

A SIREN'S POINT STORY
BOOK THREE

On Dry Land

J.J. MULDER

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OceanofPDF.com

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*For those who are so good at swimming, no one sees when they are
drowning*

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Prologue



DRYDEN

FIVE YEARS AGO

My first thought as I read the message from my doctor is that he meant to send it to someone else. That probably happens a lot, and the most reasonable explanation in this scenario is that it's happening right now. Human error. Even doctors make mistakes.

"I don't have the clap," I announce, the words echoing in my empty office.

And yet, I print out the results. I print out the portal message from my doctor and the prescription information for antibiotics. It all has my name and birthday on it. Tapping my fingers on my desk, I start to imagine that I can feel a burning in my groin, as though just the thought of gonorrhea is bringing it into existence. I don't have it, though. I can't. I've had sex with the same person for years, and that person only has sex with me.

Frowning, I shut down the blueprints I should be focusing on and instead bring up a private browser. Perhaps I've gone my entire life misunderstanding the way sexually transmitted infections are spread. Maybe I got it from using a public restroom.

Fifteen minutes of research later, there is an incessant buzz in my ears and a burn in my throat that could be anger but is most likely tears. Curling and uncurling my fingers, I swallow the urge down. Crying will fix nothing. Crying in this office, where any number of people could walk in at any time, will make this worse. Instead, I do what I'm supposed to do. I carefully—ignoring the slight tremor in my fingers—fold up the printed

pages from my health record and slide them into my shoulder bag. I take a sip of coffee, long forgotten and cold now, but soothing on my throat nonetheless. I systematically shut my emotions down, one by one, blinking them out of existence. And then I go back to work.

I work late often. I bring work home with me to continue there most days. Dylan, who neither knows nor cares what I do as an engineer beyond making money, takes it in stride when I tell him I have work to do. Most evenings, he's not home to complain about my hours anyway.

Today, the first day I've left the office at 5:00 p.m. since I started this job, his car isn't in the driveway when I get home. Dylan, whose family own a chain of grocery stores, mainly works scheduled hours. But Dylan is also a socialite and is known for being the type of coworker to invite the others out to drinks. A day spent in board meetings wouldn't dampen his desire to have a beer with those very same people, regardless of whether he actually likes them or not. I'd asked him once, when he arrived home late one night and sloppily came to greet me in my office. He'd smelled like bourbon and Bleu de Chanel; his mouth had tasted like salt. He had a weakness for snacks—bar peanuts included.

"I hate those bastards," he'd replied, grinning crookedly.

"Then why are you going out with them, you lush?" I'd asked, laughing. He'd been sitting in my lap by then, kissing my neck and trying to wiggle his fingers into my shirt. Drink always made Dylan horny and affectionate. It also, on occasion, made him angry and mean.

"Because they're there," he'd replied, shrugging and focusing once more on the buttons of my shirt.

I'd shaken my head and let him undress me. I should have guessed that would be the answer. Dylan didn't need quality; he needed quantity. He wanted rooms full of people and didn't care at all who those people were. He wanted excitement and laughter and stories to tell. He wanted attention. Now, unpacking my bag in my home office, I pull out the folded lab results and think about that night, feeling a tendril of worry curl itself around my heart and squeeze.

My husband, who has no impulse control and the kind of sweet baby face that could both get him into trouble and out of it, needs attention like a plant needs the sun. I've always been happy to provide it. I *do* provide it.

Looking around my office, shame mixes with the worry stewing in my stomach and makes it hard to focus. I do work a lot. Today is the only day I

can remember making it home at a decent hour, and Dylan isn't here. It makes me wonder if that's because he knew I wouldn't be either. The presence of this damn office in our home suddenly feels like a problem. Do I spend too much time working?

I've never thought so. And I've asked, even, when projects brought me into the office on weekends or interrupted our time together. "I could tell him no," I'd offer. My dad is my damn boss, after all. What the hell is he going to do, fire me? But Dylan would just laugh and tell me it was fine, that he liked how I was a hard worker. He'd make a joke about how I needed to keep the cash flow coming because he had his eye on a boat.

Even on the nights when I felt brave enough to have a conversation about my job, he wouldn't take me seriously. The thing is, I don't particularly like what I do. I suspect nobody does, but we do it anyway because we all took the time and spent the money to get a degree. We worked hard to get where we are—even though nepotism gave me a leg up—and at the end of the day, we all knew what sort of work environment we were signing up for. I've never complained to my family, but I thought, maybe, I could have that conversation with Dylan. That my husband would be a safe place to whisper fears and regrets and be comforted. But he didn't get it. And it was hard enough for me to even try and talk about it that the experience left me certain I'd never do it again. Dylan didn't care to hear about my work; he cared about the paycheck. I stopped bringing it up. I would settle into my job, earn money for my husband, and everyone would be happy.

Except maybe Dylan isn't happy after all. Maybe he's a liar, and I haven't been the only one playing pretend with life.

The sound of the front door opening snaps me awake. I've been standing in the center of the room, lab results clutched in my hand, staring sightlessly at the far wall. The painting hanging there was a gift from my mom, and I hadn't had the heart to tell her I hated it.

"Honey, I'm home!" Dylan calls, tinkling laugh filtering my way from the front room. I can hear his footsteps coming down the hallway. He already knew, without me even shouting back, that I was in my office. *Working too much*, that internal voice whispers.

I turn to face the door and watch as my husband comes into view. He's always been a talented dresser, somehow managing to mix clothes in a way that would look strange on someone else but flatter him. Everything he

wears costs more than it looks like it costs, a fact I pointed out to him once that made him laugh.

“It doesn’t matter if designer clothes are ugly, Denny. It matters that you can afford to wear them.”

Today, he’s dressed in a garishly colored slacks and polo, equally bright shoes glinting in the light of the room. Everything looks crisp and new, and I know without asking that this is likely both the first and last time he’ll wear the clothes. And, because I prefer to stick to muted, darker colors, I won’t wear them either.

“Golfing?” I ask him, voice steady and STI testing in my hand.

“Yeah. The board went out. You’re home early,” he notes, smiling happily and closing the space between us to kiss me.

I try to smell him. Explore his mouth a little bit. Does he taste like himself? All I can smell is grass and cologne, his lips a familiar mix of spearmint gum and salt. Every inch of him is neat—not a hair out of place, nor even a grass stain marring those yellow pants. Was he actually golfing, or was that a lie? I stare at him, lab results hot in my hand like the pages are on fire, and imagine an infection I hadn’t known was there spreading through my body. Gonorrhea doesn’t always show symptoms, and it’s been two years since I’ve had a routine physical or any sort of checkup with my doctor. I haven’t slept with another man other than Dylan since I was seventeen. The math doesn’t work.

“Shall we grab dinner? Or do you have more to get done tonight?” he asks, expression pleasant as he watches me. Dylan can be so easy to live with when he’s in a good mood, easy to be around. He tells me I make things harder than they need to be and that I’d be happier if I could just let go every now and then. I wonder how often he *let go* and if I’m holding the consequences of that in my hand right now.

“I’m done for the day,” I murmur, watching closely as his eyes light up, happy and bright.

“Well, dinner it is, then! Where shall we go? There’s a new place over on—”

“I heard from my doctor today,” I say, cutting him off. He quirks an eyebrow, likely having forgotten that I even went for a visit a week ago. He forgets everything. Or, perhaps more likely, simply doesn’t care enough to listen and try to remember in the first place. “The lab results came back.”

“I didn’t realize you were feeling ill,” Dylan comments, confirming what I’d just been thinking.

“It was just a routine visit,” I tell him for the second time. “But, apparently, a good thing I went in. I have gonorrhea.”

In the time it takes for him to respond, my mind goes through all the possible ways he might. Denial tops the list, with anger a close second. Or maybe not anger, as such, but outrage. Outrage and self-defense and hurt that I could ever think he’d cheat on me. I also wonder if he’ll question whether *I’m* the one cheating. Perhaps pick something up and throw it, the way I’ve seen him do on a handful of occasions when he lost a temper most people don’t know exists. Instead, he does none of those things. He laughs.

“Oh, hell.” He chuckles again, rubbing a hand over his forehead. “That was probably me. I made some questionable choices at a BDSM club a while back, and I’ve been waiting for them to come back and haunt me. I better call my own doc, huh?”

I stare at him. He’s not laughing any longer, but I feel like I can still hear it, ringing in my ears and vibrating my chest. I can’t imagine what sort of person would laugh at the words I just spoke. It wasn’t meant to be funny.

“BDSM club?” I ask, my logical, engineer mind taking note of all the little facts he just presented me with. Slowly, like an egg cracked on top of my head and trickling down my neck, numbness bleeds through my body. I feel calm and in control. I have to be. Dylan never is.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m not about to bring chains home. It wasn’t for me.” He rolls his eyes, shaking his head fondly like he thinks he’s being cute. “But I wanted to try, you know? Check a couple kinks off the list. I know you’re not really into that stuff.”

He chuckles again, bending to slip off his shoes. I stare at the back of his neck and wonder why I wasn’t invited to the conversation about what stuff I’m into. We’ve been together since we were seventeen—if there was a list of kinks to explore, we were meant to be exploring them together.

“Dylan,” I say calmly, refolding the papers and placing them on my desk. “Are you sleeping with other people? Cheating?”

He stands up, shoes dangling from the fingers of one hand, and widens his eyes at me. Surprise and a touch of confusion. I’ve never wondered about what sort of liar Dylan might be, because I’ve never been concerned

that he was telling any. My husband, the actor. A hint of anger bleeds through my calm before I seal the crack once more.

“Well, not sure that’s what I’d call it,” he replies, brows furrowing slightly like I’m confusing him.

“It’s a yes-or-no question.”

“Listen, I’m sorry about the gonorrhea. But come on, you know how it is! We’re not all swapping lab results in the back room while we lube up. It’s not a big deal. You’ll just take some antibiotics and be fine.”

“So, yes, then.” I breathe the words out and shake my head. He’s not even hiding it. No chagrin or fear or *anything*. He doesn’t think it’s a big deal. “How long has this been going on?”

The smile that hasn’t quite left his face since he got home slips just a bit, and a tiny hint of doubt creeps into his eyes. For a second, he looks worried. Carefully, he asks, “What’s happening here?”

“You went to a BDSM club without my knowledge. You had unprotected sex and contracted a sexually transmitted infection. You passed that infection to me,” I rattle off, swallowing down the *you’re breaking my heart* that I wanted to add. Argue like a scientist, not a lawyer, my dad always told me. Leave emotion out of it. Logic and facts only.

“Woah, hold on.” Dylan raises his hands, backing up a step. “Without your knowledge? What the hell are you talking about? I tell you every single time. I’ve already said I’m sorry, what more do you want? I’ll pay for the antibiotics!”

He laughs again, a slightly more hysterical sound as though I’m the one being unreasonable. His face is slightly flushed, voice just a touch higher than it needs to be. He never could manage to leave emotion out of anything. My father would be shaking his head, disappointed by his lack of self-control.

He leaves the office, muttering about dramatics. My dramatics, I presume, as he’s always remained woefully unaware of his own. *I tell you every single time*, he’d said, and doubt blooms heavy in my gut before the numbness overtakes me once more. Does he? I think about all the times he’s called me from work, voice cheerful as he told me about his evening plans.

“Stephen and I are going to that new club across town—Zebra? Zébra? I don’t know how it’s pronounced. You can join if you want, but fair warning, there will be dancing.”

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Or the notorious Damien, who featured in quite a few of Dylan's more colorful stories and was his go-to partner in crime when he couldn't find any other takers.

"Dames and I are grabbing a drink after work," he'd say. "Don't wait up. You know how we are."

And I did know. Dylan loved to tell me, loved to tell anyone who'd listen, about the times he got up on the bar to dance or how Damien got sick off too many body shots. Worth it, though, Dylan assured me before describing the cut of the man's abdominal muscles and how hard Damien had to work to chase down all the tequila.

Standing here, I catalogue each and every time he told me where he was going and who he was going with, trying to remember if he was ever explicit about what *he* was doing. I'd remember if Dylan was the one slurping alcohol off a stripper's stomach. I'd remember if he mentioned going out with a friend and not coming home until late because he was fucking them. I assumed friendship instead of cheating, because he hadn't given me a reason not to. My husband is allowed to be friends with other men, other queer men. I don't tie a leash around his neck and gatekeep him. I don't question him.

