and looked at Trev. “Ready?”

“Yeah,” Trev said. He nodded to the side. “In sync with the cavalry.”

I looked to where his head had nodded. Joe Cummings and Bernardo were running toward us. I hadn’t even noticed the sirens. “Good timing. Here we go. Three, two, one.”

Trev pushed and I pulled and Isaac slid out of the water and onto the pool deck securely strapped with no hint of slippage. Isaac's forehead started bleeding in earnest. I snatched the rest of the gauze pads from Jerr. I reapplied pressure with one of them and mopped the blood that had dripped off Isaac's temple with the other.

"Is it bad?" Isaac asked.

"Nah," I said. His pupils were the same size. "You'll probably need stitches, but men with scars are dashing. If Lori was interested before, she won't be able to resist you now."

"I'm being serious." His speech was clear and focused.

"So am I," I said.

"Your hand is shaking."

I looked at my hand on his forehead, and he was right. My fingers were trembling. I met his eyes. "It's been a rough five minutes, Isaac. Let's not do this again."

A locker room door slammed. "Maybe not as good of timing as we'd thought," Trev muttered.

I looked over again, and my stomach dropped. Caleb and Douglas were running toward us on the paramedic's heels. Caleb's shirt wasn't buttoned evenly; one side hung lower than the other, and the tail of his belt wasn't tucked into any of the loops after the buckle. It hung and flapped against his thigh. Douglas was out of uniform. His generic, grey undershirt tightened against lean, hardened muscle as his arms pumped. I didn't want to see his face. I looked anyway and instantly wished I hadn't. I turned back to Isaac and focused on applying pressure.

Joe knelt next to me. "Hello, Isaac MacCallaghan. How are you feeling?"

Isaac bared his teeth. "How do I look?"

Joe looked up at me.

“He did a back flip and hit his head on the edge of the tube slide. He was unconscious for about a two minutes. He’s moved his head and arms, and he can feel his feet. He’s got a cut on his head and maybe a concussion.” I took a deep, shaking breath. My throat was clamping again. “That’s all I’ve got.”

He covered my hand on Isaac’s forehead. “Thank you, Patricia. We’ve got it from here.”

I let Joe replace my hand on Isaac’s forehead. Trev climbed out of the pool. He walked over to me and offered me his hand.

“Come on, Patty. We’ve done what we can.”

I stood unsteadily even with Trev’s assistance. Jerr was talking to Caleb and Douglas who seemed rational and put together, but tense. I wanted to cry. It would probably be a good half hour before I found a moment alone, so I swallowed— my throat was becoming dry and achy from all the restrained tears— and walked to where Caleb and Douglas were listening to Jerr.

“—applied pressure until the EMT’s arrived.” Jerr turned to me. “I just finished fillin’ them in.”

I nodded.

“That was a great save, you two.” Jerr said. I hadn’t noticed Trev following behind me. “You reacted quickly and calmly the whole time. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks,” I said, thinking, *I should have gotten the tube to Trev sooner. I should have kept my knee on the backboard to begin with. I never should have agreed to that stupid pinky promise.*

“I’ll be in the locker room if you need me,” Trev said. He walked away, looking as sick and unsure as I felt.

Joe and Bernardo lifted the back board with Isaac still strapped into it, and they hustled past us toward the locker rooms and where the ambulance waited in the parking lot. Douglas clapped a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. I looked up at him, but he was looking at Caleb.

“Are you coming?” he asked.

“No,” Caleb said. “I should help settle things here. I’ll meet you at the hospital soon.”

Douglas nodded, squeezed my shoulder again, and then jogged after the paramedics.

Douglas disappeared into the locker room. I waited for Caleb to follow, but he stood his ground, staring at the tube slide.

“You ain’t goin’ in the ambulance with Douglas?” Jerr asked.

“Why weren’t you the primary rescuer?” Caleb said. His voice was quiet and tense.

Jerr jerked back. His moustache squirmed.

It took me a moment to realize that he wasn’t speaking to Jerr. “Excuse me?” I asked.

“You saw Isaac hit the slide, and you let Trev have the save.”

I gaped, taken aback. “I didn’t let Trev have anything. He was the guard at ten feet. It was his save.”

Caleb shook his head, looking frustrated. “You could have gotten there first. You always get there first.”

“If I had gotten to Isaac from three feet before the guard at ten feet, that would be a serious problem.”

“You got to Mr. Russiani from the ping pong table while Jackie was practically hovering over him at her stand.”

“And that is a serious problem. Today was a fast, efficient save because Trev did his job as primary rescuer, and I did my job as secondary rescuer. We did exactly what we were supposed to do.”

Caleb was quiet for a moment. He glanced at the locker room, and then turned to me. “I trust you with my nephew more than I trust him. I heard about Susan Carol,” he whispered.

Jerr lifted a finger and inhaled.

“Than you know that Susan Carol is a ridiculous exaggerator who couldn’t manage to drown in a monsoon, but could swear in court without blinking that she drowned in a puddle.”

“I know that Jeremy Snyder is no exaggerator, and Trev lost stabilization that day.”

“Trev and Patricia performed a beautiful, by-the-book save today,” Jerr said with lot of *back off* in his tone. I’d never known Jerr’s voice had any other settings other than worried and pleasant.

“Patricia should have been there,” Caleb insisted.

I took a deep breath to try to calm down even though the *Patricia* had my nails spiking into my palms. “I was there. If this were any other kid but Isaac, you’d be patting us on the back right now.” The tears dripped over. My voice sounded stiff and halted as I forged on. “You are worried and scared and need someone to blame, which is understandable, but you need to go to the hospital and be with Isaac and Douglas. You can’t be here and act like a parent after this kind of save. You’re not the only one who’s scared.”

“But the pool—”

“Will be taken care of.” Jerr interrupted. “I already called Misty to relieve Trev. Jackie didn’t answer her phone, but Patricia can leave anyway. We’ll just be closin’ up.”

Caleb looked at Jerr “But I—”

Jerr clasped his hand on Caleb's shoulder. "Patricia's right. You need to be with Isaac and Douglas. We'll see you bright and early Monday mornin'."

Caleb's jaw clenched, but he smoothed his hair back with both hands and nodded.

"You go on," Jerr said. He gestured at the ambulance still in the parking lot. They were lifting Isaac into the rear as we spoke. "If you leave now, you can still ride in the ambulance."

Caleb looked back at me, and he paused. "Do you need a ride home?"

"I have Maxine." I said flatly. "I'm fine."

His hands reached up to wipe the tears off my cheeks. I couldn't look at him— my nails gouged deeper into my palms — but I let him touch me without pulling away.

"You don't look fine."

"Just go."

Caleb looked torn for a second, but he jogged to the locker rooms and left Lakeside as he should have to begin with.

Jerr moved closer. "Patricia."

I shook my head.

"No one could have done a better save than what you and Trev did today," Jerr said.

"Am I free to leave?"

Jerr nodded. "Of course."

I walked to the locker room as fast as I could. The sobs built faster now that privacy was imminent, so I sprinted the last few steps, barged into the locker room, and wailed. I fell to my knees and sobbed and leaned against the bench and wiped my tears on my arm and sobbed and covered my face with my hands, and I let out all the worry and terror and fright I'd seen on Lori's face and Douglas' face and underneath the mask of anger on Caleb's face that had built

inside of me and I'd blocked in favor of focused efficiency. I sobbed a little for the accusation and frustration from Caleb, but I sobbed mostly for Isaac. I remembered the terrible, frozen moment when I saw Isaac hit the slide and heard the smack of his head on the plastic rim, and I cried harder. I thought of how limp he'd been in Trev's arms. I replayed how Trev had held him, and I questioned whether I really had hesitated and continued crying.

When the sobs quieted to sniffles and shaky breaths, I stood, rinsed Isaac's blood off my hands and face with cool water from the sink, and slipped a t-shirt and shorts over my wet two-piece. My hair still dripped even after I wrung it out and tied it up. Droplets snaked down my neck and soaked my collar. My sneakers squished as I left the locker room. I walked down the stone steps to the parking lot where Maxine was sitting diligently next to the Yuppie Mobile. I dug Strawberry Shortcake out of Popeye and Olive, fantasizing about a scalding bath and leftover Aesop Fable cookies, but as I approached Maxine, I noticed that the Yuppie Mobile was sitting too low to the ground.

I stopped short, numb. Her tires were shredded. They weren't even just slashed or pierced or deflated. All four of the Yuppie Mobile's lovely, expensive, well-maintained tires were shredded and hanging from their metal rims like frayed, rubber, mohawks. A note fluttered on Maxine's windshield. I stepped forward, gently lifted the wiper— my palms felt bruised as I gripped it— slipped the note from under its thin rubber wipe, and carefully unfolded the note. It seemed right that there should be another note, but other than my palms, I didn't feel a thing as I read:

I fucked up his tires like he fucked up your cherry. You couldn't handle him then, like you can't handle him now, so back off. Tires aren't the only thing that can be sliced.

Trev's Challenger and the Oldsmobile were parked a few rows back from the stone steps. They hadn't been touched. Nothing fluttered from their windshield wipers. I folded the note in the creases it had already been folded in. The air was thicker than it had been yesterday. I wiped the sweat and the water still dripping from my sopping hair off the side of my face with my forearm, and I tucked the note under Maxine's wiper where the siphoner had left it.

Fourteen

The Deitrich house was only a five minute walk from Lakeside. The only other house nearby was Trev's, which was down another few curves in the road. Colton had the entire basement to himself since he'd graduated from college. In high school, he'd shared an upstairs room with his younger brother, Evan, but I'd never been anywhere in their house but the ground floor.

The even pat and squeak of my shoes hitting the pavement was louder than the distant rush of the creek. The mountain was subdued compared to the bustle at Lakeside earlier today, as if the hubbub had been sucked into a driving, focused energy concentrated in my soggy sneakers.

I rounded the first bend in Hollander Road, and Colton's refurbished Victorian leered behind a smattering of trees like an unwanted mole wearing brand name makeup. Mrs. Deitrich must not have switched over to Luke when Cory passed on his lawn care business because her Rhododendrons desperately needed trimming. The porch didn't whine when I stepped on its wooden planks, a testament to expensive carpentry instead of the cross-your-fingers home repair of generous neighbors. I focused on the bed-head bushes instead of the crisp, white shutters and the smooth, glossy, wooden, porch banister and the immaculate pillars on either side of the doorway and the delicate tinkle as I rang the doorbell because the shrubs were a testament to the

farce, and my knotting stomach needed the reminder that I kept my bushes tidy even if I did live in a crumbling, single-story ranch.