Looking down at the lab results sitting on my desk, I tilt my head from side to side, trying to ease some of the tension in my neck. Damien, Stephen, Kale, Aron, Kamal, Jordan. Countless more whose names I didn't bother to remember, assuming they were just another in a long line of Dylan's friends I'd never meet. A BDSM club. Pressing my fingertips to the desk, I close my eyes.

He did tell me. Layered under just enough subterfuge to make me wonder if he really thought I was okay with it—understood what he was doing—or if he was merely fooling himself. Another of Dylan's tricks—the ability to lie to himself so convincingly, he himself would start to believe it.



There is a natural and predictable pattern to Dylan's emotions. Happy until a minor inconvenience comes along, where sarcasm might be able to jump in and save the mood. If not, it's self-pity and anger. *Why me* and *it's all your fault*. After that, it's sorrow. He has never been afraid of letting me see him cry, which I once found endearing. Now, it simply feels like another act in a show I wish I didn't have a ticket for. I sit in silence, listening to the words that make it through the tears, and wonder if the second glass of wine I'm on will be enough to burn away the gonorrhea. Dylan isn't the only one who can find humor in a fucked-up situation.

I drain the glass as he says *I didn't know* for the seventh time. I could turn this into a drinking game, if I wanted to. I'll call it: things he didn't know he wasn't allowed to do after making marriage vows. Dylan reaches for my hand—another part of the drinking game, as it's the third time he's tried it—and I slowly move mine away. I don't like holding hands, and he knows that. Another couple of tears track down his cheeks, and those traitorous emotions try to claw their way out of the cage I put them in. I look away. It's not easy, sitting and watching the person I love above anything else sob.

Performative, I remind myself. He's always enjoyed playing the role of the victim.

"Say something," he requests.

"I'm not sure what you'd like me to say," I admit. And it's true. I have been living with a stranger, apparently. A stranger who thinks marriage vows are gentle guidelines instead of hard rules. A stranger I can't trust.

"Say you forgive me."

I reach for the wine bottle and pour another measure in my glass. Dylan's glass is shattered on the floor where it was the unfortunate victim of the rage portion of his emotional hurricane. I consider getting up for a broom and dustpan but decide I simply cannot be bothered. I would rather get drunk.

"I do not forgive you," I reply, and Dylan makes a choked sobbing noise that grates like sandpaper on my heart. *Logic, not emotions*, my dad's voice reminds me. *Facts*. "I take my promises seriously. I made a vow of monogamy. The same vow, incidentally, that you made. This is not a

misunderstanding, Dylan. We said the same words, and, until now, I had been under the impression that we meant them the same way.”

“People have open marriages, Dryden! Polyamory!” He swipes a hand across his tearstained face, holding the word up like a shield.

“People do,” I confirm. “We didn’t. I do not want an open marriage. I do not want my husband to sleep with other people. I did not agree to it.”

Dylan stands up, heels of his palms pressed hard into his eyes, and takes a step around the coffee table, narrowly missing the glass. I take a sip of wine. It would appear round two of anger is in order.

“I hate it when you’re like this,” he snaps. I wait, unsurprised by this turn of events. I knew this would end up being my fault eventually. It’s possible it was always my fault, right from the beginning. “I can’t talk to you.”

“Did you try?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“Everyone does this, Denny.” I grimace at the nickname but don’t interrupt. “*Everyone*. Don’t pretend you don’t know about the things Eric and Matt get up to. Hell, what about Cynthia, huh? She doesn’t even hide it! She just goes out with other men! In broad fucking daylight!”

I watch him as he paces in front of the television. What a strange argument to make. Other people cheat, so I cheated as well?

“I’m not married to any of those people, and neither are you,” I point out. “The morals of our friends don’t concern me. Other people’s marriages do not concern me.”

“You always work late!” he replies, spinning to face me, hands on his hips. I nod, having wondered when we’d get here. “I thought...I thought you were fucking your secretary like every other man in the world.”

“My secretary is a woman.” I tip the wine into my mouth. I’ve got quite a pleasant buzz right now.

“You know what I mean,” he snaps back. I sigh.

“Yes, I do. I have a tremendous workload, Dylan. I work hard. You know this. You reap the benefits of how hard I work. And again, you have never before complained about the hours I spend at the office. If you really did suspect I was cheating on you, would you not have brought it up?”

“Of course not! Because everyone fucking does it!”

“Not if they love each other,” I murmur, spinning the wineglass on my knee. Dylan snorts.

“Don’t pretend like you love me.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I frown at him.

“Forget it. You win. I’m the villain. Marriage counseling, then? Seems to be all the rage these days.”

“Do you imagine that would fix the problem? Can you even admit there is a problem?”

“Tell me what you want me to do, and I’ll do it,” he replies, responding to neither question and in doing so answering both. Leaning forward, I set my glass on the coffee table.

“I’d like a divorce,” I say, and am proud of myself when my voice doesn’t waver.

“No, you don’t,” Dylan says immediately. “You like being married.”

I tilt my head to the side, finding that choice of words oddly accusatory. *You* like being married. Well, he’s right. I do. He’s also right in that I would not like a divorce. I do not want to lose the man in front of me. The man who glowed warm in the sun, tennis whites bright, on the day I met him; the man who used to sit next to me at family dinners and mock everyone, voice low and private and for me alone. The man who once snorted Coca-Cola from his nose, laughing as he took a drink.

“I do like being married,” I agree softly. Boy, do I ever. “And I do love you. But it’s not about love. It’s about trust. I am capable of forgiving a lot of things, Dylan, but this isn’t one of them.”

I don’t like people with two faces. People who are too weak to tell the truth and hide behind pretty, easy lies. I don’t like people who break promises, and I do not like learning that my husband is any of these things. All of them. Worse, I hate that I didn’t figure it out prior to peeing in a damn cup.

Standing, I cross the room, broken wineglass crunching under the soles of the loafers I haven’t gotten around to taking off since I got home. Stopping at the wall of glass that overlooks our yard and the bay, I stare at the calm evening. The sun is going down, and, as always, the view from here is stunning. The boat Dylan bought on a whim and hasn’t yet taken out on the water sits quietly, tethered to the dock. He’d meant to buy a pleasure boat, bought a fishing vessel by accident, and found enough joy in telling the ridiculous story that he kept it. I stare at it, finding beauty, as I always do, in the sleek lines of her. The ocean, beautiful and deadly and unknown, has always fascinated me. I wonder if the first person to build a boat felt magic when they put it in the water.

“Fine,” Dylan says behind me, agreeing to a divorce with not an ounce of fight. I hadn’t been testing him, but he failed anyway. In the distance, the *Maiden Seas* glows with the setting sun. “So, what do you want, then? The house? The cars? Half of my trust fund and a kidney?”

I don’t answer right away. He’s being ridiculous, which means he thinks this is a joke. I imagine myself out there in the water, below the surface, limbs spread, floating. Detached. No sound but the gentle whoosh of the ocean, far enough down that there’s nothing but a calm push and pull—a tender sort of motion. Behind me, Dylan makes a breathy noise that means he’s about to talk again. I clear my throat, speaking before he can.

“I want the boat.”

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Chapter One



SPENCER

It takes seven days to walk from Jacksonville, Florida, to Charleston, South Carolina, and another seven days on top of that to get to the Outer Banks. From there, a person could head inland and hop onto the Appalachian Trail. They might walk in the direction of New York City, curious about a park, in the middle of a city, so massive you could get lost in it. And then, when the Big Apple began to feel a little too vast, the traveler could head north up the coast. They could sleep on the beach in some places and under bridges in others. They could stand outside an arena in Boston and listen to thousands of hockey fans scream. They might stop in Salem to pay their respects to the witches and get chased out of town by a dog. A person might wear through the soles of their shoes and get blisters breaking in new ones. They might spend days hungry and nights cold. And they might close their eyes and put their finger on a map, letting fate choose their way.

“We’ve made it!” I tell the camera, little fuzzy microphone clipped to my collar. Turning, I make sure the Welcome to Siren’s Point sign is visible behind me and smile. Viewers like it when I smile, as evidenced by the hundreds of comments about how cute my chipped incisor is. Viewers also seem to like it when I’m chased by feral dogs, but there is only so much I’m willing to do for content.

“I think we should celebrate by finding a rest stop and taking a shower,” I joke. Viewers also like it when I’m funny, which is a harder thing to replicate religiously, but I give it my best shot. Sometimes difficult to do when I’m thirsty and hungry and haven’t bathed in two weeks, when I’m so exhausted it feels like even breathing is too much work, and my socks are

crusty with dried blood. I smile wider. Nobody on the internet can tell what's real or fake anyway.

I take more footage of the town line, getting a few closer shots of the sign and the mermaid painted on it. Siren's Point, a tiny dot on a map only 4,000 people wide, is a fishing town. Lobster fishing, to be exact, according to my internet sleuthing. Per the government website, fishing isn't a hobby around here; it's a legacy to be passed down through the generations. They take it seriously, and they're proud of it.

I finish getting content with my cell phone before tucking it back into my pocket and forcing my feet onward. The little GoPro camera on my jacket gets footage that my hands are too tired to manage as I cross the town line and enter Siren's Point. Letting my arms swing loosely down by my sides, I walk at a pace just above casual. It's a little colder than I was expecting, but fitness is on my side. Seven hours of walking means I'm untouchable to both temperature and pain—numb to all bodily complaints.

The road is hugged by evergreens, the shoulder just wide enough to give me a little peace of mind. I walk as close to the tree line as I comfortably can, the gravel crunching under the soles of my slightly too-big boots. I have a feeling, once I stop moving, my feet are going to be the worst of the pain I'm ignoring right now. I hope Siren's Point has a charity shop, and that charity shop is well stocked with men's size eight.

Not a single car passes as I walk, the cool winter day still and silent but for the sound of me walking. It's nice and exactly what I was hoping for after weeks spent on the shoulders of interstates and highways, cars blowing by fast enough for me to feel the displacement of air. I've seen it all—cities, country towns, the ocean, and the desert. There are things I like about them all and many I hate. But if I were to choose, I'd choose rural. I'd choose off the beaten path and near enough to a body of water that I could smell it. As I crest a hill and get my first glimpse of Siren's Point proper, I think that I'd probably choose something like this.

I take out my phone and record some better video than what the GoPro is getting before snapping a couple of pictures. The town is postcard perfect, sitting next to a slate-gray ocean. I shiver as though I'm not boiling hot under all my layers. I love the ocean, and I've got a healthy respect for her, but it's an appreciation I've so far held with my feet firmly planted on dry land. Tucking my hands under the straps of my backpack, I heft it

upward, giving my shoulders a brief second of relief. Cracking my neck, I follow the road down to Siren's Point.

I keep my head on a constant swivel as I walk, noting street signs and landmarks, places to hide and routes I could use to escape. I look and listen for fucking dogs and pay very close attention to traffic. The two times I've been struck by a vehicle were two times too many. The vague foggiess that comes from fatigue barely registers. Only a fool lets their guard down in a new place, and being tired isn't a good excuse to let danger sneak up on me.

Of course, given that this is a tiny-ass town nobody knows about and not New York City, there isn't any danger. At least none immediately visible. The roads are clean and relatively quiet. The sidewalks are both free of snow and speckled with salt. I haven't walked by a single piece of trash. There are no crowds of people taking up space and forcing me to walk around, glaring and wrinkling their noses as I do. There aren't any police sirens. When a car drives by—slowly enough to make me believe they're actually following the speed limit—the driver waves at me.

I stare, vaguely shocked. I'm homeless, which anywhere else means I'm invisible. I can't even pretend I don't look like a vagabond right now, with my greasy scalp hidden under a dirty beanie and three days' worth of dust and grime stuck to my skin with sweat. I have a hiking backpack on, for fuck's sake. Belatedly, I wave back, the gesture feeling vaguely alien. I've forgotten what attention that isn't hostile feels like.

Four times more, cars drive by, and the occupants act like I'm a member of their family and not a complete stranger. Lowering my hand as the latest of them drives by, I puff out my cheeks and come to the realization that this probably isn't a town I can sleep rough in. Given the amount of attention I've received after only being here an hour, I'm thinking that this is a place where everyone knows everyone. I'm not invisible; I'm the opposite. I stick out.

"Damnit," I mutter softly, glancing around. A pair of kids are trying to make a snowman, bundled up so much only their cheeks, eyes, and noses are visible. I turn and keep walking, always aware of how too much attention paid to children by a stranger could be misinterpreted.

I walk until I leave the residential parts and find the downtown area. The main part of town, I'm assuming, given how much busier it is. If one were to consider busy to be three pedestrians, a dog walker, and two cars parked in front of what I'm certain is a pub. The buildings are kind of cute,

in a quaint, dollhouse sort of way. Each one is painted a different color, but aged and weathered like it's been a few years since they've seen a fresh coat. The streetlamps look like the kind of thing a lamplighter would be in charge of, riding a bike through town early in the morning, setting them all alight with matches before pedaling off into the fog. There's a vaguely fishy smell in the air, mixed with the salt.

I pause when I get my first view of the lobster boats Siren's Point is famous for. I've never been on a boat before, but they do look pretty impressive, floating next to a long wooden pier. There aren't very many, which surprises me. The photographs on the website made it seem like I wouldn't be able to turn in a circle without smacking into a lobster fisherman. Turning, I walk carefully down a hill, eyes flicking around, taking it all in. I want a closer look, and the viewers will eat this up. Even better if I *do* actually run into a lobster fisherman.

There's definitely more activity around the boats than there was up on Main Street. I pause, stopping in the shadowed overhang of a large building with colorful buoy things hanging off the walls. I take a picture, for research and viewership purposes, but also simply because I like the way it looks with all the colors. Tucking my phone back in my pocket, I pull my hands into my sleeves and hunch my shoulders. It's far colder down here, with the wind coming in off the ocean, than it was up where the buildings shielded the worst of it. I stay, though, watching the group of men standing down near the dock, and further out, the small shape of what I suspect is a boat in the distance.

I squint, trying to figure out what is going on. There's a massive truck idling nearby, the engine a low rumble in the otherwise quiet day. I decide to move a little closer, straightening my shoulders and acting like I belong. There aren't any private property signs. I have just as much right as these guys do to be here.

As it always does, the GoPro clipped to my jacket provides a safety blanket. People don't like being filmed. Bullies especially don't like it. The times in the past when people have been aggressive toward me, the mention of the recording sent them on their way quick enough. Nobody wants to be caught on camera being the type of person they pretend they aren't.

All heads turn my direction as I approach. The majority of them simply nod a greeting and go back to watching the boat come in. One man doesn't.

He watches me, and although his posture isn't aggressive, the eye contact feels that way. I stare back, unwilling to be intimidated.

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Chapter Two



DRYDEN

I watch the man as an excuse to ignore the marina staff. He's a face I don't recognize, which means tourist, since the only other option is local, and the newest one of those was Ewan Fate. The backpack is interesting, as it's not exactly the time of year known for such a hobby. It's also filthy and patched, like he dragged it behind himself through the woods instead of carrying it on his back. I look a little closer at his face, not caring that I'm being obvious in my perusal. Not a backpacker at all, I realize, but homeless.

He's too far away for me to see much of his features, but the scowl is easily discernible. I raise my brows at him, letting my mouth soften into a smirk. After a moment, I turn away and go back to my silent vigil, watching my boat approach. I wish the marina staff would dispense with the small talk. I am, frankly, not in the mood. I'm frustrated and annoyed and exhausted. I'm worried about Oliver, who I only just found out, in a text from Shiloh, is in the hospital. He hadn't told me why and hasn't returned any of the messages I've left, which is so unlike him it's setting my teeth on edge.

I'm not an idiot—if anyone got hurt coming to help Cody and me yesterday, the blame isn't on me. Nobody who works in this business thinks like that. We all go through our days knowing shit might go wrong, and we all remain on standby to help others when they do. Yet I can't help but picture Oliver's young, innocent face and think about all the times we've sat together at the bar, the way he talks to me and understands my dry humor. If anyone had to get hurt, I wish it hadn't been him.

I glance over at the homeless man as the boat towing the *Maiden* continues to get closer. He's watching as well, turned slightly toward the water but without putting his back completely to us. I don't bother wasting time wondering why he's here. It's none of my business.

Having not slept at all last night and spent the morning organizing a tow for the *Maiden Seas*, my patience is at an all-time low. My muscles ache with the kind of pain I've only experienced after the single time I ran a marathon. My neck hurts so bad, I can barely turn my head. Even so, I can't bring myself to care about any of this as I watch my boat pulled from the water for dry docking and repairs. I love this boat. Honestly, I think if I had to choose between her and any member of my family, I'd choose the *Maiden* and kiss my blood relatives goodbye.

I lose track of the man with the backpack as we dry dock the *Maiden* in the boat shed I rent. I'm glad we don't have to take her far. If I have to listen to any more talking from these people, I'm going to drown one of them.

"Thank you for your help." I don't bother trying to tone down the snap in my voice as I cut off Brent. The man truly cannot pick up a signal, no matter how obvious it may be, and will happily stand and talk from sunrise to sunset if you let him.

"That's all right, then," he replies, cuffing me on the shoulder. I stiffen. I do not like it when strangers touch me. When anyone touches me, to be honest. But he did answer my call when I asked for help towing in the *Maiden*, so I suppose it's my duty to suffer through. I hated having to ask for help, and I'm sure they all hated having to accept. I do not have many friends in this town.

It takes another twenty minutes before I'm left alone in blessed silence, a low-grade headache throbbing at the base of my skull. I need a drink. Water for health followed up with a neat whiskey as a treat for dealing with the public and not committing a felony.

"Tell me what's wrong," I murmur to the *Maiden* as I climb on board, the door to the shop propped open to let in a cool breeze. I don't hold much hope that I'll be able to fix her. Possibly, I won't even be able to figure out what went wrong. I hadn't been able to yesterday when she died on the water.

The deck is soaked, water pooled in several places and dripping down the glass. At first glance, everything else seems to have fared pretty well,

nothing immediately sticking out as missing or obviously damaged. I'll have to replace all the rescue equipment Cody and I used, and the possibility of us getting those missing traps back is seeming less likely with each passing day. I could ask Shiloh, I suppose, since the *Drifter* is back on the water, at least for the meantime.

I won't, though. I'd rather take the loss in profits than ask him for a favor. I glance again at my phone, wondering if he's replied yet and feeling immediately disappointed that he hasn't. I'm going to have to drive to the hospital and figure out what's happening with Oliver myself, apparently.

If there were parts of my body that didn't hurt from the mess that was yesterday, I'm feeling them by the time I leave the boat shed. The *Maiden* is as good as I'm able to get her, and a hell of a lot better than she was hours ago. Locking up behind me, I glance around for the man with the backpack. Gone, looks like, which is just as well. It's dark and cold and damp this close to the water; it would be a miserable place to spend the night.

I give Shiloh the length of time it takes me to drive home before I call him. No amount of telling myself not to worry and that it's not my problem can make me stop thinking about Oliver, and I have long since passed what little tolerance I am allotted in a day. Letting the front door fall closed with a slam behind me, I peel off my wet jacket and drop it in a heap on the floor. My boots follow, kicked carelessly toward the mat as I call Shiloh. Ewan answers.

"Fuck," I mutter, pulling the phone away from my ear and tilting my head back, eyes closed. These past two days aren't anywhere near the worst days of my life, but boy are they giving it their all.

Ewan snorts. "Butt dial?" he asks, giving me the opportunity to bail if I want to.

"Unfortunately, no. I'd like to know what's happening with Oliver. I was told he went to the hospital last night, which I'm assuming has something to do with what happened yesterday. I'd like an update," I repeat, and then, because I do know what manners are, even if I often forget to use them, I add a clipped "Please."

"Ouch," Ewan comments. "Don't hurt yourself on my behalf. I don't expect you to be polite."

"Can you answer the question? This is painful for both of us."

Another snort before he clears his throat and sobers up a bit. "Nils is at the hospital with him. Last update we got was internal bleeding requiring

surgery. Shiloh and I are headed over now to deal with the insurance and check in. We called and were told not to visit right away—let him rest for a few hours after surgery.”

Closing my eyes, I breathe in, hold it, and slowly exhale through my nose. Ewan is silent on the other end of the line, but I imagine I can hear the thoughts he’s keeping to himself. It’s my fault. If those traps hadn’t gotten lost and I hadn’t taken Cody out to grapple for them; if the weather hadn’t turned and the *Maiden* hadn’t gone dead in the water; if Shiloh and his crew hadn’t been the first to answer the distress call and Oliver hadn’t been out on the water yesterday, none of this would have happened.

“Fuck,” I repeat, more vehemently.

“Yeah,” Ewan agrees, and for the first time since I met the man, I find something to like about him. He isn’t telling me Oliver will be fine, or that everything will work out, or even that none of this mess is on me. He’s simply agreeing that this day is not our day and leaving the platitudes for someone else to lap up.

“Please give me another update after you see him at the hospital,” I request, trying to modulate my voice and make it sound less like I’m speaking the words through clenched teeth. I am truly in a foul mood.

“Will do.”

With that, Ewan hangs up, and I can’t help but huff an incredulous laugh. Perhaps there are two things to like about the man.

Chapter Three



SPENCER

It turns out I picked the perfect place to spend the afternoon on my first day in Siren's Point. I hadn't meant to linger so long, but as soon as the boat got close enough for me to see that it was towing another boat, I couldn't help but stick around. I'd figured they'd park it alongside one of the other boats, but instead, they pulled the whole thing from the water and stored it in one of the sheds scattered along the shore. I got so much good footage, I'm giddy. How many people can say they've seen *that*? Not many, I wouldn't think, and talk about a hell of a way for me to start my vlogs about Siren's Point.

Some viewers follow me for the short-form videos—the quick, one- to two-minute captures of my walking days. Some prefer to put me on their television and watch a thirty-minute vlog like it's a weekly TV program. Others still only look at the static imagery I post on my grid and don't watch any of the video footage at all. Recently, people have started asking for written blogs to be posted on my website, as though my content could be used to plan travel itineraries. Or, in some cases, advice on what *not* to do.

I have a feeling, no matter what flavor of content it's posted as, everything I got of the boat being towed to shore will be a huge hit. I can't even be annoyed about the amount of time it took for them to do it, essentially eating up every daylight hour that was left and leaving me with no time to find a suitable place to hunker down for the night. I'd been planning on sleeping rough no matter what the first night and using tomorrow to further scope everything out and find a more suitable long-term option. I don't know how long I'll be here before I move on, and

available accommodations might be the deciding factor on that timeline. I don't think these locals are going to be the kind to let me sleep on the street without having something to say about it, but I'm also a little worried about other options. B and Bs and hotels are available, but I can't—and won't—use all of my limited money on them. It's possible that one or two nights will be the only thing I can manage in Siren's Point, so I have to make them count.

Sitting on a bench next to a little shack thing near the end of the pier, I rest my legs and watch as the men disperse. All but one eventually get in their cars and leave, headlights swooping across the parking lot and briefly illuminating my shadowy little corner. I've always hated the winter months for how early it gets dark, and hate it even more on the nights where I'm sleeping rough. Nightfall at four in the afternoon is fine if you have electricity and a cozy house available. Not so much when you're sitting on a bench, cold and tired, and rapidly nearing that cutoff when exhaustion sinks its teeth into you and you feel as though you can no longer move at all.

Eventually, the little rectangle of light spilling through the open warehouse door turns off, and I watch the shadow of the last man step out. I'm thinking he must be the owner of the boat that had to be towed in, since that's where they pulled it into and he hasn't reappeared since. He must also be the owner of the Porsche I saw parked in the lot. I can only imagine the type of wealth required to possess both a boat *and* a Porsche. I wonder if those other guys were his employees.

I keep making up stories in my head about him as I carefully wander the marina in the dark, seeking out a place to spend the night that's both out of the wind and where no motion lights can detect me. It's a habit I've picked up these past few years on the road, making content. I come across so, so many strangers. Well, *everyone* I come across is a stranger, to be fair. And there really isn't anything to do to pass the time walking for miles and miles per day. Filming can only take up so many minutes. The rest I spend in silence, dreaming up scenarios and lives for different people I meet. It's a fun little game and keeps me from falling asleep with my eyes open when I'm wandering down a lonely stretch of road.

Or from worrying too much when I'm stumbling around in the dark, looking for a soft and hopefully not frozen patch of grass to curl up on for the night. I end up at the back of the Porsche guy's warehouse, nestled

behind the metal wall of the structure where it backs up to a hill. It's a tight fit, with only a couple of feet of wiggle room, and there's only a single, easily accessible exit. With the moon completely blocked by the building, it's pitch-black back here. It's also blessedly warm. Or at least warmer than out in the open, with the winter wind blowing in off the Atlantic.