No one came to the door. I tried the knob, but it was locked. I rang the bell twice more, but nothing stirred inside the house. Just as I decided that I could safely break in, something heavy clicked and the door cracked open.

“Sugar Patty,” Colton breathed. He stared at me like a less guilty man would look upon the eternal gates and know he was getting in. His shirt was rumpled and half tucked. I looked away from those dark, bottomless eyes that made primmer girls than me want to sin. I reached up to tuck a curl behind my ear only to realize that my hair was tied back. I rubbed the back of my neck instead.

“We need to talk.”

“I’ve tried calling,” he whispered. “Margoe refuses to put you on the phone even when I know you’re not on duty.”

I looked up into his handsome, chiseled, disgruntled face and frowned. “You called my house? Why would you call? I don’t want you calling.”

“That’s what Margoe said. Thank God you’ve changed your mind.”

“I haven’t changed my mind about anything concerning you,” I said, annoyed.

Colton’s nostrils flared slightly. “Then why are you here?”

“To talk about the damn notes and threats against me and Caleb and Maxine.”

He blinked, and the anger that had started to build evaporated into confusion.

“Don’t pretend like you don’t know what’s going on. You’re right in the center of everything between me and Cecilia and the siphoner and—”

“I know,” Colton hissed. He looked behind him, and then turned back to me quickly, his voice hushed. “That’s what I’ve been calling about. There’s not much time. She’s here, and I don’t want her to know that I—”

“Cecilia’s here right now?” I asked, incredulous. “She stayed the whole night? Her mother is going to have a conniption. After all these years I thought she’d have enough sense to at least—”

Colton fisted his hand in my t-shirt. “The ice pick is in Evan’s room. You’ll have to climb the crab apple tree and jump for the roof, but it’s do-able. She used my ice pick this time because last time I ratted to Douglas.”

“You told Douglas who slashed my tires?” I asked, breathless. “But he’s still investigating. He doesn’t know who—”

“She dumped the last ice pick before he searched her place. He knows I know something, but he won’t believe me now. He’s just suspicious. She’s using his doubts to pin everything on me, but it’s not going to work and she knows it. The notes don’t fit with anything I’d write. When she realizes how deep—” Light thumps of someone coming down the steps pattered beyond the door. “Evan has plastic garbage liners in his closet. Get the ice pick and get out.” Colton pushed me away. He slammed the door shut, but as it was closing, I caught a glimpse of a tall woman with long, witch nails and her hair twisted into an octopus claw hair clip. I stared at the shut door for a dumbfounded moment before I could recover enough to dive off the porch and under the Rhododendrons.

How do I always end up hiding under untamed shrubbery? I thought. I army-crawled through the flower beds and around to the back of the house. The dirt and mulch mixed with the chlorinated pool water still dripping from my suit to make a gritty paste that caked onto my

forearms and the entire front half of my body. I clenched my teeth and forged onward. When I reached the back porch, I poked my head out from under the even more unkempt back yard Rhododendrons. The crab apple was not a do-able jumping distance to Evan's balcony window unless I was Galina Chistyakova, but even she'd had a running start. The pillars that supported the roof, on the other hand, had a winding spiral design carved up their length that I could probably scale.

I peeked up over the shrubbery to creep through the window. Colton was pounding into Jackie on the den floor. I cringed and ducked back under the bushes. *At least she's distracted*, I thought, and I dampened the unwanted memories to focus on the present problem. The Rhododendrons were further from the back porch pillars than from the front porch pillars. I'd be exposed longer, but I was also at the back of the house. The only person I really had to avoid was Jackie. Anyone on the road wouldn't be able to see me, and Colton didn't have next door neighbors to spy on him. The spiral design on the pillars was deep enough I should be able to dig my fingers in to climb.

I squatted in the mulch, readying myself to spring up out of the shrubs and attempt to scale an old Victorian roof pillar, when two arms burst through the foliage, gripped me roughly around the waist, yanked me out of the Rhododendrons, and tossed me on the ground on my stomach.

"Ouf," I wheezed. My cheek and arms stung where the branches had scratched.

A knee pressed hard between my shoulder blades. I turned my head to see who it was, but he wrenched my arm behind my back.

"Get off!" I shouted, trying to buck him off balance.

He wrenched back my other arm, and something hard and cold and tight synched around my wrist. I froze.

“You have the right to remain silent,” Bruno said. Excitement bubbled in his tone.

“Oh, for the love of God,” I muttered.

“Anything you say can and will be used against you in the court of law.”

I struggled against him, but I may as well have been struggling against an armed rhinoceros with opposable thumbs. “What the hell are you doing, Bruno?”

“They’re called Miranda rights. You get them when you’re being arrested. It really pains me to do this, Patricia,” Bruno said, not sounding pained in the least, “But I have to arrest you.”

“For what?” I snapped.

“Trespassing.”

I rested my forehead against the ground as the handcuff clicked around my other wrist. “I was not trespassing. Ask Colton. He’s in the den.”

“Don’t need to,” Bruno hauled me to my feet with one hand under my arm. “Jackie called and said you were trying to break in. That boy’s got one loyal girlfriend. Sticking by him through thick and thin she is.” He puffed out his already expansive chest. “I got here just in the nick of time.”

“Yeah, you’re a real paragon of swift action.” I muttered.

“You have the right to an attorney.”

“Like I can afford an attorney,” I huffed.

“An attorney can be appointed to you free of charge,” he informed as he led me to his parked police cruiser on the side of Hollander Road.

“Yes, thank you, Bruno. I was especially worried about that one.”

“No problem,” He said, full of sincerity. “Watch your head.”

The ride back up Buckbur Mountain to the police station took two minutes— I could have made it in one— information, prints, and my mug shot took fifteen minutes, and I was in a cell in twenty, the only occupied cell out of five dusty, underused cells. Bruno was the only cop on duty, which may have been a score in my favor in another universe where he couldn’t snap me in half with his trigger finger. He offered me the house phone for my one call, but I couldn’t bear to hear Margoe screech about losing social rank, I was too embarrassed to call Jerr, Caleb had enough disaster in his life today without me adding to his pile of shit, and Garrett didn’t pick up. I hung up without leaving a message, much to Bruno’s disapproval. He locked me in the cell— the clang of metal sliding into metal sounded disturbingly final— and I hunkered down on the firm, dry-rotted, neglected cot to wait out the night or until Garrett saw the missed call on his phone or until the rumor mill had Margoe racing up Buckbur like the Horseman of Death.

No one was going to believe that I’d had permission to break into Colton’s house even if Colton risked castration by acrylic nail scraping and ratted out Jackie again. Both our reputations were ruined. Everyone might wonder what took me so long to retaliate and how the hell Bruno had managed to take me down when I’d outwitted Douglas all week, but no one would question the legitimacy of me breaking into Colton’s house. What a shame Douglas hadn’t been on duty. He could have finally busted me and restored a little piece of justice and order to his life. Instead, my incarceration only bloated Bruno’s head with more hot air to cook what precious brain cells he didn’t have to spare, provided Harriet Carol with an interesting topic for her next social gathering, and perpetuated the creek kid stereotype by being the first local since Dean’s last bar fight to get arrested. If I was doing time it should be for something memorable and courageous and for the good of all, like stealing from the yuppies and giving to the creek kids. Robin Hood

didn't get thrown in the dungeon before spreading the wealth, and he certainly never let the king's half-witted manservant be the goon to stop the legend. Next time I got busted, I'd make sure someone would benefit from the risk besides myself, so when I fucked up, someone else can reap some sort of satisfaction other than Bruno.

I dozed off thinking about the phone calls and Robin Hood and rumors and Isaac when my cell door clanged open.

"I restrain myself from judo chopping the siphoner so I'd be available to bail you out, and you didn't even call."

I looked up, and I forgot to breathe.

Bruno couldn't have frowned more deeply without leaving permanent creases between his eyebrows. He pulled the key out of the lock and grumbled something indecipherable to Caleb.

"Don't take it up with me," Caleb said, the epitome of calm reason. "You heard him call it in. I'm just her ride."

Bruno walked away, grumbling something about snoots thinking they're above the law. .

Caleb leaned against the open door. "I've heard you were caught crawling under people's flower beds again."

"It's becoming a problem," I said, sitting up. A few dry grains of mulch had clumped and rolled off my t-shirt as I moved. "So you're my ride?"

He nodded. "Anywhere you want, and then we can reenact the last time I caught you under the bushes."

“Three problems with that, Rambo,” I said, ticking off the problems with my fingers. “One, you weren’t the person who caught me this time. Two, I’ve gone without longer than this, so I’m not resorting to conjugal visits. And three, I don’t want you posting my bail.”

“I’m not.”

“Good,” I said, feeling disappointed. I stared at the chipped, brown painted floor. “How’s Isaac? Is Douglas holding up alright?”

He nodded. “Isaac was very lucky. He has a concussion, but no neck or spinal injuries. He’ll be able to leave in the morning. If we were anywhere but Dansbury, they would have released him by now, but you know Dr. Carol. Douglas is going to stay with him overnight.”

I let out a long breath. “Thank God he’s alright.”

“Thanks to you.”

I looked up sharply.

“And Trev, I suppose,” Caleb conceded, grinning.

“What made you change your mind?” I gripped the side of the mattress.

“Reason.” Caleb swiped his hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, Patty. I shouldn’t have been angry that you were secondary rescuer. You were right. I should have been there as your head guard to support you or not been there at all. I acted like an asshole.”

I stood. “You acted like any worried parent would.”

“Douglas didn’t act like that,” he said, walking toward me.

I stepped closer and met him halfway. “True.”

Caleb wrapped his arms around my back and held me close against him. “That’s right, Patty. Icing it up for me.”

“You don’t need icing. I like you the way you are.”

“Asshole and all?” he asked.

“Well, you are bailing me out of jail.”

“I already told you. I’m not posting any bail.” He kissed my forehead. “Where do you want to go? I was thinking we could grab a shower, and then head back to the hospital if you want to check on—”

“How are we going anywhere without bail?” I asked. I followed him out of the cell but looked around warily, waiting for Bruno to sneak-attack me again.

Caleb looked smug. “Douglas sent me to fetch you. He’s expunging your arrest.”

“He can do that?” I asked, surprised.

“He’s the chief of police for a town where everyone knows everyone’s last name, birthday, current girlfriend, past girlfriends, fantasy girlfriend, and favorite cookie flavor. Douglas can do whatever he wants,” he said. We passed Bruno at the front desk, and Caleb waved. Bruno glared, one unhappy police underling.

“Oh.” I frowned. “Why would he want to let me out? Isn’t he about ready to shoot himself over all this?”

Caleb held the door open and frowned at me as I stepped outside. “Why would he want to do that?”

“He missed his big chance to bust me and get his edge back. Bruno was there instead. That had to burn.”

“Douglas didn’t miss anything. Unlike Officer Oblivious, Douglas only arrests people for actually breaking the law.”

I whirled around mid-stride as Caleb shut the door behind him. “He knows that I wasn’t breaking in?” I asked in a hot hush.

“No. Douglas is pretty much convinced you were breaking in because Jerr reported the vandalism done to my BMW. Breaking and entering is your standard method of coping and gathering information.”

I wiggled my hands in the air. “Well, I wouldn’t want to disappoint.”

“Fortunately for you, Colton claims that he knew you were in the back yard. He made up some ridiculous story about you wanting to make crab apple jam, which neither of us has been able to make sense of,” Caleb said, sounding bemused.

“Colton had plans for me and that tree, but I’d opted for the bushes because they were closer to the pillar.”

“Right. So Colton covered your ass, which is just as well because Douglas already knows something’s up with Jackie and Colton. He’s just not sure which one.”

“Colton’s not the problem. It’s Jackie we have to worry about.”

“Maybe.”

“What do you mean, ‘Maybe?’” I ducked into the Yuppie Mobile and waited for Caleb to walk around to the other side, open the door, and sit before continuing. “She’s the siphoner. She’s the one who’s been writing the letters and making threats and booby trapping my life.”

He twisted the key in the ignition. “And you came to that conclusion how?”

“Colton said so, but it makes sense. Jackie—”

“What have you ever done to her? Why would she have a grudge against you?”

I hesitated. “I don’t know. But Colton—”

“Could be lying.” Caleb jerked his thumb behind him. “Your place to shower before we double back to the hospital?”

“I need to burn some music for Isaac before we go,” I said, nodding. “I don’t think Colton’s lying. Jackie is trying to set Colton up. He—”

“Could be trying to set up Jackie.”

I shook my head. “The letters don’t make sense coming from him.”

Caleb shifted into first and started the drive down the mountain. “He could have written them that way deliberately to set Jackie up. He could be angry that you haven’t answered his calls and jealous that you’re with me. He’s the more likely suspect of the two.”

“How do you know he was calling me?”

“Margoe told me. She had me install call ID, so she didn’t have to answer his calls anymore.”

“Ah, and the world makes sense again.” I said. “I don’t think you’re right about Colton though. You weren’t there when he grabbed me. You didn’t see the ware of desperation and worry on his face and in his voice as he said that Jackie was going too far. He said it as if he was scared of her.”

Caleb stared at me for a moment before turning his eyes back to the road. “I expected you of all people to jump on him for this once Douglas started to suspect him. I know I did.”

“I want whoever is siphoning and slashing to actually get caught. If it happens to be Colton, then that’s great, but I don’t want the real siphoner free to roam Hazen Street just for spite.”

“The siphoner will not be left to roam free. We’ll get the bastard,” Caleb said, his voice low and sure.

“I hope so,” I said. “I don’t know how much more Maxine can take.”

We made it down the mountain in seven and a half minutes— wonderful time— but that was the only record Caleb apparently intended on breaking. He undressed me slowly, smoothing his hands over my sides and up my arms to lift my shirt over my head. He kissed my stomach and licked and nibbled his way up my neck to my mouth where he teased and nipped and lingered. The shower head beat steadily, soaking over my hair and skin. Between the smooth, insistent, coaxing of Caleb’s lips and hands and the warm water pulsing over me, the remnants of Isaac’s blood and Colton’s untrimmed Rhododendrons rinsed away.

By the time we reached the hospital, Douglas was conked out on the chair next to Isaac’s bed, and Isaac was watching reruns of Nick at Nite on a fuzzy, twelve inch, TV and VHS combo. His head was wrapped in gauze like a war veteran.

“Hey, bud.”

Isaac smiled up at Caleb, saw me shutting the door behind us, and turned back to the TV in stoic silence.

“I’m going to the vending machine for a few minutes,” Caleb said. “Do you want anything?”

Isaac shook his head.

Caleb squeezed my shoulder on his way passed. I waited until he’d shut the door behind him before walking closer to the bed. “I like your turban,” I said. “It’s very dashing.”

He picked up the remote.

“I’m sorry about our fight the other day.”

Isaac stared at the TV and clicked through the channels.

“I have something for you.” I held out the CD I’d burned after my shower with Caleb. “It’s not what you wanted, but consider it a peace offering.”

He turned to me then. I stepped closer, sat on the edge of his bed, and handed him the CD.

“It’s the same design as the shirt I bought,” he said, rubbing his thumb over the cover.

“I figured you should have all their songs, not just ‘Caught Up in You.’ A real fan should know everything their band’s about.” I tapped the plastic cover with my finger. “There’s some damn good hits on this thing.”

Isaac looked up at me. “Thanks.” He smiled mischievously, as if he was happy but not only because of the CD, and I felt something rigid and gnawing that had been clenched in my gut relax. “Uncle Caleb mentioned that you’re going with him to Leven.”

“Yeah,” I said breezily. “It should be fun. I’ve never been to Scotland.”

“He said that I could visit anytime I wanted as long as it didn’t interfere with school.”

I rolled my eyes and huffed. “Jeez, I thought I was something special, but he doesn’t have any discretion if he’s just inviting any old person to Scotland.”

Isaac pushed my shoulder, laughing. “Hey!”

“Izzy, it wouldn’t be the same if you didn’t visit. Who would I corrupt with movie quotes and rock music? Caleb isn’t as open-minded about expanding his pop-culture tastes as you are.”

“Yeah, that’s mostly how I see it too.” He fingered the edge of the CD case. “After the rumors and the fight and everything I said though, I just wanted to make sure.”

I squeezed his knee through the sheet. “I’ll be looking forward to your visits, as long as we never repeat the past two days.”

He nodded enthusiastically. “I’ll pinky promise to that.”

Isaac offered me his pinky. I hesitated for a moment, dissecting how I’d worded the promise and wondering if he could hold it against me as an excuse to flip off another tube slide,

but I wanted both sides of that deal; only good could come of that. Knowing Isaac though, he'd cook up a way to twist it and finagle his way into trouble, as always. I smiled because I'd be there to stick it to him right back.

I linked my pinky with his, pulled myself in close, and kissed Isaac's forehead. His skin was cool and half swathed in bandages. "You're my favorite MacCallaghan. Don't tell your Uncle." I smooched his bandaged forehead one last time and leaned back.

Isaac jutted forward suddenly. He locked his lanky arms tight around my neck, pressing his smooth, baby-soft cheek against mine. His gauze snagged my gauges as our faces rubbed together. I wrapped my arms around him, and when I smoothed my hand over his back, he snuggled closer. His steady breath warmed my neck. The flutter of his eyelashes tickled under my jaw, and I held him with all the love and relief and escape he'd blindsided me with simply by waiting for me to show up.

I stayed for a little while. We watched almost a full episode of "Bewitched" before Caleb returned from the vending machine with a bag of M&Ms. He ate half the bag before handing them over to Isaac. Isaac hoarded them after that, so I could only sweet talk him into giving me two despite having just given him an entire CD. Caleb kissed Isaac's forehead when we left. Isaac concentrated on Endora as she turned Darren into something ridiculous, but when Caleb turned around to leave, Isaac glanced away from the TV. His lips quirked softly when Caleb wasn't looking.

I shut the door behind us as we left, and we'd just rounded the corner in the hallway when we bumped into Misty. She held a dark green polyester backpack over one shoulder like a purse. Her hair was tied back in a sloppy ponytail, and she wasn't wearing any eyeliner. I'd never seen her without makeup before. She wasn't as mesmerizingly pinup-like, but somehow

she seemed more real even though her purple tube top stretched thinly across her bust to show a hint of the orange polka-dots on her strapless bra.

“Misty,” I said, a little surprised. “Hi.”

“What a coincidence running into you here, huh?” She smiled at Caleb. “Isaac is still doing well?”

“He’s doing just fine. Thanks for asking. I hope nothing too serious has brought you up here tonight.”

Misty jiggled the backpack at us. “Same as you. Douglas could probably use a few things from home since he’s staying the night.” She hesitated, suddenly unsure. “Right?”

Caleb blinked rapidly. “That’s very thoughtful of you, Misty. I’m sure he’ll appreciate whatever you’ve packed.”

Misty bit her lip. Even without the make-up, she still looked depraved. She turned to me. “Actually, could I talk to you for a moment?”

“Oh.” I looked at Caleb and then back at Misty. “Sure.”

“I’ll just be over here,” Caleb said and walked further down the hallway.

“What’s up? Is something wrong?”

“I just wanted to say thank you for everything you told me.”

I frowned. “About counting and letting men notice you?”

She nodded.

“Look, Misty, I know it seems like everything worked out so nice and tidy right after we talked, but it doesn’t always work out that way. Men don’t always just notice you and instantly want to have sex,” I said, and I realized who I was talking to. “Well, maybe they do instantly

want to have sex with you, but if you wait a little longer so they know you before having sex, you'll have more of a chance of making it count."

"Douglas counts."

"Yes, I know, but—"

"No buts," Misty interrupted. "Trevor and I have known each other our whole lives, but he doesn't know me. When we were together, I wasn't anything more than a body. He'd leave afterward, and I'd lie in bed and think how good it had been and how much I liked him and when I'd get to see him again." She scoffed. "I can't breathe let alone think after I'm with Douglas. He stayed, and we talked all night," Misty said in awe as if he'd magically separated the linking rings, and she couldn't figure out how. "I'm a person with plans and goals and a life outside of my time with him, and Douglas actually cares to know about it. He cares to know about me. The caring is what matters, not the knowing."

I thought of Sydes and William and how much it had hurt when they had left. I thought of Frank. They'd known me and they'd counted and they'd still left.

"What about Caleb?"

I blinked back from my own thoughts. "What about him?" I glanced up at him waiting down the hallway.

"Should you have had sex with him even just knowing him less than a week? 'Cause I've only known Douglas a day, and I know for sure that I was meant to have sex with him."

Caleb looked annoyed.

"I don't know, but I'm glad I did. I'm not just a body either."

"I'm never going to be just a body again."

My throat tightened because I'd heard that tone before. "Good for you."

Misty smiled, radiant with post-coital pillow talk, and I took it back; she was more mesmerizing without her make-up.

Fifteen
Sunday

“Patty-without-the-Cake.”

I didn’t bother opening my eyes. The bed had shifted and dipped when Caleb had woken fifteen minutes ago, and in the fifteen minutes he’d taken to get ready, the sun hadn’t risen.