Slipping my hands out of my gloves and hissing at the shock of frigid air, I get out my camping lantern and turn it on to the lowest setting. Being outside, alone, at night is unsettling no matter who you are or how tough you proclaim to be. The tiniest bit of light can go a long way. Tonight, though, it's hard to be grateful for the lantern without wishing it were a fire.

Blowing on my fingers ineffectually, I dig through my pack until I find my external charger, journal, and a slightly bruised apple I have from a few days ago when I was able to stay in a roadside motel for the night and they offered free breakfast. My mouth feels heavy with saliva as I take a bite, hunger—gone dormant on the road—gnawing on my insides as it roars back to life. I can't even remember the last time I had three meals a day. Luckily, the long periods of starvation on the road no longer bother me all that much. Rarely do I even feel that hungry—not until I take a bite of food do I even notice it sometimes. And then, as though it was only lying patiently in my gut, I feel ravenous. I think, if I ever did have three full meals in one day, my stomach might actually burst.

Holding the apple between my teeth, I angle myself so I'm facing the light source and hold my phone up in front of me. I start the video and open my mouth, apple falling into the palm of my free hand. I smile.

"Well, here we are. Another night in a zero-star hotel," I joke, grinning impishly at the camera and taking a crunchy bite of apple. Since I'm planning on adding this clip to a vlog and having it follow up the footage of the lobster boat being towed in, I talk as though the audience has already seen it. "I lucked out today, walking into town at the exact right time to see the show down at the water. If every day is as exciting as this, I suppose I can see why so many of you were eager for me to come here."

I pause for another bite of apple, my stomach grumbling loud enough that it'll likely be caught on the mic. When my fingertip had randomly landed on Siren's Point, I hadn't thought much of it. I'd never heard of it, and the tiny little map dot was so far down the road at the time—a week of walking, to be exact—that I hadn't even bothered with more than a cursory internet search to see if I was walking to a big city or a small town. But

comments had flooded in on that video, excited to see the winding, wooded roads, moose, puffins, and big, burly lobstermen. People had left recommendations of places to eat and what to order and, in three separate cases, locals I should talk to. It had seemed incredible to me that a town that boasted barely four thousand residents at a push could garner so much tourist activity, and for so many of those tourists to be present on my channel.

“I like the vibes of this place,” I tell the camera now, the Porsche driver inexplicably flashing into my mind as I say it. He’d been the one watching me as the boat was towed in. I clear my throat. “Tomorrow, I’ll head into town and chat up some locals, look for better digs than this, and maybe put a few bugs in some ears about work.”

This is another aspect of my wandering lifestyle that viewers seem to oddly appreciate. I don’t make enough money from social media to support any kind of lifestyle—not a homeless one, and certainly not a house-with-a-white-picket-fence one. The money I earn doing these videos is both sporadic and sparse. Some months, there’s a windfall of hundreds of dollars; others I get barely enough to cover a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter at the grocery store. Which means most places I go, I end up finding temporary work for a few weeks. I stick around, doing odd jobs at odd hours, and filming as much as I can.

In New York City, I hit the jackpot when a viewer direct messaged me and said they were a fan of my content and would love to hire me to walk their dog for a few weeks. Since walking is the one and only qualification on my resumé these days, I felt pretty certain I was the right man for the job. Besides, I always try to push myself where dogs are concerned—not let the fear take root and grow, but control it with exposure therapy. Unfortunately, all that exposure therapy might have been for nothing since only weeks later, I was literally chased out of a town by one.

Most of the time, the jobs I work are more day-labor-type things. Loading moving trucks, mowing lawns, cleaning gutters, that sort of thing. No qualifications needed beyond a strong pair of shoulders and a work ethic that’ll see you through uncomfortable environments and long hours. The type of jobs that don’t pay much, because the type of people hired are like me—unhoused and transient. They’re unexciting employment opportunities by anyone’s estimation, yet people seem to love watching. The GoPro footage from my dog walker stint in NYC was as much of a hit as any of

my footage on the road. Almost as popular as the couple of weeks I worked as a logger in Minnesota, chopping trees and fielding an influx of comments about how my channel was turning into a thirst trap.

I'm unsure what sort of job will be available to me here and give myself a couple minutes to dream of being allowed to join a lobster boat. Lobster crew? Fishing brigade? Whatever. No matter what they call themselves, I think there is very little hope of me being allowed into their midst. If anything, I might be able to smile and finagle my way onto a boat to watch and film, but not help. Another thing to add to the to-do list once I'm showered and less offensive to the eyes and nose.

"It's cold here," I comment now, wondering if I actually can see my breath fogging in front of my mouth, or if that's just fanciful thinking. Now that I'm sitting still, I'm freezing. Settling down this close to the water was a mistake. "Pretty, though. And you guys sure weren't kidding when you said everyone around here is friendly. Haven't had a chance to speak to anyone, but I definitely received some warm welcomes."

I chuckle a little bit, still feeling surprised and finding a little joy in how many people waved at me today. Truly, I don't mind being invisible. Sometimes, though, I have to admit, it's nice to be recognized as a human being who might benefit from something as simple as a wave and a smile.

I watch as the battery on my phone gives me a twenty percent alert and sigh. I've got some kick left in the external charger, but not enough to film frivolously. Being without access to a cell phone is foolish and dangerous, and an extra few minutes of footage isn't worth either.

"I'd better wrap it up there, friends," I tell the camera, smiling tightly. Fuck, but this night is going to be miserable. "Hopefully tomorrow, we'll see some lobstermen with our lobster boats."

Clicking the recording button, I roll my neck back and forth, putting my phone on low-power mode and plugging it into the external charger. I need to find a public library tomorrow to charge all my batteries. Taking another bite of apple, I try not to pay attention to the weight dragging on my psyche. Everything I have planned for the next day is feasible. It's all things I've done before and are certainly all things I'll one day—likely soon—be doing again. But living on the road means I'm living in a constant state of being on. I don't get to crawl into bed every night, safe and well-fed. I have to curl up on the ground and try to grab a few minutes of sleep in between the periods of wakefulness. I have to listen and be aware of my surroundings at

all times. I have to be happy with nothing more than an apple and not worry or think about when next I'll be able to eat and whether that meal will be fished out of a dumpster.

It hits me, sometimes, the sheer weight of how I live. I wouldn't say I regret my life choices overall, but when the ground is cold and hard beneath me, my feet and back killing me, and I'm wishing for one single real-life person instead of thousands of virtual ones to talk to... Well, on those nights, it's hard not to hate my existence a little bit.

"No sense crying about it," I mutter to myself, pulling out my ratty but trusty thermal sleeping bag. "Suck it up, Spencer."

Not wanting to lose all battery power, I click off the camp lantern and try to settle myself down in the crevasse next to the shed wall. Eyes open, staring blankly into the dark, I listen to the rush of the ocean. I can pick out the slight creaking of the boats and picture them rocking gently. Straight overhead, I can see stars. It's comforting, as it always is, to see the tiny pinpricks of light speckled above. Turning onto my back, I settle my backpack under my head and zip the sleeping bag up so nothing but my face is exposed to the elements.

I stare up at the stars, tracing a few constellations and letting the familiar practice soothe me. Calmer, I curl onto my side, fingers clenched tight on the backpack under my cheek, and close my eyes.



I wake with a jolt when I hear the low rumble. Car engine, definitely, and moving closer. I keep my eyes on the end of the little alley I'm tucked into and silently curse to myself when headlights briefly illuminate the space. The sky is barely beginning to lighten, probably only five in the morning if I were to grab my phone and check the time. What the hell is someone doing here right now?

Carefully, so I don't make any noise, I cup a hand around the zipper of my sleeping bag and slide it down, opening the fabric so I can sit up. My little crevasse was a good place to sleep, but not so good of a place to be caught in. There is only one exit, and it's exactly where that engine is currently purring. Knowing it'll shut off soon, I scramble out of my sleeping bag and roll it up, using the noise from the engine to cover the

sound of the fabric. Movements quick and economic, I'm just stuffing it into my backpack when the car shuts off, headlights blinking away with it. I slow down again, carefully closing my bag and easing the straps over my shoulder. If I need to run, I can.

Everything is just a little bit louder in the early morning—the slamming of the car door explosive and the click of the lock on the warehouse door sharp. I know they've gone inside when I hear the creak of the rusty hinges and a scratching noise that makes me think of a rock being dragged over the ground. I stand, still and silent as a statue, and wait. If I give it a few minutes, I can sneak around the front.

I wait what feels like five before I take a couple of confident, silent steps forward. I know how to be quiet when it's needed, and finding yourself alone with a stranger when it's dark and you've been sleeping on what they might consider their property is one of those times. Unfortunately, I'm not the only one who can be quiet.

When I round the corner of the warehouse, stepping into the pool of bright light, I come to a sudden stop when a man walks out the open door and meets my eye. He stops as well, blinking in the only outward display of surprise. He stares at me, and I stare back, neither of us having expected the other and both of us startled.

I clench my fingers harder around the straps of my pack. I'm backed into enough of a corner that the only way to freedom is either vaulting the car or going through the driver. It's the Porsche guy from yesterday, I realize, which is either a very good or very bad thing. He probably recognizes me, and any idiot could figure out that finding the slightly grubby-looking fellow from the day before hiding behind his shed means I had been sleeping there. People do not like surprises that come in the form of strangers in the dark, and they're even less likely to provide grace to that person if they're homeless. Homeless, in a lot of people's minds, equals criminal, drug addict, or mental instability. In short, it equals a person they need to fear. Fear, to many, presents itself as violence, and I'm going to be in real trouble if this man is one of those people. He's at least five inches taller than me, on the thinner side, but certainly a hell of a lot bulkier than I am.

Unwrapping my fingers, I slowly hold my hands at shoulder height, palms facing outward like I'm surrendering. I don't want him to think I have a weapon. I want him to take seven measured steps backward and give

me enough space to flee. I'm scrappy when I need to be, but I really would prefer all conflict be resolved in ways that don't involve fists.

"I was just leaving," I tell him, keeping eye contact. His are nearly black in the low light, calm and assessing. I hope that's a good thing.

"Did I wake you up?" he asks. I swallow, still holding my hands aloft. One single time in my life, someone fired a gun at me, and that was one time too many. His jacket is too bulky for me to see the shape of a weapon hiding beneath, but I never need to learn a lesson twice. Until he proves otherwise, he's a threat.

"I was just leaving," I repeat, heart thrumming and nerves evident in my voice. "I'm sorry I disturbed you."

Porsche guy tilts his head to the side, expression unchanging as he regards me. Because I'm the kind of person who notices everything, I can't help but notice how attractive he is. Jarringly so, with high cheekbones, dark eyes, and rich brown skin. His jaw is the kind of smooth I'd never be able to achieve with my cheap plastic razor, and there's something silky in the tone of his voice equally out of reach. Even if he weren't standing next to the kind of car I've only seen in magazines, I'd be able to clock him as rich by the way he speaks.

"No need to be nervous," he comments. My back straightens immediately, although I don't drop my hands.

"I'm not," I reply shortly. It's never a good idea to let people know you're frightened of them. That's a power imbalance that can never be returned once it's shifted that direction. He merely raises one smooth eyebrow and takes two steps backward.

"Do you have a weapon?" he asks, not sounding as though he particularly cares about the answer either way and is merely asking because he's curious.

"No."

"Then put your hands down."

I comply slowly but still don't go near my pockets. I let my hands dangle by my side, projecting a nonchalance I do not feel. He is making me nervous, and it doesn't only have to do with his size and proximity. It's not even really him but the fact that it's dark and he caught me here alone. He startled me. I'm scared because interactions in the past have taught me I have to be fearful of everyone.

“Not a great place to sleep,” he comments. I nod in agreement, because, yeah, no shit, buddy.

“Wouldn’t be my first choice,” I joke and am enormously relieved when the faintest hint of a smile is visible in the tilt of his mouth. We stare silently at one another for a few moments. I clear my throat and add, “I’ll be on my way. I’m sorry I disturbed you.”

For just a second, I think he’s going to box me in—move toward me instead of away, catch instead of release. It passes in a blink, though, and I watch as he retreats, sweeping a hand out like he’s a gentleman letting me go first through a doorway.

“Of course,” he murmurs, still watching me with eyes so dark I can’t read a single emotion in them.

I have to walk past him to get by, and every hair on the back of my neck rises as I do. The second I’m able, I turn just enough to keep him in my periphery, unwilling to show my back to anyone, let alone a stranger in the dark. I am well beyond the pool of light, footsteps quick, when he speaks again.

“If you walk a mile down Bluefin Street, you’ll find a diner that offers a full breakfast for two fifty.”