“I’m going back to the hospital, if you want to come.” His lips whispered against the shell of my ear.

I turned over and squinted up at him. His face hovered a few inches away. I only had time to appreciate a quick blur of intense turquoise eyes, smooth cheeks, and chin dimple before my eyelids succumbed to exhaustion.

“Are you crazy?” I croaked. “The sun’s not even up yet, which means I am still dead to the world.”

“The sun’s been up for six hours. It’s just cloudy outside from the storm.”

My eyes snapped open. “Storm?” I squirmed out from under Caleb, shoved aside my lacy curtain, and peered out the window. Rain wasn’t falling, but the clouds upstream were black and billowing and brewing up something promising. “Finally! We haven’t had thunder all week.”

Caleb leaned back. “What does it matter? You’re not working.”

I glanced at him and tsked. “No one will be working. We’ll be Hubbing.”

“With everything that’s happened with Jackie and Colton and Cecilia, perhaps you should skip the Hubbing, and come with me to visit Isaac.”

I threw off the covers, ran to my dresser, and started changing. “This won’t be any old Hub in the Hut. Everything that has happened with Jackie and Colton and Cecilia is the very reason why I need to go. They’ll all be there. I can confront Cecilia about boinking Colton, I can confront Jackie about vandalizing Maxine, and Garrett and Misty can testify against who attacks who so I won’t be unjustly arrested again. All the drama can end, and our lives will be boinking and vandalization-free.” I pulled a pair of jean shorts over my one-piece.

“I certainly don’t want to live a life that’s boinking-free,” Caleb muttered. He was facing me on my bed, his feet flat on the floor.

I slipped a t-shirt over my head, slinked toward Caleb as sexily as shorts, a t-shirt, and the grogginess of just waking up allowed, and straddled his legs. “We’ll never stop boinking,” I said between kisses. “It’s just the evil, gas-siphoning, tire-slashing cheaters who don’t get to have anymore fun.”

Caleb worked his lips over my neck, and his hand wandered under my suit. “Thanks for clearing that up. Maybe we could—”

“Nope.” I smacked my lips against his, untangled myself from his capable embrace, and ran toward the door. “I’ll meet you at the hospital later.”

“When will that be?” he asked, looking disgruntled in a wrinkled creamsicle sea.

“After I Hub in the Hut.”

Caleb swiped his jeans off the floor and shoved his legs through the holes. “How long will that take?” he groused.

“Until later.” I blew him a kiss as I jogged out of my bedroom only to stop short before colliding with Margoe and a tray of blueberry pancakes and sausage links she was holding.

“Breakfast?”

“Thanks.” I snatched a pancake off the stack. “Caleb could use the rest. I just pissed him off.” I bent down and kissed Margoe’s cheek. “I’ll see you later too.”

“Going to Hub in the Hut? It looks menacing out there.”

“Yup,” I said over my shoulder.

“You should stay and enjoy breakfast before you leave. I’m not gonna be there to cook for you when you’re in Scotland, you know.”

I froze. Margoe didn’t say anything else, so I pivoted. She stood outside my bedroom door, looking at me just as pleasant as she had a moment before even though worlds had just collided.

“What do you know about Scotland?”

Margoe waved her hand dismissively. “You think Caleb MacCallaghan would take my baby all the way across the world without asking permission from me first? Ha!”

I blinked. “When did you talk to—” and then the light dawned. “He seduced you with a Bengay rubbing into letting him seduce me. You, with all that talk of visiting and Mad Libbing fantasies about grandchildren, you knew he was going to whisk me to Leven.”

“The man’s taking you to his home town. That’s a big step.”

“Damn right it is.” Caleb sauntered out of my room, devastating even when fully dressed, swiped a pancake from the stack, and bent to kiss Margoe. She blushed and gazed at him from over her gold and brown, rhinestone-studded cat glasses. She edged the breakfast platter closer to him, unfazed by the profanity.

I narrowed my eyes at the two of them.

“Thank you, lass. I hate to eat and run, but I need to visit Isaac.”

“Of course, dear. Here, take another for the road.”

“That I will.” He burritoed a pancake around a sausage link and took a bite.

I rolled my eyes, turned my back on my sucker of a grandmother and schmooze of a boyfriend, and nine minutes later, Maxine was parked in Lakeside’s parking lot. I walked up the stone steps to the locker rooms. Thunder rumbled over Lake Wimple. The air smelled damp and acrid and thick as the first wave of drizzle hit the summer-warmed asphalt, and my heart thumped with anticipation. I ran hunched against the rain to the Hut.

When I opened the door, Garrett, Trev, Misty, and Cecilia were already sitting around the plastic table. Garrett saluted me with his beer can. Trev smiled warily before looking away. Misty beamed, practically bouncing in her lawn chair from exuberance. Cecilia took a healthy swig of strawberry daiquiri wine cooler.

Garrett nudged the refrigerator open with his foot. “Which’ll it be: mango wine cooler, beer, or Hug Your Cat cutout cookie? Misty’s regaling us with tales of counting.”

Trev took a healthy swig of his margarita wine cooler.

“A cookie would be great. Why’s your mom stuck on June fourth?” I hunkered down into the fridge for the Tupperware.

“Lot’s of holidays on June fourth. She still has Applesauce Cake day and Old Maid’s day to celebrate, but the Hug Your Cat day was easier to make cut outs for.”

I sat between Misty and Garrett, opened the Tupperware, picked out a kitten cookie with a Reese's Pieces nose, Twizzler whiskers, and a Laffy Taffy tail, and placed the Tupperware in the middle for everyone.

“And I have Patty to thank for all of it,” Misty said, gesturing at me as if I was a prop in her side show.

I bit off the kitten's head. The peanut butter of the Reese's mixed with the cherry of the Twizzler mixed with the vanilla, sugary, flakiness of the cut out was odd, but not bad. "Actually, there's been a whole lot of counting going around in Dansbury."

Cecilia's hand was tense around her wine cooler.

"So I've heard," Misty said, sounding concerned. "Not all of it's true though, right? Douglas assured me that, well, he assured me that not all of the rumors are true." Misty glanced between Cecilia and me skeptically.

"No, not all of it's true. Actually, when the rumors started Friday afternoon, none of them were true."

Trev took another swig of his margarita.

Misty's lips curved into her lascivious, Clara Bow pout. "But you made at least one of the rumors true, isn't that so?"

Trev made a gurgling noise. He swallowed and started coughing, and Cecilia thumped him on the back a few times for good measure.

I wiggled my eyebrows at Misty and took another munch out of my cat cutout.

"Ooooo!" Misty squealed. "I just knew you were only with Caleb. I'm glad. I didn't like thinking that after all you had said that you would bend it into something hurtful and selfish. Unless of course the three of you all wanted each other equally, then maybe that would be—"

"You mean, if say, hypothetically, the rumor about me having sex with Colton was true, that would be hurtful and selfish?"

"Of course." Misty looked at me as if I was talking nonsense. "He has a girlfriend, and you know he has a girlfriend. Completely disregarding that just because you think he'll have you is just plain rude, not that he'd be all that great of a catch anyway if he's juggling girls."

Trev slouched in his seat.

“I think you’re on to something there, Misty.” I looked at Cecilia. She met my eyes. Her hands were still white-knuckling her wine cooler, but she hadn’t taken a sip since I sat down. “I don’t know what possesses a girl when a guy takes a look at her. Even if she knows he’s taken, she’ll want him anyway. Sometimes she’ll want him even more because she knows she shouldn’t have him. Girls bitch all the time about their cheating, bastard boyfriends, but we do it to ourselves just as much as they do it to us. Even best friends will have sex with guys they know should be off limits.”

Misty frowned. She turned to look at Cecilia.

Cecilia stared at me.

“Colton doesn’t care how many girls he hurts as long as he gets to be with all of them. They’re not individual people with thoughts and feeling and needs and wants to him; we’re just bodies. You let him come between us, and for what? He doesn’t even care.”

Cecilia was crying now. Thick, bloated tears streamed down her face and reddened her eyes.

“Why did you let Colton hurt us, Celia, even knowing that he had a girlfriend? Even knowing how he’d hurt me?”

She wiped at her face. “Dean gets into too many fights, so you don’t want to be with him. Trev had a girlfriend, so you don’t want to be with him. Colton’s a little rough, so you didn’t want to be with him. Me being with Colton didn’t take anyone away from you that you wanted. You don’t want any of them!”

“This isn’t about taking away a potential suitor,” I snapped.

“It is for me,” Cecilia ground out. “Who do I have lined up waiting with numbers for me to call on and reject? You toss away guys that I would love to have, good guys that don’t deserve to be tossed aside.”

“So take them!”

“I can’t because they all want you! You think that I would choose Colton over Dean or Garrett or even Trev? Colton actually wanted me. Finally! Someone who knows both of us, and he actually wanted to be with me.”

I shook my head, disgusted. “Colton hurt me. As my friend, you should hate his fucking guts as much as I do. You should feel the pain he caused me and want to avenge me. You should not want to be with him no matter how much he wants you.”

Cecilia slammed her fist on the table. The bottle trembled. “It didn’t matter if he hurt you seven years ago! It didn’t matter if he was hurting Jackie! He’s hurting me now too!” She sobbed. “You’re so fucking picky about who you want to keep, but I don’t have that luxury! There was Colton or there was nobody!”

I stared at her, stunned. “You can’t use that as justification for anything. I had that choice, and I chose nobody for seven years until I found someone who cares, who is *single*, and has the potential to stick around. I hope you’re content with yourself because after everything you’ve done and everyone you’ve hurt, you’re still not with anyone.”

The rotary phone trilled on its stand next to the checklist clipboard. We stared at it in silence, no one quite sure what to do and waiting for someone else to do it. I’ve never heard that phone ring in the seven summers I’ve lifeguarded at Lakeside, even on a Hub day when the pool was essentially on lock down. I didn’t even think the Hut phone still worked let alone that anyone knew the number for it.

“Who would call here?” Misty asked, perplexed.

I stood. “It has to be Jerr or Caleb. Probably Jerr.”

“Why would he call here on a storm day? The pool’s closed.”

“Only one way to find out.” I picked up the receiver. “Hello?” I asked uncertainly.

“Patricia?” Jerr asked.

“Yeah, it’s me. What’s up? Is something—”

“Who’s there with you?”

I turned to look at the people sitting around the plastic table behind me. “Garrett, Misty, Trev, and Cecilia. Why? Does it mat—”

“Where’s Jackie? She ain’t with everyone in the Hut?” he asked quickly.

“No, she never showed. Did she not call out?” I asked, wondering why that would be a surprise. “It’s not like we need her today anyway.”

“Do not leave the Hut. I’m on my way up the mountain as we speak. Get in touch with Jackie if you can, and make sure she’s up Buckbur past Old Orchard. The creek is breachin’ the dike.”

I felt the phone in my hand and my ear against the receiver and my gauges clicking against its hard plastic, but it took a second for what Jerr had said to register. “The creek is flooding.”

“That’s right. Mayor Winneski just issued a flash flood warning. Everyone’s evacuatin’ up the mountain ’til the storm passes.”

“Mama Margoe is still at home. I need to—”

“Your grandmother’s right here with me. I picked her, Mrs. Webber, and Presley up on my way out. The Doughertys already booked it to Harriet Carol’s. That woman could’ve turned the holocaust into a themed social gathering.”

I rolled my eyes.

“My mom too.” Garrett whispered. “We could drive down quick and—”

I waved Garrett away and gave him a thumbs up.

“I’ll drop the ladies off at the Carol’s, and then check on all yous at the Hut. Try to get in touch with Jackie in the meantime for me, will ya?”

“Sure will.”

“Thanks. See ya soon.”

“Bye.” I replace the receiver in the cradle.

Garrett was still tensed to jump out of his metal folding chair and into action. “And Presley—”

“Jerr’s bringing Margoe, your mom, and Presley over to the Carol’s. Relax. They’re fine. Our houses will be soggy and collapsing, but they’ll be eating brie on wheat crackers and washing it down with Dom Perignon.”

Trev whistled. “Wow. Another flood. It’s coming down pretty hard out there, but I didn’t think it was that bad. We haven’t had to evacuate since ’99.”

The storm rained steadily down on the Hut. The occasional crash and rumble of thunder interjected through the rushing downpour and filled the sudden silence between all of us. I remembered the smell of Old Spice clinging to Martin’s neatly tucked shirt and his lips that had waited all night for that one moment to make it count. The thought of our picture being washed

off of Jerr's console television and taken by the current panged almost as much as the real loss of Martin himself.

"Are we safe up here?" Trev asked, breaking the tension. "We're at the top of the mountain, but we are only in a shed."

I cleared my throat. "Jerr's coming up to check on us in a few minutes. We need to get in touch with Jackie and make sure she's gotten the flood memo."

Cecilia crossed her arms. "Or not."

Misty glared at her.

"Oh, crap!" Garrett burst. "Mom never called Dean to fix our pump. My basement is going to be a freakin' swamp when we get back."

"It might be alright. Frank never reset Margoe's pump when he left, but sometimes the basement carpet—" My voice droned off as I remembered that I'd never finished going through all of Frank's boxes. Most of them were still stacked in the basement. I hadn't organized them or thrown out the boxes I had organized. The CD's were still there. The ugly tie, the cheese puff cologne, and the one picture with both my parents actually together and smiling and alive were still there. I envisioned the lonely, contemplative woman on the cover of *The Oxford Book of English Verse* ripped from her binding and bobbing in flooded creek muck, and my stomach knotted.

I ran for the Hut door.

"Patty-Cake? Where—"

"The boxes!" I pulled the Hut door open, and a gust of wind yanked it out of my hands. It swung wide and clattered into the shelves. "I'll be right back."

I stepped out into the pelting rain and shut the door firmly behind me with both hands. My clothes were soaked through to my underwear before I even reached the locker rooms. The wind whipped the rain sideways and stung my skin. I had to crouch slightly as I ran to keep balance.

“Ready to go mudding, Baby?” I gave Maxine’s hood a quick pat as I passed. I hopped into the seat and twisted Strawberry Shortcake in the ignition. She purred to life. “Here’s to hoping it’s not too bad yet, and we don’t end up swimming.”

I shifted her into first, and we gunned out of the parking lot. The windshield wipers couldn’t keep up with the heavy drops and how fast the windshield was swiping into them, but I could still see the road in brief glimpses. I didn’t really need to see to drive down the mountain anyway. The turns on Hollander road were pretty dicey even past Trev’s house. Water sprayed up in a swooshing arc as I zoomed passed. I braked slightly and smoothly into the turn, and floored out of it, spinning my wheels and spitting mud and water. I felt the shocking double thump of Maxine plowing over something large in the road. The blurred, cylinder-shaped object was indecipherable in my side-view and rear-view mirror. I glanced back and recognized the sticks and fluttering vegetation on the end of it as branches and leaves. I must have run over a tree trunk.

I stroked Maxine’s dashboard. “Keep it up. We girls don’t let anything stand in our way.”

The sharp turn after Frank’s gnarled oak and the straightaway approached. I couldn’t make out the curve signs or road lines through the spray on the windshield and the fog-like bounce of the rain ricocheting off the asphalt, but I knew the feel of the turn’s pull in my back as I strained to stay in my seat. I knew the angle of my steering wheel and the pressure of my seatbelt holding secure. I flirted with the edge of speed and control like I used to, and because I

was propelled by urgency instead of rage, I could stay in control and push Maxine against the rain and mud and potholes and limits of physics.

I made it down the mountain and parked in front of my house in seven minutes, a new record. Hazen Street was flooded halfway up Maxine's tires. There was only a slim foot between the water and her underbelly. I'd better snatch whatever I planned to salvage and escape back up the mountain before Maxine floated away.

I hopped out and splashed onto the ground. The creek water was freezing and thick with mud and gravel and slime as I waded up the walk. I stepped out of the water, onto the creaky porch—the boards groaned in agony as I clopped over them—and ran inside. The screen door slapped shut behind me. I lunged for the basement steps and stopped short. There were no basement steps. The creek water only had another foot to go before it started to spread through the kitchen. Whatever boxes I'd left on the curb for the garbage man and Margoe had brought back down to the basement were ruined. I reminded myself that I'd intended to throw them out anyway, that they'd only contained hangers and stinky cologne and that God-awful tie—I'd only lost things to definitely chuck—but I felt as if Frank was dying all over again. The grief I'd resented even more than I'd resented him slammed into me again.

"It can't hurt to lose something you wanted to be rid of," I hissed at myself as I stared at the almost visibly rising creek water consuming Margoe's basement and what was left of Frank's life and all the memories I'd struggled not to remember fondly, and I couldn't convince myself that it didn't hurt. I missed him. I'd missed him when I was thirteen and he'd moved out to live with Susan Carol; I'd missed him when I was twenty and he'd built a new family with Madeline on a mountain where I'd never be completely welcome; and I missed him now that he was truly,

irrevocably gone. He'd left me willingly and then permanently, and I'd hated him for it. I might always hate him for it, but I'd always miss him too.

I backed away from the basement steps, feeling spent and disappointed and alone, and I remembered the one box I'd stashed and saved upstairs. I could recover the music from the Lyric Man Music CD I'd given Isaac, but *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, the framed photo, the sheet music, and the letters were irreplaceable. They actually mattered. I ran down the hallway, burst into my room, and came up short, my heart stuttering. I tried to recover my balance, but a thin sheen of creek water had glazed over the hardwood floor, and my feet slid out from under me. I landed flat on my back with a hard "Oof!" as the breath knocked out of my chest, and Jackie blinked over her shoulder at me from across my bedroom floor where she knelt on her hands and knees. She turned to face me and stood, gripping a freshly stained ice pick in her hand.

We stared at each other for a shocked moment. I stood up slowly in an attempt not to aggravate the tension.

"Hi Jackie. What are you doing?" I asked casually. My heartbeat pulsed through my ears.

"Don't talk to me like I'm a nutcase," she snapped. "What the hell does it look like I'm doing?" Jackie placed the ice pick on my bed. The blood still on its blade smeared on my creamsicle comforter. I fought to keep my face bland.

"It looks like your placing a dirty ice pick on my clean sheets."

"Can't pull a fast one on you, can I?" She crossed her thin arms over her chest.

I kept my eyes on Jackie because I half expected her to lift the ice pick off my bed and lunge full *Psycho*-style, but out of my peripheral, I could see Frank's box next to my bed, just behind her feet. "You managed to pull one off Friday while I was at work. Margoe had the damndest time with that load. Pun intended."

She sneered at me with disgust. “I don’t know why your low class, trashy, creek talk surprises me after that production you starred in with Trevor at Lakeside. Go loot through someone’s house, so you can get arrested again and spare the loyal, well-bred citizens of this town your—”

“Can the bologna. I wouldn’t get all high and mighty on your glass throne, Miss ‘diseased pussy parade.’ Loyal, well-bred citizens do not go around siphoning their neighbor’s gas, slashing their tires, and booby-trapping their Jeep, porch, and bed. Harriet Carol would piss on your breeding. What the hell did I ever do to you?”

“What did you do to me?” she repeated, outraged. “It’s not what you did to me; it’s what you did to Colton!”

“If memory serves me correctly, and I’m pretty sure I’d know better than you on this one, Colton’s the one who screwed me over.”

“I’m not talking about whatever happened between you two in high school. I’m talking about what happened Sunday night. Why do you think I tried to destroy your Jeep? You snuck out with Colton during the party and fucked him in that sorry excuse of a motor vehicle, but God forbid Caleb should allow a scratch on your precious Jeep.”

“I did not have sex with Colton Sunday night. I haven’t had sex with anyone since high school until two days ago!”

“Bullshit!” Jackie shouted. “I saw you. You didn’t even bother driving down the mountain. I followed you around the curve in the road, and I watched as you went down on him. I watched his face tip back and slacken as you disappeared under the window in your gaudy, purple, slut shirt, and he loved it.” Her voice broke as she screeched ‘love.’ Tears flowed over her face. She struggled to speak through the sobs and hiccups and hate. “Does that get your rocks

off, knowing that he wanted you more than he wanted me, that he was willing to throw five years with me away for twenty minutes with you in the cramped backseat of your Jeep? He was waiting for me to graduate. My parents were giving us an acre of Old Orchard to help us get started. I stopped using birth control,” she growled, still hysterical, but with a quiet focus that made me stop inching toward Frank’s box and pay attention. “Dean Russiani has worshiped the ground you drive over since he sold you that monstrosity of a Jeep. Trevor would carve out his own kidney if it meant having sex with you. Garrett thinks he’s gay, but I’ve seen the way he looks at you; starving children in Ethiopia could look at restaurant advertisements with less longing. You have Caleb— that hulking, immovable, beast of a man— completely whipped. He practically bought you a whole new, perfect Jeep. You could have them all, but you took Colton. You took my plans and my hopes and my love and you sucked them dry in twenty minutes. You made the life I wanted with him worthless.”