I glance back over my shoulder, pretty confident that he can no longer clearly see me given the dark morning and the distance now between us. I raise a hand in acknowledgment and thank you anyway, but he’s already turning away and walking back inside, nothing but a tall silhouette in the glowing doorway before he’s gone.

Chapter Four



DRYDEN

Approximately five foot six in height—although he was doing his best to stretch that a little further—brown eyes, skin that’s seen a little too much sun and not enough sunscreen, and what I’m estimating was a day-six beard. Hard to guess accurately with the dirt and exhaustion sitting below his eyes, but in his twenties for sure. Younger than me, certainly.

I glance over at the open doorway every couple of minutes, thinking about him. I didn’t get a name, which is idiotic, but he caught me by surprise. As I did to him, if the raw fear in his eyes was any indication, or the way he’d held his hands up like he was proclaiming his innocence at gunpoint. I hadn’t meant to startle him, and I don’t think I did a very good job of dispelling the discomfort after I did. Comfort isn’t a thing I’m proficient in giving, and I hadn’t been anticipating the need to try when I woke up with an urge to check on the *Maiden*.

I’d spent the evening lying in bed, wishing for sleep but unable to turn off my brain. I enjoy a good puzzle, although I’d prefer they be less dangerous than my boat’s engine failing at sea and being unable to fix it. I should be able to fix it. I’m *always* able to fix it. Engines make sense. Engines work within the same parameters every time and act the same way, as long as those parameters are met. Unlike people. Unlike cute little strangers with big, untrusting eyes and pouty lips.

Sighing, I sit back on my heels and look at the door again. He hasn’t come back, nor do I expect him to. I would be surprised if I ever saw him again, in fact. Which is fine. He is no concern of mine.

I tinker with the *Maiden* for a few hours, growing increasingly frustrated when I can’t figure out the issue. I’ve double- and triple-checked

the usual suspects when something like this occurs, and nothing seems to be amiss. Nothing other than the fact that the damn thing won't turn on.

Carefully wiping my fingers off on a rag, I rise to standing. I made certain to apply myself to learning the *Maiden's* engine when I acquired her, my preference always going to be to hire a professional but aware that for safety, I should at least be proficient. It's frustrating for all that preparation to be for naught the first time it's tested. I'm an engineer, for fuck's sake. And while I might have started my career in an office, my skills have grown these past few years to a more hands-on approach to the mechanical aspect. I slide my fingers along the gunwale as I think, still turning the problem over in my head and trying to spy a solution. As though I can't help myself, I find my gaze catching once more on the doorway. I hope he went and got breakfast from the Sand Dollar. I hope he'll get the hell out of my head so I can focus on things that actually matter.

Like Oliver. Hands clean, I check the time on my cell phone and mentally calculate how long it'll take me to drive to the hospital. If I leave now, I'll get there well after the start of visiting hours. Dropping the rag carelessly on a workbench, I exit the boat shop and step outside into a hazy, chill morning.

The brown-eyed stranger is long gone and the wharf busier with locals in his place. Nobody hails me as I lock up my boat shed. I cast a cursory glance toward the *Drifter*, tied to her slip, as I climb into my car. It's dark and still, which means Shiloh isn't here. Occasionally, since we broke up, I feel a strange twist of longing in my stomach when his name comes to mind. I don't miss being with him, but I admit to sometimes missing him being there at all. A year ago, had something bad happened to Oliver, I would have been his first call. I wouldn't have had to chase down information or go to bed worried. I wouldn't have had to try and prove to anyone that I care.

I had known, from the first time I went out with him, that Shiloh and I were not destined for romance. Perhaps that makes me a piece of shit, since I pursued one anyway, but the pair of us were so wrong and sad and *different*. I remember very vividly sneaking out of his house in the dead of night the first time we'd slept together, thinking that perhaps it didn't matter if we ever loved each other or not. That what mattered to me right then was having someone—anyone—to smile at me, to talk to, and to touch me. And selfishly, I'd found a person who'd do just that. I'd kept Shiloh just near

enough that he couldn't escape and far enough away that I wouldn't care if he did. It had felt, at the time, like the perfect arrangement. Neither of us would be alone; he could pine for his lost love, and I could rejoice that mine was gone for good.

I put the radio on low as I drive toward the hospital, listening to a playlist of soul music that seems intent upon only giving me mournful tunes. I watch the shoulders a little closer than I usually do as I drive the winding roads, wondering if I'll catch a glimpse of a dirty blue jacket and red backpack. I must truly be bored if I can't think of anything else but a homeless man I talked to for less than five minutes.

The hospital is quiet when I arrive, the night shift having traded off with the day, the sun giving a brief reprieve from the emergencies that seem to only spawn at night. I don't stop at the desk for help but use the sparse information Ewan provided me, as well as my own brain, to find my way. When I step out of the elevator on the fifth floor, laughter, strangely out of place in a hospital, alerts me to the fact that I'm in the right place. A young nurse with tight rows of braids along his scalp nods at me. I return the greeting and follow the laughter.

Indeed, when I peek through the open doorway of the room where the fun is apparently being had, I see two nurses standing next to a patient bed, Oliver reclined back and grinning goofily. In the corner, one leg crossed over the other, ankle resting on his knee, is Nils, eyes on me and expression as haggard as my own feels. I'm not the only one who's had a bad couple of days.

Nodding a greeting at him, I knock gently on the door. Oliver and his lady friends look over, the former smiling broadly when he sees it's me, lifting a hand in a slightly sluggish welcome. I almost smile. Oliver could probably lose both his arms and still find a way to wave a greeting at everyone.

"Another visitor," one of the nurses teases, smiling down at Oliver like she wants to pinch his cheeks. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Hey, Dryden," Oliver says. I step back, giving the nurses enough room to pass me and exit the room. Oliver struggles to push himself into a more seated position until Nils reaches over and places a quelling hand on his shoulder, silently asking him to stay where he's at.

"Feeling okay?" I ask quietly, closing the door and blocking out the noise from the busy hallway. I don't want an audience. This will be

uncomfortable enough as it is.

“Great. Yeah, fine. No problems. Ready to go home. Maybe today,” Oliver says hopefully. Nils catches my eye again, shaking his head slightly. Ah. No chance of going home today, then.

“How are you?” Oliver continues, his voice a little slurred but nonetheless strong enough to make me relax a little bit. I’d been half expecting to find him on death’s door and am relieved to see he’s at least well enough to be chatty. “Is the *Maiden* okay? Did you get her towed in? Is Cody fine? You’re okay?”

Curling my fingers around the rail of his bed, I lean my weight on it.

“We’re fine. Boat is fine.” Dead on land, but intact, so I keep my complaints to myself. Uncomfortable, I look Oliver over—what I can see of him, anyway, beneath the hospital gown and blankets. I wanted visual confirmation that he was okay, and now that I’ve gotten it, I don’t know what else to say.

“Do you want to sit down?” Oliver offers, like he’s a host at a dinner party and not a patient in a care unit. “Something to drink? I think we have some water and crackers. Do you like saltines? There’s a coffee machine down the hallway, right, Nils?”

“Yes, actually, if you wouldn’t mind whipping me up a latte,” I request dryly. Nils snorts softly, mouth pinched in a way that looks slightly humorous. Oliver grins sheepishly. He never seems to take my sarcasm to heart.

“You can sit down,” he repeats as though he can’t help himself.

“I won’t stay long. I just wanted to stop by and make sure you were okay.” I clear my throat, discomfort making it hard to maintain eye contact with him. I should probably pat his shoulder or hold his hand or something. Judging by the vast array of floral arrangements along the windowsill, the very least I should have done was bring the man a flower.

“That’s nice of you,” Oliver tells me, always happy with whatever I can give. My fingers loosen just a bit, the cool metal no longer biting into my palms. “What’s your plan for the *Maiden*? Are you going to try and recover the lost traps again? Maybe Shiloh and Nils can help.”

I glance over at Nils in time to see a look on his face that tells me he’ll be doing nothing at all that can’t take place in this room for as long as Oliver is here.

“I’ll figure it out.” My shoulders tense once more, thinking about how little time is left before the season starts. Those lost traps are probably lost for good, and even though it’s the tags that are the real loss, the gone equipment burns me just as much. But the real issue right now is getting the *Maiden Seas* checked over and repaired. I’ve got barely a month before she needs to be seaworthy for the high season, and even less if I consider the traps I already have set and need to be hauled in the meantime.

“We can help,” Oliver offers.

“Can you? Don’t have enough problems of your own, you’d like to adopt mine, too?”

Oliver laughs but stops suddenly and grimaces as though it hurt. I take a small step back from the bedside but don’t retreat too far when he looks pained by this as well. I have worked very, very hard not to let anyone in this town get too close. I don’t know how this man managed it anyway.

“Sorry about this, Oliver,” I say quietly, embarrassed by the words and how hard it is to say them, still ashamed that I’d needed to call for help at all, and angry that someone had gotten hurt when they’d come. Frustrated that so few things seem to be going right lately, and annoyed at myself for letting it all get to me. I will handle it, and everything will be fine. Life will go on. It always does.

“Hey, don’t be sorry,” Oliver replies immediately, frowning, big blue eyes a little glassy. He shifts, flinching again, and Nils rises to his feet, reaching for a button on the wall to call a nurse. “Everything’s fine, right, Nils? That’s what the doctor said. Things happen. You don’t have to be sorry.”

I nod, stepping away from the bed as one of the young nurses from earlier strides into the room with a smile on her face, reaching to turn off the call light. She touches Oliver’s shoulder the way I probably should have been, offering comfort as her eyes scan his vital signs on the monitor.

“Feeling okay?” she asks.

“Fine!” Oliver replies sunnily. Nils shakes his head, so he amends, “Just a little sore.”

Badging into the computer, the nurse opens up his chart. I move further away and avert my gaze, not wanting to inadvertently peek at his medical information nor make it seem like I’m looking. Finding myself at the foot of the bed and the only useless person in the room, I touch my fingertips to

the top of Oliver's foot. He glances at me, cheeks a little red as though embarrassed about the trouble he's putting everyone through.

"Leaving?" he asks.

"I'll check back in," I promise, stomach squirming with discomfort. This is too many emotions for me in a day. Oliver smiles, though, happy with the promise.

"Thanks for coming. I'm glad you and Cody are okay. I was worried about you."

Nodding, I squeeze his ankle in what I hope comes across as a kind, comforting gesture, even though it feels abnormal to me. Only Oliver would worry about others while in the hospital for a medical emergency himself.

The sky, once I'm leaving the hospital, is slate gray, the clouds fat and heavy with what looks like snow. We've had a hell of a winter this year, and it doesn't seem to be letting up anytime soon. And indeed, when I'm a short five miles into my drive home, sleet begins falling. Looks like we're in for an ice storm. Lovely. The perfect addition to an already shit week. I wonder about the man with the backpack and whether he'll find decent shelter for the night.

Chapter Five



SPENCER

I follow the pretty Porsche man's instructions, heading in the direction of the diner and lucking out when I see a sign for a trailhead. Veering that way, I follow the signs until I reach the starting point for the Mermaid Basin Loop. As there usually is, a large stone building sits next to a wooden map of the trail, erected near the far end of the parking lot. Public restrooms near trailheads are usually open year-round and, depending on the place, are sometimes better maintained than gas station ones.

The inside of this one is cold when I pull open the heavy metal door, but it doesn't smell like shit, and there isn't any standing water or soggy toilet paper on the concrete floor. All signs pointing to this being a win, so far. Closing the door, I rest my backpack on the ground and take a much-needed morning pee. Washing my hands, I hiss when the frigid water touches my dry, already cold skin. I hadn't been expecting heated water, but it's a shock to the system nonetheless. Resigned, I dry my hands and reach for my bag, pulling out the small Dopp kit I carry with me.

There isn't a full shower in here, and I probably wouldn't have braved it in the cold even if there was, so a sponge bath at the sink is the best I can do. I go through the motions quickly, giving the important bits—groin, butt, armpits, and face—a quick, thorough wash. I'm shivering by the time I'm done, even though I didn't spend longer than needed with my clothes off and covered back up the moment I was done washing each area. It doesn't matter. The cold air and water combined after a night spent out in the elements means no measure of care would get me through this practice warm.

Teeth chattering, I zip my coat back up and pull my beanie back on. I need a haircut, and I need to shave my face. I can't stand having a beard. It's the thing I hate above all else about living on the road. Slinging my backpack over my sore shoulders, I open the door and step back out into the morning.