Her heartache made me want to vomit. Had Cecilia been there at that moment, I would have thrown her at Jackie with a bow choking her neck, but all I had to give her was my sympathy, which wasn’t even half enough. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry about everything that happened, but that wasn’t me. I did not have sex with Colton.”

“I saw you, you bitch! He was in your Jeep. Your precious Wrangler! You think you’re happy with Caleb, but you just wait. They’re all the same. They make you feel like you’ll be different, like you’re so wonderful and great and special that they’d actually leave their girlfriend for you, but they’re not leaving anybody. You get left, and the girlfriend either leaves or hates herself for not being able to leave, and he gets off having had both of us. And the really fucked up thing is that we let them.” Jackie trembled with contempt. “Caleb might have paid Dean to fix your Jeep, but he can’t pay your way out of jail.”

Something was building outside. I could see it through the window by the creek, just over one of Betty's pointy smooth leaves. It looked like a low floating, accelerating cloud. "My bets would never be against Caleb getting exactly what he wants, but don't let my opinion sway you. He already got me out once. Assassination, hijacking, and murder aside, he could probably do it again."

Jackie's smirk was so certain and smug that I focused fully on her. "Actually, rumor has it you murdered Colton."

I frowned.

"Finally, after all these years of letting what he did to you in high school fester and build your hate and *ruin your life*, you snapped and gave him what he deserved." She let out a mousy, delighted giggle. "You got even."

"You killed Colton," I breathed numbly, staring at the ice pick on my bed.

"No, you killed Colton when you stabbed me behind my back. Did you think you could just take whoever you wanted and screw over whoever they're with without it coming back around?" She pointed her finger at me. "I'll end you."

The accelerating thing in the creek wasn't a cloud, and it wasn't low floating. I tried to continue the conversation, subtly inch toward Frank's box, and not gape at the wall of rapids charging downstream, but I'd never excelled at triple tasking. "No one's going to believe you, Jackie. I've been at Lakeside all day. I have witnesses and an alibi and no motive—" *and no murder weapon in about ten seconds*— "and Douglas knows that you know that Colton ratted you out. No one knows where you've been all day—" *except for Colton, the stupid cheating bastard*— "and you have more reason to want him dead than I do. You're in too deep, Jackie. Just let it go."

She laughed harshly. “Your word against mine isn’t worth squat. I live in a renovated gothic cathedral on six acres of Old Orchard land. My home has buttresses, Patricia Margoe! You live in an ancient one-story ranch on a half plot of flooding creek land. You can’t escape that.”

“Caleb and Douglas couldn’t care less about money and land and buttresses. They just want the truth, and you can’t escape that.” The rushing wave of creek water burst over the dike, and I lunged forward, knocked Jackie off balance, swiped Frank’s box off the floor, plowed over Jackie on my way out as she recovered her balance, and ran.

I made it to the kitchen table when the backdoor cracked off its hinges. The creek poured through, flooded down the short hallway, partially veered into my room, and rammed into the back of my legs. The water was frigid. It rushed passed me, nearly bowling me over, and the spray from its force iced up my spine. I gasped from the suddenness of it and struggled to keep my footing. Jackie yelped from inside my bedroom. The front door was still open from when I’d walked in; the creek knocked off the screen door without even having to flex. I waded laboriously out through the wide open doorway, leaning back to keep my balance against the current. I stepped gingerly onto the porch, praying Jackie hadn’t tinkered with any more porch planks. The flood water was up to my thighs as I stepped into the grass and made my way to Maxine. It would be a miracle if she could start in these conditions, but I’d witnessed miracles from her several times this week.

Something slammed behind me, and I jumped, almost toppling from the double burden of carrying Frank’s box and fighting the swirling currents. My front door had slammed shut. I wondered if Jackie was still inside. I wondered if I left without checking, and they found her dead, drowned body floating in my bedroom, if that was considered negligence. I shoved Frank’s

box in Maxine's glove compartment first, taking care of what was important before I considered taking care of what was necessary to avoid prison. I jammed and squished it in as best I could and slammed the compartment door shut before anything could burst out.

A faint rapping noise banged from inside the house. I turned, pretty sure I was about to go back in, and even more sure that that was a really dumb decision, when the front door cracked off its hinges just like the back door. It fell on an angle with one of the tips pointing down, and the porch gave under its drive and weight. The door punched a hole through the porch and snapped, so half the door was wedged in its own hole, and the other half floated almost peacefully over the front lawn, across the street, and passed Hazen's cul-de-sac. Creek water gushed from the blasted doorway, and a flailing human body gushed over with the arch of creek water, slammed into the splintered half door, and dropped like an anchor into the hole in my porch.

For one horrible, wrenched, self-indulged moment, I thought of all the grief Jackie had caused. I thought of Caleb coming all the way down the mountain with his red plastic gas container, so I'd get my ass to work on time. I thought of changing my slashed tire to the overinflated spare. I should have checked the air, and I probably would have if Caleb hadn't been hovering over me. I thought of my tire blowing, of crashing Maxine, and of Caleb carrying me to safety. He'd been worried that the Jeep was leaking gas and might explode, but he'd had the courage to go in and get me out anyway. Through everything that had gone wrong this week, Caleb had been there for damage control. He'd made everything a little more bearable, a little more breathable, and a lot more interesting. He'd been there to support me, the way Jerr was there to support me and Margoe and every woman in Dansbury over fifty with a wink and a sly smile, the way Douglas was there for Isaac and Misty, the way Margoe was there for Frank and

me, the way Dean was there for Maxine, the way Cecilia used to be there for me, the way Jackie wanted to be there for Colton, the way Lori was there for Madeline, the way Joe Cummings and Bernardo Morales were there for me and Isaac, the way I was there for Garrett and Madeline and Mr. Russiani and Luke and Isaac. The way someone should have been there for Mom. People save for one another in so many different ways and for so many different reasons— love, desire, family, devotion, duty, friends, neighbors, compassion— because they care and want to be cared for. I wouldn't let Jackie drown. I couldn't let *anyone* drown.

I rushed the porch as fast as I could through the waist-high current and branches and broken chunks of houses and debris. The creek wasn't fountaining from the front door as intensely as it had been a second ago; the water must have built up pressure from the closed door, but now it flowed over the dike, through the back door, to the front door, over the porch, and to the street with the same steady flow as the rest of the flood waters.

I stopped at the edge of the steps. I tried to peer around the splintered door jutting out of the hole in the porch, but the water was murky. I couldn't see Jackie above the water. If she was still under the water, or Poseidon forbid, under the damn porch, I wouldn't be able to drag her out without going in myself. I searched carefully for the steps with my foot, shifting my weight slowly up onto the porch boards. The water sloshed around my knees as I shuffled wide around the door. A low whine trembled under my feet. I braced myself to jump off the porch, but the boards gave before I could move. Ice water rushed passed my waist, up my back, arms, neck, and over my head as I fell through the porch. I stretched my arms out to stop myself from dipping completely under, but the jagged edges of the wooden planks broke off under my weight and scratched gouges into my forearms.

I couldn't think past the cold for a moment. It froze the breath in my lungs and sped my heart and almost made me gasp. I fought the urge and saved the little breath I had, but my lungs already started to seize. *I can hold my breath for two minutes and five seconds*, I thought. *I still had two minutes and three seconds before I should start to panic*, but my lungs burned and screamed and panicked. I stretched for the mulch and earth under foot, but the water was an opaque, blinding black. The ground should be there. The water had only been up to my waist. I should be able to stand and breathe, but I couldn't feel anything because of the cold. I couldn't see anything because of the dirt and debris and consuming blackness. I couldn't breathe.

Something hard bumped into my leg. I stretched out a little further. My feet finally reached the bottom, but the water was still over my head. The ground beneath the porch must be lower than the ground at the street. My breath was gone, and I still needed to find Jackie. I pushed off the ground, and my head hit something hard. The current had pushed me further down the porch. The hole I'd broken through wasn't over my head anymore. I punched up, aiming through the porch. Any other time I couldn't tip toe over the porch without it threatening to collapse, but it held firm.

I clenched my teeth in frustration and fear, dying to take a breath even though I was still underwater. I punched a plank again, but it didn't give. I raised my arms and pushed myself down until I crouched on the ground. I pushed off the mulch, and I punched the porch again with the force of the push behind me. My fist broke through the planks. I scrambled to latch onto the hole, but I didn't have much feeling left in my palm and fingers. The hole was small and jagged. I thought I had a hold of it. I thought I could feel the edge cut into my palm as I pulled myself up, but something snapped. The current dragged me further beneath the porch with the edge of the plank still clutched in my hand.

That was it. That had been my chance to breathe, but the porch planks were old and crappy and held when I needed them to break and broke when I needed them to hold. My thoughts were screaming. I was drowning like Mom, during a flood like Martin, under the porch like an animal, and Douglas would find my body with Jackie and wonder who had really murdered Colton. Isaac would probably appreciate the irony and hate me for it. The rate of drowning at Lakeside would sky rocket for the rest of the summer without me guarding. Margo would be alone without the hope of visits or grandchildren. Garrett would have to eat dozens of Tupperware containers worth of leftover cut out cookies all by himself. He wouldn't know that I'd saved Frank, and even if Dean found him inside Maxine's glove compartment after the flood receded, no one would read English Verse, snap the Zippo to flame, hum through the sheet music, or graze their fingertips over that framed picture of the three of us— Mom, Frank, and I together in another lifetime with different hopes and expectations than the course reality had us journey— no one would look at the boxful of Frank's remains and appreciate the trial of finding the will to forgive. Caleb would go to Scotland alone, and I would never live in a world outside of Dansbury.

My back hit something hard and I thought, *NO!* and rammed my elbow into whatever had stopped me from drifting. Something whined and cracked. I elbowed it again and again and again in rapid, desperate, strikes. My arm broke a hole through what had to be the side of the porch. I elbowed the planks one last time with the rest of my energy and hope and life, and my upper body busted through.

The current sucked my out from under the porch. *I'm out. I can get to the surface. I can get to air and breathe now*, I thought, but my arms wouldn't stroke to the surface. My legs kicked, but I couldn't tell if they were propelling me forward. I was clumsy, as if I was in

someone else's body, someone who had never swam before. My heartbeat slowed, and I almost didn't want to move. Something large and softer than the hard porch planks I had bashed myself into brushed against my arm. It had long, thin strands that tangled around my wrist like seaweed, and the strands were attached to a round, hard ball. I fisted the strands in my hand and pulled, but the ball and whatever else was attached to it was drifting along from under the porch with the current like me. *Jackie*, I thought, and I kept hold of her hair.

I felt my thighs scrape against stones and concrete. I maneuvered my legs under my body, desperate and knowing I was out from under the porch and hoping that air was above me and praying that if I could just get air I would breathe and see and live, we could both live, and I pushed off the stones and concrete as hard as I could.

My head broke the surface. I gasped and choked and breathed and sank back under the water. I pushed off the concrete again, broke the surface and sucked in air. Over and over, I jumped and bobbed for air until the desperate screaming in my head faded and my heart was beating frantically and I could finally think. I shifted my body, so my feet led in the direction we were drifting. When I pushed off the concrete this time I didn't just bob for air. I dug my heels into the concrete and leaned sideways into the current as I stood. I broke the surface again, sputtering and shaking and breathing and coughing and breathing, and I held my place against the current. The water was up around my shoulders and sprayed up slightly against my neck, but I could stand. I could breathe.

Belatedly, I realized I was still holding Jackie by the hair. I pulled her up to the surface and wrapped my arm across her chest and under her arms to hold her head out of the water. She wasn't breathing. Her lips were blue, and she was trembling. I placed my fingers on her neck to feel for a pulse. I couldn't keep my hand steady, and I realized that she was only trembling

because I was holding her, and I was trembling. I tried to calm down enough to pick up a pulse. I took a few deep breaths to slow my breathing from the hyperventilating gasps I'd been sucking in, but I couldn't stop shaking. Even if she didn't have a pulse, I wouldn't be able to perform CPR; there was no where to lay her down to do chest compressions.

On the off-chance that she'd let herself pass out from holding her breath and not flooded her lungs with water, and her larynx had constricted to block any water from entering after she'd passed out, I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck, pinched her nose, tilted her head, covered her mouth with mine, and forced air into her lungs. Nothing happened. I breathed into her again. Her heart may have already gone into arrest. She might be dead. I might be holding and breathing into a dead body. I took a breath around the knot in my throat, sealed my mouth over hers and forced more air into her lungs. She gurgled slightly and coughed up water.

“Come on, Jackie. Breathe, damn it!” It hurt to speak.

I wiped the gunk off her chin, pinched her nose again, and breathed into her a fourth time. She coughed violently. Water poured out of her mouth as she gagged and coughed and gagged vomited and coughed and finally sucked in a clear, ragged breath of fresh air. She continued to breathe, unconscious and nearly purple, but she was breathing too.

Maxine was up Hazen Street about forty yards. We'd drifted with the current halfway to the cul-de-sac, but the creek water was almost over her hood now. She wouldn't be able to drive us anywhere. The porches on all the Russiani houses around the cul-de-sac were completely flooded. Unless I wanted to test the stability of their porch planks, Maxine was my only option for reaching higher ground. I carried Jackie over my shoulder, so she floated on her back with her face on the surface of the water as I trudged against the current up Hazen Street. My feet felt like dragging weights. I used my right arm to keep my balance and paddle myself through the

water, but I still stumbled every few steps. The rain pelted the flood water and sprayed into my eyes. I dunked Jackie a couple times to regain my balance when I lost my footing, but she didn't stop breathing. She'd cough and moan and remain unconscious.

By the time I reached Maxine, the water was at my neck, and I struggled to lift my arm and stroke forward. I stretched as far as I could, trying to take another step, keep Jackie's face above the surface, and keep my footing, but the current was too strong now. I slipped, and we both plunged under the water. My hand hit the bar in front of Maxine's grill as we fell. I gripped it and pulled us closer to Maxine, my arm trembling against the cold and current and exhaustion. I tucked my knees to wedge my foot against the bar, so I could grip onto her grill and take a breath. With my feet on the bar and one hand on the grill, I dragged Jackie in front of me and locked onto the grill with my other hand. I pulled up on the grill and pushed on the bar with my feet. My body blocked Jackie from drifting away. I climbed up and stood on Maxine's hood, draped Jackie on the door frame— although she didn't deserve Maxine's help after the way she'd damaged her— and held onto the top bars to keep my balance. I stood on Maxine and breathed and shook and hoped she didn't tip because that would be the end of me.

“Patricia!”

I jerked up and slipped on the hood. I splashed into the water on my ass, holding tight onto the top bar, so I sat on her hood, neck-deep in water, and stared at Caleb with incredulous relief. He paddled downstream in Lakeside's canoe. His hair was tied back, but scraggly ends stuck to his face and neck. His wife beater was drenched from the rain. I could make out the definition in his muscles through the clear ribbing as he worked his way toward Maxine.

“Step in as I pass,” he shouted. “Be careful not to tip.”

“J-J-Jackie first.”

Caleb hesitated. “You have Jackie?”

“Yeah.”

“Great,” Caleb said, his voice monotone.

He came up parallel to Maxine. I eased Jackie back into the water and guided her closer to the canoe. My arms strained against the current’s pressure, but I held onto Maxine firmly. I’d let go of Jackie before letting go of Maxine. Caleb scooped Jackie off the surface and swept her into the canoe like a ragdoll as he passed. She lay motionless in the bottom of the boat. Caleb picked up the oar again and worked to turn the canoe against the current.

“Is she still b-b-breathing?” I asked.

“I hope not.”

I took a trembling breath. “Y-y-you’re angry.”

Caleb glared at me. “Anger doesn’t quite do justice to how I’m feeling.” He paddled the canoe level with Maxine again, working harder this time because the current tried to push him back, but he didn’t drift. “Alright.”

I stepped into the canoe and collapsed onto my side. It rocked dangerously.

“Careful!” Caleb snapped. He steadied us with the oar.

“Sorry.”

“There’s another oar under Jackie if you can manage.”

I sat up slowly, found the oar, and yanked it out from under Jackie. She moaned again. At least she was still breathing.

“If she w-w-wakes up while we’re paddling, that’ll b-b-be interesting,” I said.

Caleb glared over his shoulder at me, looking concerned. “Yeah.”

I faced forward and started to paddle. My hands had trouble gripping the handle. I tried to work the oar in and out of the water in time with Caleb, but I don't think my strokes were actually helping. I had trouble keeping myself upright in the seat let alone putting effort into paddling. I went through the motions anyway. Either I paddled or I lay next to Jackie, and as welcome as passing out next to Jackie seemed, the current was strong now, and I couldn't leave Caleb to paddle our dead weight all the way to Buckbur alone. I focused on dipping my oar in and out of the water even though I couldn't feel its handle. I focused on how delicious it felt to breathe again, and the world narrowed down to Caleb, the beat of our strokes, the rhythm of my breaths, and the promise of finally making it back.

Eventually the bottom of the canoe scraped against asphalt. We were a few yards past the light at the interception of Hazen Street and Hollander Road. The current had eased once we'd cleared Cecilia's house, and Caleb had rocketed us the remaining few hundred yards. I'd continued the façade of paddling. Caleb's BMW was parked a little further up Buckbur. When he stepped out of the canoe, the water only reached his knees. I forced my fingers to let go of the oar, and it clattered to the bottom of the canoe.

"I'll take one arm if you take the other," I said, reaching for Jackie. I wasn't shaking anymore. I wasn't feeling much of anything. My aim and balance were a little off, so instead of taking hold of Jackie's arm, I slumped off the seat. I sat up and tried again. "I hope she doesn't have brain damage from drowning. She should have woken up by now."

"Someone must have brain damage," Caleb grumbled. He knocked my hands aside, wrapped his arms around my back and under my bottom, and scooped me out of the canoe. His skin was just as drenched as mine, but his body pulsed with heat. I didn't bother trying to lift my

arms. My eyes closed, and I buried my face in the curve of his neck. My nose and ears stung against his skin.

“Oh,” I sighed, relaxing into all that throbbing warmth.

His arms tightened suddenly.

“Caleb,” I wheezed. “You’re squashing me.”

“Sorry,” he whispered roughly. His brogue was thick on the r’s. He carried me to his BMW, opened the side door, and put me down on the seat. I leaned sideways against the backrest, my feet still on the asphalt. I felt something drape around me and rub my arms vigorously. My eyes snapped open. Caleb was drying me off with a blanket.

“Thanks,” I said. Feeling pricked through my skin, and my teeth started to chatter.

Caleb twisted out my hair in the blanket.

“You s-s-sure had good timing b-b-back there.”

He rubbed my back and shoulders, getting the blood flowing again. His hands were rough and quick and efficient. I peeked up at him, unsure.

“Are you alright?”

His jaw flexed. He continued rubbing, a little quicker and more vigorously, then moved to warm my forearms. I flinched and pulled away. He hesitated and turned over the blanket. Its fuzzy fleece lining was streaked with blood. Caleb’s eyes darted frantically over me. He looked about ready to burst.

“It’s fine. See?” I showed him my forearm. The porch had gouged little trenches into my skin, and each little trench welled with blood. “They’re just scratches from my p-p-porch, like when Garrett had fallen through. Remember?”

He stared at me, blinking.

I stroked the outside of his wrist. “Caleb?”

His lips tightened, the corner of his mouth pulled to the side slightly, and suddenly he fell to his knees, gathered me close, and breathed harshly against my chest. His fingers kneaded into my back as he fisted my shirt in his hand. I hesitated at first, startled by the suddenness of it. I rubbed my hands slowly over his sides uncertainly, and his shoulders trembled.

“It’s alright. We’re going to drive back up B-Buckbur, and Jerr will probably be waiting at the Harriet Carol’s along with the rest of the whole t-t-t-town, and he will feed us steaming coffee from Harriet’s freshly ground, imported beans. We’ll get Jackie to the hospital, and we’ll get to w-warm up. It’s alright, Caleb. We made it.”

His shoulders shook even harder, his breath coming in harsh and ragged, and I didn’t know what else to say. I kept rubbing his sides slowly and gently, and I kissed the top of his head. His arms tightened too tightly around me for a second, and then he pulled away. He smoothed a curl away from my face that was plastered to my forehead. His eyes pierced mine as he tucked the curl behind my ear. I touched his face, and his fingers still shook against my neck.

He took a deep, unsteady breath. “We’ll patch up your arms when we get to the Carol’s.”

“Sure,” I said.

He took my hand touching his face and squeezed it firmly. I slipped my hand from his casually and tried not to flinch this time.

“We’ll need to get Jackie to the hospital first though,” I said, “She’s been through a lot, and she’s still—”

“—going to jail for attempted murder. I don’t care what she’s gone through. Let me see your hand.”

“Colton isn’t dead?” I asked.

Caleb picked up my hand where it rested on my lap. “Cecilia called him to find Jackie. When he didn’t answer, she went to his house and found him sprawled in the den. Three stab wounds. None of them fatal. He’ll live to screw over another day,” Caleb said, inspecting my fingers. “Flex your hand.”

I tried to ball my fingers into a fist, but a sharp pain shot through my knuckles. I hissed. “It hurts.”