It's light enough now that I can see the dark curl to the clouds, and there is an accompanying chill to the wind. Gloved hands shoved into the pockets of my coat, I hunch my shoulders and walk back the way I came. Pretty Porsche man made it seem like the diner would be easy to find if I merely walked that direction, and I'm hoping he wasn't having one on. People have strange senses of humor and will occasionally err closer to cruel than funny. I hope that guy isn't an asshole and didn't send me on a wild goose chase for cheap greasy food.

But, as promised, a walk down Bluefin Street eventually brings me to the Sand Dollar Diner. The sign flickers in the early gloom, neon faded in half of it. A bell tinkles over the door when I walk inside, pulling off my beanie and clutching it in one hand as I look around. It's surprisingly busy, and I forget about how cold I am for half a second when I gaze around at the patrons. I think maybe I found some of the lobster fishermen I'd been so hoping to run into. Grinning to myself, I stuff my hat into my pocket, tug my gloves off and tuck them away as well.

"Sit anywhere you want," a blond woman with dark rings of eyeliner painted around her eyes tells me as she passes, coffee pot held aloft. "I'll be with you."

Not feeling quite ready to approach any locals after my run-in with the Porsche driver this morning, I slide into one of the only open booths, tucking my backpack under the table and hopefully out of sight. Looking around the room, I relax a little bit when I see a general sort of scruffiness on many of the other patrons. I'm not the only one with out-of-control facial hair, nor cold-bitten cheeks. Nobody is looking at me.

"Hey, sweetie," the waitress says, shoes squeaking on the linoleum floor as she walks up and slides a plastic Coca-Cola water glass over the table toward me. Dropping a straw down next to it, she smiles. I smile back, finding the gesture easy. Her name tag says "Wendy." I'm pretty sure in every diner across the country there is a woman named Wendy working there, ready to kick ass or make you feel special, depending on what's needed.

“Hi, Wendy. Busy morning?” I ask. Rule number one for living on the road: be fucking polite. You never know when the kindness of a stranger will mean the difference between life and death.

“Oh, not too bad. We’ve had an exciting couple of days ’round here. Everyone’s having a lie-in today.”

I raise my eyebrows at that. The room is almost full, only a handful of seats remaining and a low hum of noise as everyone chats. It looks busy enough to me.

“Get you started with some coffee while you look?” Wendy offers, plucking the menu off the table and holding it out for me. I take it, the plastic sticky under my fingers.

“Yes, please. Thank you.”

I glance at the menu as she strides off, stopping at three tables between mine and the swinging kitchen doors. Scanning the offerings, I bite my lip as I look for the two-fifty deal Porsche guy promised. I don’t have money to spend on fancy restaurant food, and even the two fifty is going to be pushing it. But there, on the back cover, is a cartoon lobster looped around the words: LOBSTERMEN SPECIAL. Indeed, it’s a full breakfast for the promised amount, and even the coffee is included. I set the menu down, and less than a minute later, Wendy is back, white coffee mug in one hand and pot in the other.

“Thank you,” I tell her as she pours it for me, steam rising from the cup. As soon as she finishes, I reach for it, skin dry and painful from the cold, tight as I curl my fingers around the mug. It’s too hot to drink, but exactly hot enough for me to borrow some of the warmth for my hands.

“What’ll it be, sweetheart? Need a little longer to look?”

“I was wondering if I could order the lobstermen special? Or is that only for...lobstermen?”

She smiles, revealing a single missing canine. “’Course you can, love. How do you want your eggs?”

“Scrambled, please.” It’s not my favorite way to have eggs, but some sort of dairy product will be used to scramble them, and I need all the extra calories I can get.

“Toast? White, wheat, sourdough?”

“Wheat, please.”

“Sausage or bacon? We’ve got pig and turkey.”

“Bacon, please. The kind that oinks. Crispy, if possible. Or if you have any extra fatty pieces, I’d take those, please.”

She nods at me, jotting everything down. “Home fries are grilled with onions and peppers, that okay?”

“Perfect,” I enthuse, and get another smile. Lifting my mug to my mouth, I enjoy the warmth of the steam on my face and take a careful sip.

“Anything else to drink? Juice?”

Glancing down at the menu lying flat on the table in front of me, I scan the special. It doesn’t list any drink as included other than coffee. Shaking my head, I smile up at Wendy.

“Coffee and water are perfect, thank you.”

Plucking the menu off the table, she slides a roll of silverware in its place. “Be out shortly. Let me know if Fred gives you any trouble.”

She winks as the man in the booth next to mine—Fred, apparently—grumbles something that sounds suspiciously like “nosy woman.” Ducking my head to avoid making eye contact with Fred, whom I really don’t want to give me any trouble, I pull my cell phone from my bag. The Sand Dollar’s Wi-Fi isn’t hidden behind a password, which is another thing I’ll make sure to remember. If I needed to, while I was in town, I could sit outside and connect to it without having to adhere to the paying-customer rule most establishments have.

Pulling up a web browser, I do a quick search of hotels in the area. There aren’t many, and I usually avoid hotels if at all possible, not able to drop a few hundred dollars a night on a mattress. There’s one long-term-stay option, which looks promising. The longer you book, the cheaper the rates, apparently, and the reviews are pretty much raving. The cottages are also the ones a viewer recommended to me after they stayed in them for a two-week holiday and were impressed. I memorize the address and shut my phone back down, wanting to conserve battery.

Wendy brings my food before swooping away and returning to refill both my water and coffee. Nobody talks to me as I eat, the food greasy and hot and the most delicious thing I’ve ever tasted. I start garnering more attention, though, people’s eyes catching on me and holding as they shrug on their coats and leave. Every time I look up from my food, I meet the eye of someone watching me with interest. Although I’m not fond of the attention, it doesn’t yet feel malicious. Slowly, I eat my way through every bit of food on my plate before using a corner of my toast to mop up

anything I might have missed with the fork. I make it through five mugs of coffee and seven glasses of water.

Sitting back, I put my silverware in a stack on the empty plate and take a deep breath. I'm uncomfortably full, but liquids are just as hard to find on the road as solids. If food or drink is in front of me, I have to finish it. There is no guarantee of more later.

Wendy brings me a peppermint with my bill, and I feel awful for the three dollars I leave on the table to cover it, plus a little extra. No amount of politeness on my part will make up for the meager tip, and I'd leave more if I could. Flipping the receipt over, I write a thank-you on the back, hoping she doesn't curse my guts as I walk out the door.

It's freezing outside. It took me hours to eat my way through that plate of food, and I was hoping that warmer temperatures would be more likely with the sun in the sky. Regretting that I can't turn back around and spend the day in the cozy interior of the diner, I make sure my GoPro is in the right spot, hunch my shoulders, and begin walking. I memorized the map to the Libby Cottages and am happy to at least be able to see a new part of town on my journey.

Halfway there, rain starts falling from the sky. I frown, holding out a gloved palm and watching as snowflakes melt on the fabric. A mix of rain and snow, actually, which is fantastic. Sleet is terrible to walk in, and makes roadways twice as dangerous as they usually are. It picks up the longer I walk, blowing into my face like tiny little icicles, stinging my cheeks. By the time I get to the Libby Cottages, all the warmth I accumulated at the Sand Dollar Diner has flown away on the wind, and I'm finding it hard to appreciate the beauty of the town. I need a good night of rest. Desperately. I need a real shower, with real hot water, and a bed that doesn't zip up the side. I need to feel just a little bit human, because, right now, I'm feeling like nothing at all.

"Hi, welcome in!" a cheerful voice greets me when I walk into the main office at the Libby Cottages. I smile at the woman seated behind the desk, cheeks raw from the wind and cold, eyes damp as they start watering from the abrupt change in temperature.

"Hi, thank you," I reply, trying not to sound as down as I feel. People respond better to joy than sadness.

"Goodness, it's cold out there, isn't it? You look frozen to the bone," she comments, frowning.

“I was hoping I could rent a room?” Stepping up to the counter, I clench and unclench my hands in my pockets, trying to generate warmth. These are good gloves, yet my hands are cold anyway. “For the night, for sure, but I’m hoping to be in town for a few weeks, at least.”

Her face falls, and any hope I had plummets with it. She’s going to turn me away.

“Oh, gosh, I’m so sorry. We’re all booked up. I don’t have a cottage opening until next Thursday, and it’s a three bedroom.” She looks genuinely apologetic as her eyes move over my face and down my body, taking in my clothes. “I could call over to the Boatman, if you’d like? They usually have a vacancy or two.”

Smiling weakly, I shake my head. The Boatman is a five-star hotel. I didn’t even bother clicking on the listing when I’d been searching for options. I can’t afford it.

“No, that’s all right. Thank you for offering, though, Amy,” I add, glancing at her name tag. People like being called by their name. She smiles sadly at me, eyes wide and remorseful. She really does look sorry. It almost makes me feel bad for even asking.

“There’s a few longer stays available in Harris,” she adds, plucking a map from a little tray sitting on the counter and unfolding it to point at a town next to Siren’s Point. “It’s not too far away. If you leave now, you’ll make it well before we lose the light.”

She bites her lip, eyes flicking to the straps of my backpack. She’s trying to be considerate and give me the benefit of the doubt that I drove here in a car. Feeling exhausted, I simply nod and smile again.

“Thank you, I’ll do that.”

Relieved, she refolds the map, snatching a business card and tucking it inside before handing them to me.

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“There you are. Give me a call if you’d like to try later, okay? Again, I’m so sorry. We aren’t usually this busy in the winter months, but vacationers are looking for snow this year, apparently.”

I mumble my way through the small talk, backing slowly toward the door. I’m not eager to be out in the cold again, but I need to figure something out before I lose the light, as Amy so helpfully pointed out. As miserable as last night was, it’ll be nothing compared to this one if I have to sleep outside. Heading back the way I came, once more dreaming of the warm diner, I make the decision to sleep inside the public toilet at the Mermaid trailhead. The sleet is really coming down now, temperature noticeably dropping, and I’ve had enough close brushes with frostbite to not go looking for another.

When I’m passing the wharf, I turn my head and look out at the boats, distracted by the gray water and dark clouds hovering over the ocean. It’s a pretty view, if not a little frightening. The elements seem a lot closer, all of a sudden, like Mother Nature wouldn’t have to try all that hard to wipe Siren’s Point off the map.

It’s also getting colder. A lot colder. And fast—the temperatures declining rapidly as the sleet continues to patter gently against my jacket. It’s thick enough that the visibility is poor, and I can only see so far ahead before the world washes away into white. Tucking my face as far as I can into the collar of my jacket, I pull my beanie lower and walk on, skin stinging and eyes watering as the snow blows directly into my face.

I slip on some loose gravel on my way to the trailhead, stumbling and hitting my knee hard enough on the ground to make tears pop into my eyes, the heavy backpack unbalancing me for a moment. My joints protest when I push myself back to standing, hips twinging with pain and knee throbbing. My shoulders are numb underneath the straps of my pack, and as I forcibly push myself back into motion, I wish that my feet were as well.

It feels like there are a hundred tiny rocks inside my shoes, digging into the soles of my feet and sending stabbing pain shooting up my legs with each step I take. Last night wasn’t particularly restful for my brain or my body, and both are nearing the point where exhaustion can no longer be pushed through and ignored. Already, my stomach feels hollow and aching, like the food I put into it this morning did nothing but fall into a void.

When I reach the concrete outhouse building, the handle is cold beneath my gloved palm, and my arm shakes as I pull open the door. I blink away

the moisture sticking to my eyelashes, feeling the burn of tears in the corners of my eyes as I step inside. For just a moment, I can trick myself into believing it's warmer. The absence of the wind and the blowing snow has this little concrete shelter feeling like a portal to a warm, sunny beach for a few blissful seconds.

Checking to make sure nobody is lurking in any of the stalls, I turn on the tap, bending and tilting my head to drink from the stream of frigid water. My stomach cramps, and I ignore it, just like I ignore the face in the scratched and dirty mirror. I'm not prone to letting things get to me. I will bend and bend and bend before I ever show a sign of breaking. I'm good at surviving.

But there are always days like this, when no amount of food can touch the hunger, and the wear on my body becomes tears; when the hard makes it difficult to remember there has ever been any good. There is only so long a person can go before they must stop.

Arms trembling, I wipe the back of my glove across my eyes and carefully slip my backpack from my shoulders. I bite my lip as I do, sensation flooding the area like a thousand needles stabbing into my skin. When I set the bag on the ground, I notice a small gap underneath the door, snow blowing gently through. It would be best to sleep in the furthest corner, curled up inside one of the stalls. But there's no lock on this door, which means the only option I have is to block it.