“A lot?”

“I’m fine.”

“Is there anywhere else that hurts?” He ran his hands up and down my legs. “Did you hit your head? Do you have any other bad scrapes?”

“I’m fine, Caleb.”

“I don’t want to bring you to Harriet Carol’s to warm up if you have another concussion, or if you need stitches. That flood water was disgusting. Those cuts need to be disinfected, and you probably need an IV. I need to know you’re alright.” He squeezed my arms gently and rubbed his thumbs over the crease in my elbow.

My right elbow throbbed, and I blinked back tears. “I’m just fine.”

Caleb shook his head, clearly fed up with me. “I’m taking you to the hospital.”

“Jackie is still unconscious in the canoe. She *actually* needs to go to the hospital.”

“Lucky for her then that she needs to go to the same place we’re going,” he said, standing. “I’ll let Douglas know where we’re headed, so he can walk across the street and handcuff her to the bed.”

He walked back to the canoe. I swiveled in my seat, shut the door, and watched through the window as he chucked Jackie unceremoniously over his shoulder, walked briskly back to the

car, and dumped her into the backseat. He opened the driver's side door, sat down, started the Scottish Aquatic Rambo Yuppie Mobile, and drove up the mountain.

Caleb didn't say anything on our way to the hospital. His jaw was still clenched. He kept his hand on the stick as he shifted gears, so I touched his hand gently and traced my fingertips over his knuckles. He cleared his throat and kept his eyes on the road, but when I slipped my fingers between his, he wrapped his fingers carefully around mine and held on loosely.

Monday

A vibration in my front pocket startled me awake. For a second, I thought it was Caleb, and smiled, then reality squelched the vague haze of sleep. We were huddled in sleeping bags on Harriet Carol's living room floor. Caleb was lying beside me, but he was still sleeping; softly garbled snores wheezed rhythmically as he breathed. He probably wouldn't reach for me anyway with Luke and Lori lying next to him, Ben Moyer sidling up next to them, Garrett on my other side, Joe Cummings next to him, the Russiani mob in the den, Patrick and Sue somewhere at my feet, Kimberly and Lou somewhere at my head, Margoe and Jerr in the spare room upstairs, Cecilia presumably somewhere on the property, and Harriet Carol— grand mistress of the Carol estate, Queen Dansbury gossip biddie, and the savior of homeless creek families— presiding over all of us in the master suite. Even I— the scourge of Dansbury and B and E extraordinaire— respected some social boundaries.

Jackie, on the other hand, obviously did not. She started to rouse as we passed Trev's house, and Caleb had to pull over and restrain her before she could claw my eyes out with her one inch acrylic talons. A simple thank you for saving her life would have sufficed. Dr. Carol assured Douglas that she should be in perfect health for her bail hearing on Monday.

My pocket vibrated again. I rolled onto my back and gingerly dug out Garrett's Verizon touch screen from Caleb's rolled up mesh shorts. My elbow twinged at the movement. A snapshot of Joe Cummings staring sultrily at me flashed on the screen. I'd just received a text message: *Meet me at Lakeside, pronto.*

I turned my head to the side, and sure enough, two empty, indented sleeping bags were next to me where Garrett and Joe should have been. I clicked out of the message screen to check the time: five-thirty. I stared at the ceiling in misery. Six hours of sleep after a day like yesterday wasn't nearly enough to function properly even just to watch the sunrise, but Garrett wouldn't be up at this hour either if given the choice. I'd have to return his phone eventually anyway. I extracted myself from the safe, cozy warmth of the sleeping bag, stumbled over Patrick and Sue on my way to the bathroom, and fluffed my hair before ducking out the bathroom window. My cast slid and roughened the plastic window frame. I couldn't grip and leverage myself with it as well as I could my left hand. Caleb probably wouldn't have woken if I'd used the front door, but Garrett's "pronto" had set me into sneak mode. I'd rather err on the side of paranoid than get busted because I hadn't taken simple precautions.

I jogged down Lakeside Street in a pair of Caleb's mesh workout shorts, the waistband rolled three times over, and Isaac's The Darkness t-shirt. The streetlights still glowed faintly in the predawn light, casting stripes on the asphalt leading to Lakeside. Garrett was waiting for me outside the chain link fence next to the Hut as I approached. He was sitting in the grass. His arms were locked around his tucked knees as he gazed over Lake Wimple.

"That was slick." I sat next to him and offered him his cell phone.

“Yours is probably being dumped into the Atlantic at we speak. I was forced to improvise.” He took the cell and stretched out his right leg to slide it into his front pocket.

“Cecilia’s not coming.”

“Was she supposed to?”

He nodded. “I texted both of you.”

“Maybe she thought you were Joe and didn’t bother getting back to you.”

“She texted me back.”

“Oh.” I looked at the destruction that the flood had wrought. Lake Wimple was bloated past her usual shores, the surrounding oaks and birches wading quarter trunk deep. Pebble Harbor had been eroded to smithereens. The creek flowed straight over where it used to thin and curve around the boulders and pebbles. I sighed. “Did she say why?”

“She’s not here. She left Dansbury.”

I swallowed. “For good?”

“For a while.”

I fingered the gauze wrapped around my forearm. “She never came to see if I was alright.”

“It’s not the first time,” Garrett said, sounding bitter.

“True,” I said, feeling resigned. “I didn’t think she had plans to leave.”

“She didn’t.” Garrett looked at me. “Did Maxine make it?”

I shook my head. “Dean doesn’t have the Wrangler parts on hand anymore since he used them after my accident, so I’ll have to wait a few weeks until he can patch her back together.

She’ll be alright eventually.”

“That’s good.” Garrett picked at a clump of dried grass. “J. C. and I are moving in together.” He turned to me, almost cautiously. “He’s the one, Patty-Cake. He’s my last first kiss. When he moves back to Ohio for the fall semester, I’m going with him.”

“That’s wonderful, Garrett.” I said, a little surprised to realize that was true. “Will you be in Dansbury for the rest of the summer at least?”

“I’ll be here for another month. J. C. goes back to campus early for football camp, and we’ll move before that to settle into an apartment. We’ll leave for Ohio State in late July.” Garrett smiled, his excitement overcoming any misgivings he’d had about telling me. “Rite Aide and Wal*mart pharmacies have already responded to my applications. I have an interview next week, and J. C.’s going to tag along so we can scope out available apartments.”

I smiled back, helpless not to when he was smiling at me. “I’ll be here until the end of the summer too.”

“Are you moving?” Garrett asked. He sounded both surprised and relieved.

“Yeah. Why did you just ask like that?”

“Because I know you don’t want to stay here, and if you’re moving too, I won’t feel like I’m abandoning you to the dull drudgery of Dansbury alone. I’ll still miss you—” He boinged one of my curls, and it sprang up and made the curls around it quiver. “— but I won’t feel guilty about leaving.”

“I wouldn’t want you to feel guilty for moving even if I was staying,” I said, a little glad that he’d feel guilty.

“I’d rather bring you with me to Ohio than think of you left here in Dansbury with the crazies.”

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint, but Caleb’s white horse beat yours to the locked tower. I’m moving with Caleb back to Scotland.”

Garrett’s smile widened. “For how long?”

“As long as I like.”

Garrett raised his eyebrows.

“For a while.”

Garrett laughed. “Saw that coming.”

I turned to face the valley and looked down at my crossed legs. “I didn’t.”

“If you believed in something good coming your way instead of always bracing yourself for when they might leave, you would have.”

“They always leave. There’s nothing to believe in once they’re gone.”

“I never left,” Garrett whispered.

“You don’t count.”

“Since when?”

I hesitated.

“Frank stayed.”

“Come again?”

“He tried to bring you with him to Susan’s house, and you refused.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Phil Carol—”

“Was an ass, but Frank offered to stick with you at Susan’s just like Caleb offered to stick with you in Scotland. The only difference now is your consent.” Garrett touched the back of my hand. “Frank wanted to stick around, but you let him leave.”

I pulled away. “I’m not making the same mistake. I’m going with Caleb to Scotland.”

“Even if you parted ways with Caleb at the end of the summer and left Dansbury on your own, the mistake wouldn’t be letting him go. The mistake would be not believing that love can stay even when he’s gone.”

“He’s not gone.” My breath shook as I breathed. “Dean’s the best mechanic I know. The glove compartment he installed in Maxine’s last facelift didn’t leak. You don’t have to worry about me and Frank.”

“But I—”

“And you don’t have to worry about me and Caleb. I may still be a little shaky on blindly believing in the good, but I believe in Caleb. Actually—” I leaned my shoulder against his—
“The people I’m worried about is you and me.”

“Us?”

“I don’t want us to spoil like Trev and me. I don’t want us to see each other however many months from now and think everything we have right here, right now, must have all been a farce because of how fast we lost it once we parted.”

“We’ll never be like you and Trev,” Garrett scoffed.

“Why not?”

“Because we know and respect the relationship we have. We’re not struggling to morph it into something that’s selfish and unattainable.” Trev touched my cheek. “Just because we won’t be in each others’ day-to-day lives doesn’t mean we’re going to lose each other. Cookies aren’t a main dish. You don’t eat cookies every day.”

“I eat cookies every day.”

“Now you’re just being obstinate. You don’t *have* to eat cookies every day. You can’t live off cookies, but life would be a little worse without a maple tree or nurse’s hat or snickerdoodle now and then.”

“But J. C.—”

“Is the one, but even after the main dish, you always save room at the end for dessert. I love you, Patty-Cake. You’ll be my cookie for the rest of my life, no matter how much or little I see you everyday.”

I smiled. “I love you too, Garrett.”

“Do I need a cookie?” He leaned in close.

“No, not anymore,” I whispered through the tightening in my throat, and our lips met softly and as smooth and rich and spreading as hot chocolate. His mouth moved with mine, pressing and yielding slowly. I drank in his warmth and caring and faith, so the immortality of that moment wasn’t just something to hope for.

Our lips parted. I turned away to gaze over Dansbury.

Garrett linked my fingers in his and looked over the valley too. “Better take a good, hard look, Patty-Cake,” he said, nodding at Lake Wimple, the valley, and the acres of woods into the horizon. “Take it all in before we leave.”

Garrett dimpled at me, and although my heart still warmed at his smile and nearness, it didn’t ache for him to love more than he could. I squeezed his hand in mine, and Garrett’s face softened. He knew the kiss had been different than it would have been had he counted before Caleb. Even though it wouldn’t have gone further than a kiss, it still would have been different. Caleb didn’t have dimples, and I didn’t want him to.

He squeezed my hand back, and I let go. “I won’t be missing out on anything.”