"Everything is fine," I murmur to myself, voice echoing slightly. This is honestly a hell of a lot more than I can usually count on when sleeping rough, and I really am grateful for it. The difference between sleeping on the ground exposed to the elements and sleeping on the ground inside a shelter is immense. The odds of getting frostbitten outside tonight would have been high. Now, with the simple addition of four walls and a roof, I can safely halve that possibility. I'll be fine. Life hasn't killed me yet, and it certainly won't tonight. Not if I have anything to say about it.

I drink a little more water, knowing it'll help trick my brain into thinking my stomach has something to digest, pee, and carefully pull my sleeping bag from my pack. The heavy metal door is cold against my back as I slip my legs into the sleeping bag—fully dressed and boots still on, feet throbbing—and zip it up. Making sure my body is completely blocking the door, I use my backpack as a pillow and do my best to curl up.

It's too early to go to sleep. I should be filming content or utilizing the running water to wash my socks and underwear in the sink. I should be thinking of all the things I have to be grateful for instead of letting my mind focus on the things that are difficult. Instead, I curl tighter into a ball, cheeks numb where they're exposed to the cold, and close my eyes. Things will be better tomorrow; I just have to make it there.

In the morning, the pain in my feet has licked up my legs like an out-of-control fire, blazing in my hips and back as I open my eyes to light streaming through the small window set high above the sinks. I bite my lip against the hurt as I straighten my knees and adjust so there is no longer so much pressure pushing my hip into the concrete floor. Sitting up, I tentatively move my head from side to side, testing the mobility of my neck. I'm trembling slightly, which is strange because I'm not all that cold.

The grogginess clears just enough for me to frown and think about that a little harder. It's freezing outside and in here. I know it is. There's snow caught in the corners of that window set into the concrete wall and frost coating the inside. I can see my breath.

"Shit," I mumble, rubbing my hands up and down my arms, trying to stimulate a little blood flow and heat.

I stagger a bit when I climb to my feet, my entire body an odd mix of numb and painful and stiff. I have to get moving. Sitting still in freezing weather is a terrible idea, and even if I have nowhere to go, it's the *going* that's the important part. Having a purpose clears the foggy from my head, and I carefully fold my sleeping bag back up, tucking it safely into the backpack and grabbing my water bottle. I fill it up at the sink before putting my mouth under the trickle of water and drinking as much as I can straight from the tap. I pee again, trembling and wishing there was a way to complete the practice without baring skin.

The sky is painfully bright when I open the door and step outside, a burst of cold air hitting me in the chest and stealing my breath for a moment. I squint into the light, noting that the parking lot for the trailhead isn't plowed, but it looks like the road leading in is. Ignoring the way my shoulders are complaining, I adjust my pack and step into the snow.

It's not a lot of coverage as far as inches, which I'm thankful for. I slip twice on my way out of the parking lot, though, the worn tread on my boots useless against the ice. Walking slower, I shorten my stride and stop lifting my feet so much. My eyes burn with the childish desire to cry. I swallow it

down, knowing I'm just tired. Nothing's really that bad, and once I stretch the ache from my legs, I'll start to feel better. Walking and fresh air will help.

I walk for what feels like half a mile, maybe more, before I hear a car approach. Immediately, I step off the road as far as I can. My jacket and backpack are brightly colored, but it's a cloudy, stormy winter day, and I don't want to take any chances. Getting hit by a car is the very last thing I need.

I watch the vehicle pass, light glinting off the curved lines and the shiny black paint. My stomach clenches when the brake lights flash and the Porsche slows to a stop, snow crunching lightly under its tires as it pulls to the shoulder. I stop moving, swallowing through a scratchy throat, and stare at the exhaust clouding in the air behind the car.

"Fuck," I mutter when the driver's door opens and a tall man unfolds himself from the vehicle.

It's the same guy from the wharf the day before. The same guy who caught me sleeping behind his shed and is now catching me alone on a stretch of back road. His dark clothes are stark against the wintry day, clean and fresh, and he walks in my direction without once losing his footing on the slick road. He looks like a fashion model, getting ready to lean sexily against the rear of the Porsche for a photoshoot. I take a step back, and he halts, staring at me.

"I've never had a stalker before," he muses, expression still but a hint of amusement in the tone. I lose the scowl, mouth falling open slightly. Not what I thought was going to be the first thing out of his mouth.

"I'm not—I was just—"

"I know," he says silkily, cutting me off. Shifting, he takes a small step closer and lifts his right hand to hold it out to me. "I suppose it's time for a formal introduction. Dryden Roy."

Without thinking, I approach, put my gloved hand against his, and shake. It feels awkward, like it's my first time doing it. There isn't exactly a line of people queuing up to introduce themselves to me or willing to touch me to do so. I'm out of practice.

"Spencer Davis. I'm not stalking you," I repeat.

"Wouldn't be very good at it if you were," he notes. Again, so seriously I can barely tell if he's joking. Clearing my throat, I gesture toward the road

behind him, trying to indicate he's blocking my way. He doesn't move. "Libby's weren't up to your standards?"

I frown. I never told him I stopped there. "They were booked, actually."

"Not many boat sheds up here," he comments lightly, and this time, I can tell he's making fun.

"Ha ha," I deadpan, reaching up to use the back of my glove to wipe moisture from my forehead. I pull my beanie lower. It's starting to snow. *Again*. "Thanks for telling me about the diner."

He tilts his head a degree to the side, dark eyes unwavering. I can hardly tell by the look on his face, but I feel like I've surprised him with that. After a moment, he murmurs, "Not a problem."

"I don't suppose you have any recommendations for accommodations, too? Something affordable," I add awkwardly, the Porsche gleaming just a couple of feet in front of me in a fog of exhaust. This man probably has no idea what is affordable and what isn't.

Dryden Roy thinks about it for a minute, the silence somewhat uncomfortable as it's paired with the most direct eye contact I've ever been subject to. Well used to living in discomfort, I don't fidget or break the silence. I wait, staring back just as calmly. He looks over my shoulder, smirk tipping down into a slight frown as he contemplates the road behind me. When his eyes come back to mine, I feel like I can see exactly what math he was just adding up. He knows where I slept last night.

"Not in the Point, no," he says evenly. My shoulders slump, even though I'd been expecting it. Amy would have told me if there was, I'm sure. He adds, "But I might have a solution."

Immediately, I straighten, warning sensors flaring to life. He's going to offer to help in exchange for a *favor*. He's going to dangle a bed in front of me on a hook and hope I want it badly enough to not mind what comes with it. He's going to make a lewd comment and offer to *take me for a ride*.

"I'm good. Thanks anyway," I bite out, taking a step back, meaning to walk around him and continue past the Porsche.

"Just a moment," he requests. "I have a detached guest suite at my house. It's furnished and unused. You're welcome to sleep there for a night."

"Uh-huh." I snort, shaking my head disdainfully. I'll just bet he'd let me sleep there. "And what do you get out of it?"

"I'd prefer not to get anything at all."

“Right, well, I’m not going to fuck you. I’m not going to fuck your spouse while you watch. I’m not going to do *anything* while you watch or let you do anything to me. I don’t deal in favors, so if that’s what you’re wanting, the answer is no.”

“Unfortunately, we do not have time for my lawyer to draw us up a contract,” he replies, slightly sarcastically. “Will it suffice for me to promise not to harass or intimidate or harm you in any way, sexual or otherwise?”

Clenching my teeth, I look away from his pretty black eyes and his pretty face and his pretty car. In the distance, the road curves lazily through the trees, barely visible through the snow falling steadily from the sky. I’m running out of time and options. It’s either Dryden Roy or the public restroom, a warm, soft bed or a cold concrete one.

“Do not touch me,” I warn. “Ever.”

“I will not,” he replies.

“Don’t touch my things either,” I add, feeling childish for the request but standing behind it nonetheless. This backpack is my entire life, and I cannot live without it.

“I promise.” Hoping I won’t live to regret this decision, I nod. Dryden reaches for the rear of the car, popping the trunk for me to put my bag in the back. There’s a coil of rope inside. Catching me looking, he says, “For lobster traps.”

I flush but nod again, gratefully. I can’t decide whether my gut is backing this decision or not, as it’s flopping around like a fish on land. I’m nervous, but I’m also sure that this is my best of the bad choices. I can’t fight back against frostbite the way I can a man, which makes Dryden Roy that much safer than sleeping outside.

He walks around to the front of the car. Pulling open the driver’s door, he raises an eyebrow at me when I don’t move.

“If you’ll give me the address, I’ll walk.” Rule number two: never get into strange cars if you can help it. Feet are safer than wheels.

“I live thirty-seven miles that direction,” he responds, pointing up the hill through the trees. My eyes burn, and it’s no longer something I can blame on the cold. Voice rough with emotion, I repeat my earlier request.

“Please don’t touch me.”

“I won’t. You’re not my type anyway.”

“What’s your type?” I ask without thinking about it.

Sliding gracefully into the driver's seat of the Porsche, I barely catch his reply before the door slams closed.

"Clean."

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Chapter Six



DRYDEN

In my previous line of work, I dealt in calculated risks. Informed decision-making based on thorough analysis and risk mitigation. Potential benefits would be weighed against potential drawbacks, risks, and consequences. Choices were deliberate and carried out with a strategic approach. Even as a lobster fisherman, I do the same. I took a calculated risk, grappling for those lost traps. I knew, as I know every day I take the *Maiden Seas* out on the water, that one of a hundred things might go wrong. I'd weighed the potential of retrieving those traps and the tags on them against the loss of profit during the high season if we didn't have them. I'd scored the potential of bad weather high and the possibility of maintenance issues low. I was wrong.

But that's always the possibility when taking a risk of any kind, and there is comfort in knowing that nothing was rushed. I didn't push us to go out that day without considering all my options first, and I didn't cut any corners on pre-launch checklists. I did everything by the book, and still, as they do, things went wrong. It happens. Nothing to do but get on with it.

This, what I'm doing right now, is not a calculated risk. It's a foolish one. It's temporary madness. I am not a bleeding heart. I do not spend my weekends volunteering at soup kitchens or sorting donations at our local charity shop. I don't do handouts. I don't involve myself in others' lives. I mind my own business and expect everyone else to mind theirs.

Engine rumbling, I sit and wait for Spencer Davis to nestle his backpack in the limited space at his feet and clip his seat belt in. He refused the offer of the open trunk, which I choose not to comment on. The Porsche growls lowly as I pull out onto the street, extremely aware of the man sitting next

to me and wondering if there is a way I can get rid of him. Sighing quietly, I glance over at him. His gloves are off, nestled in his lap, and his fingers are wrapped into the straps of his pack like he's prepared to bring it with him if he needs to jump from the moving vehicle.

"Seat warmers are there," I murmur, pointing at the button. "Feel free to adjust the heat."

He's already sitting still, and yet I can feel his pause as he considers my words. After a few minutes pass, he reaches carefully toward the dashboard. The knuckles on his hand are dry and cracked, a badly healed scar jagged across the meat of his thumb and disappearing up into the cuff of his jacket.

"Thank you," he replies.

I keep an eye on him as I drive, noting the minor movements of his head and how his eyes seem to be on a constant swivel. He's memorizing the roads we're taking, I realize after a couple miles, making sure he has an escape route. Smart.

"What happened to your boat?" he asks suddenly, doing a good job projecting a calm tone and demeanor, were it not for the way he's gripping his backpack giving it up as a lie. I'm slightly mollified by his fear, hoping that if he's intimidated by me, there's less risk of him trying to slit my throat tonight.

"Mm?"

"Your boat? Is it not...the one that was towed in? When you came by the shed yesterday morning, I figured it was yours."

"It is," I agree, finding little point in hiding it. He could ask any person that lives in Siren's Point, and they'd tell him that and a whole lot more about me.

"What happened?"

"Engine failure. Which could be caused by a myriad of things. Overheating, air in the fuel lines, electrical issues, leaks from water pump seals. The possibilities are, unfortunately, many."

"Oh." He lapses into a thoughtful silence. "Can you fix it?"

"I hope so. There is only so much I can evaluate and repair myself, and I can find nothing wrong with those things. I've called a specialist to have a look."

He thinks about that for a second, the small space hot from how warm he set the temperature. The air vents are blowing at the highest setting. Feeling like I'm going to begin sweating here in a minute, I angle the vents

on my side of the car toward him, trying to save myself from the hot air. As I do, I notice he's no longer holding quite so tightly to his bag, hands looped gently through the straps now but relaxed on his legs.

"Were you on the boat when it died?" Spencer asks.

"Yes."

"Scary," he comments. Then, apropos of nothing, he adds, "Can I call you by your first name?"

"Sure," I agree, for some reason thinking of Shiloh's propensity for using my last. Dylan had always insisted on calling me Denny, which I'd tolerated while we were married and loathe now that we're divorced.

"Cool. Spencer is fine for me," he adds, even though I didn't ask. I'm planning on dropping him off at the guest cottage and retreating to my house. I'm not going to call him anything because I'm not going to be speaking with him.

I bring the Porsche smoothly around a bend, allowing the car to naturally slow down on the curves. The sleet is falling less quickly here, the road somewhat sheltered by the evergreen trees. I keep my speed sedate anyway, always aware of black ice and how you rarely see it until it's too late. I'd rather not end the day wrapped around a tree. Or, I think as a deer bounds across the road ahead of us, with an animal through the windshield.

"Do you get cell service up here?" Spencer asks, suddenly enough that his voice feels loud in the confined space of the car. I glance over, noting the tension he's trying hard to hide.

"Yes. Of course," I reply. It probably makes me a massive asshole, but I'm again gratified to hear the fear. He's worried about being alone in this car with me, and he's worried about being alone at my house and not having a way to call for help. I doubt these are things criminals think when they are planning a crime. He's wary of me and my offer, and I'm questioning what the hell I was thinking offering it in the first place.

The tension remains thick and noxious the rest of the way, Spencer still and silent. The closer we get to my house, and the further from town, the more on alert he seems to become. He's going to strain his eyeballs from how hard he's watching our surroundings. He's paying far more attention than I am, and I'm the one driving the car.

The moment I park in front of my house, I open the door and breathe a heavy inhale of crisp winter air. My sweater is sticking to my lower back with sweat, my body cooked from spending forty-five minutes in a heated

space with Spencer's discomfort. I don't make many friends, but neither do I usually frighten people quite that much. I feel like I need a stiff drink, a shower, and, strangely, to apologize to him.

"Fucking hell," he comments now, carefully closing the car door and spinning in a slow circle, backpack already in place on his shoulders. His brown eyes are wide as he looks around. I'm unsure what he's more surprised about—the size of the property or the size of the house built upon it.

When I moved here once the divorce proceedings were finally finished, I chose the location based on the wharf. I had a lobster boat I knew not what to do with, a desire to learn, and a need to get as far away from home as I could. The first thing I'd looked for was a place I could dock my boat and run it from, once I figured out what the hell I was doing. The second thing I worried about was a place to live. Siren's Point was an easy answer to the first problem and was far enough away from home to be enticing. I'd driven in, found the biggest and most secluded house I could, knocked on the door, and offered the owner twice as much money as the property was valued at.

They'd moved out a week later, leaving everything but their dog behind. I haven't changed a single thing about the house, nor replaced any of the furniture. Really the only bits of myself here are the old lobster traps stacked out back and my clothes hanging in the closets. That and the guest cottage at the rear of the property, which was empty when I moved in. I furnished it when my sister made noise about coming to visit, but seeing as that was years ago and I've yet to see her, apparently it'll now function as a homeless shelter.

"Fuck," Spencer mutters again, staring up at the house. It is rather garish, with the boxy, modern lines and the dark windows. I would never have built a house like this for myself, but moving into it was so hassle-free I couldn't have cared less about what it looked like. My life had imploded, and the questionable architecture of my sleeping arrangements factored so low as an area of concern as to be nonexistent.

"What do you think?" I ask my new strange, filthy friend.

"You know this is the kind of house a supervillain would live in, right? It's not a home; it's a lair."

I smirk at him, leaning an elbow on the top of the Porsche and drumming my fingers gently on the metal. How refreshing—a person who answers honestly, and not the way they think I'd like them to.

“Want a tour?”

“I’ll stay on this side of the moat, thank you.”

Snorting, I round the hood of the car, clicking the key fob and engaging the locks. A moat isn’t a bad idea. Perhaps I’ll install one.

I wave Spencer politely forward, but he stands still, fingers wrapped around the straps of his pack up by his shoulders. Ah. He doesn’t want to put his back to me. Questioning whether I’ve lost my mind, I stride off across the grass, giving him mine. I’ve already brought him this far. If he’s going to kill me, I might as well make it easy for him and hope it’s a quick death.

The hard snow crunches beneath the soles of my boots as I lead him around back, aware of him following me by the prickle of discomfort at my nape. Once upon a time, I would have said I was a good judge of character, and had I met Spencer Davis back then, I would have said my gut instinct was of trustworthiness. I have learned better, since then, and no longer trust my gut nor anyone else. This is likely going to end up being the second worst decision I ever made in my life.

“You have a *pool*?” Spencer says, gasping in shock and, I think, excitement. I glance back at him, surprised to hear anything other than suspicion in his tone.

“Yes. Heated, according to my gas bill. I’ve never used it.”

Spencer turns his incredulous gaze to me. I shrug. I’d rather die than throw a pool party, and what am I going to do? Float around by myself? Swim laps after working twelve hours hauling traps? The pool, more than anything, is a money sucker. I get nothing out of it and burn cash by the fistfuls in upkeep. Many times, I’ve considered draining the damn thing and using it to store lobster traps and floats.

“This is an Olympic-sized pool,” Spencer tells me, apparently under the impression that I care.

“Useful for all the Olympic swimmers in town,” I deadpan, turning back around and continuing my way to the guesthouse. After a moment, I hear his footsteps behind me, and I know he’s following. As I walk, I pull the key for the cottage off my key ring. Holding it up over my shoulder, I address Spencer. “I’ll leave this with you tonight.”

“Is that the only copy?” he asks. I snort.

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“Contrary to how it may seem, I’m not an idiot. I have a spare inside.”

Reaching the cottage, I fit the key and unlock the door, dead bolt sliding free easily. Pushing it open, I reach inside to click on the light before stepping back and waiting for Spencer to walk in. He doesn’t, but hovers uncertainly a couple of arm lengths away on the grass.

“What do you get out of this?” he asks. “Helping me.”

“Absolutely nothing at all.”

“Then why are you doing it?”

Boredom. Apathy. A general disinterest in life. Big brown eyes.

Ignoring the question, I point a finger through the open door. “I hire a company to come once a week—linens are fresh, and everything should be clean. There isn’t any food, but if you’ll tell me what you’d like, I can handle that.”

“Why?” he asks again.

“Food?” I prompt.

“I’m fine.” A pause. “Thank you.”

Tossing him the key, I leave the door standing open and walk away. “Enjoy.”



The winter storm tapers off in the late afternoon, just in time for the sun to go down. Leaning against the windows that face the back of my house, I look across the expansive yard toward the guest cottage. The blinds are drawn on the little picture windows, and the door is closed. Locked as well, I imagine.

“Dryden?” Cody asks. I shift the phone to the other ear.

“What was that?”

“I asked who you called for the *Maiden*. It wasn’t Vince, right?”

“Lex.”

“Ah.” Cody breathes, relaxing into the exhalation. “Good. She’ll get her right.”

“Mm,” I agree, only half listening as most of my attention is on the cottage. No movement. I wonder if Spencer barricaded the door—pushed the dresser in front of it and hammered nails into the windowsills. I wouldn’t be surprised.

“Want to grab a beer at the Temptress, tonight?” Cody asks, surprising me enough that I jolt out of my stupor. I can’t remember a time he’s ever asked me to go out for a drink. I’ve certainly never extended an offer to him.

“Can’t. I picked up a stray.”

Cody pauses. “You did? Do you even have dog food?”

Snorting, I look down at the pile of foodstuffs I put together in a crate, sitting on my coffee table, waiting to be delivered to my new tenant.

“Yes,” I tell Cody, straightening.

“I didn’t take you for an animal person,” he continues. I almost make the joke that the dog in question seems unlikely to piss on my floors.

“It’s a human, Cody.”

The pause this time around is bloated, not unlike the silences Spencer was prone to on our ride here.

“Didn’t take you for a human person either,” he eventually says. I chuckle, unable to hold it back.

“His name is Spencer Davis, in case you need it for the detective working my homicide. You can have my boat and the Porsche.”

“I love it when things work out.”

Hanging up, I tuck the phone into the back pocket of my jeans and lift the crate of food. Nudging open the back door with my hip, I skirt the outer edge of the pool and walk casually toward the guest cottage. The temperature has dropped with the sun, and the air nips below the fabric of my turtleneck sweater. I wonder for a second whether I shouldn’t have tucked some nicer winter clothes into the box for him as well, and then immediately decide it’s not my problem. I’ve put a temporary roof over his head and am providing food. I’ve done enough.

Adjusting my grip, I tap the knuckles of my right hand against the door and take two big steps back. As I knew would happen, the curtains on the window twitch as Spencer looks out, making sure it’s me. As though he’s expecting other company tonight.

I count all the way to a hundred and twelve before he opens the door, only far enough for me to see him, but not far enough for me to get in. I glance down, noticing the absence of his right foot. He's probably got it planted on the other side of the door, knee braced, just in case I try to force my way past. I lift the crate.

"Food."

Even in the rapidly waning light, I can see the indecision on his face. The battle between stepping out and taking it from me or letting me walk in and deliver it. Both, I imagine, feel unsafe, as they'd require either leaving the door unguarded or allowing me entry. He's still wearing his shoes and winter coat, I notice, although the pockets are bulging with what I imagine are his hat and gloves. Short brown hair is the next thing I notice, a darker shade than his eyes—more a rich chocolate color where his irises are closer to a caramel or gingerbread brown.

Deciding to solve the dilemma for him, I take a single step forward and bend to put the food on the ground. Retreating back to where I'd started, I tuck my hands casually into my pockets and go back to staring at him. I think, if he were introduced to shampoo and a razor, he might be handsome.

"Going somewhere?" I ask lightly, looking pointedly at his attire. His eyes squint closed into a semblance of a glare.

"Hope not," he replies. Ah. So he's planning on sleeping in the clothes he'd need to run in, were I to come looking for that favor he seems worried I'll try to collect. I never thought I'd meet another person as mistrustful as me, yet here one is, living and breathing right in front of me. I move back another step.

"Coffee, bread, peanut butter, deli meat, a couple bananas, an orange," I rattle off, nodding down toward the food, "and some cold lobster meat, of which I have a surplus. If you want more, ask. Oh, and bottled water."

"That's—you didn't have to do that. Thank you." He lets the door fall open a bit more, exposing another inch of his blue jacket.

"Need anything else?" I know he investigated every inch of that cottage and is aware of exactly what is in there. He has a better idea than me, that's for sure. Penny, the woman who comes to clean, is the only person who goes in there these days.

"No. Thank you," he repeats.

I wonder if I should let him know he can crank the heat if he wants. Let him know that it's okay if he stands under the hot water in the shower until

his skin prunes. I'm not worried about electricity or water bills. It's unlikely I do need to voice any of this, though. I don't exactly hide my wealth, and it's usually the people who have none that are able to pick it out in others. Spencer knows the bills mean nothing to me. The only thing he wants is for me to leave him alone.

"Have a good night, then."

Hands still in my pockets, I walk unhurried back to my house. The interior lights flood the yard through the uncovered glass wall that takes up the majority of the rear half. I reach the pool, walking along the edge of the cover, when Spencer replies, voice raised to carry across the expanse of the lawn.

"You too."

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Chapter Seven



SPENCER

Dryden Roy isn't a supervillain at all, I realize, watching the back of him as he walks away. He's fucking Batman. Quickly, I snatch up the crate of food and retreat back to the cottage, catching the door before it can slam closed. I watch through the corner of the window, food balanced on my hip, making sure he goes all the way back to his house and inside. I can see *everything* with the interior backlit and the light flooding through the windows. Just the way I could see everything when Dryden Roy was standing in front of me, fancy clothes draped over his body like they'd been made specifically to be there, his brown skin glowing bronze against the cream of the turtleneck sweater, black eyes liquid in the shadowy light. Rich, drives a Porsche, and looks like that? Oh, yeah, this motherfucker is totally Bruce Wayne.

Satisfied that he's inside his house, I put the food on the little sliver of counter next to the refrigerator and go back to the door. Checking that the dead bolt is secure—even though it's useless since he has a key—I begin sliding over the wooden dresser. It's probably illegal to bar the entrance on a building I'm not the owner of, and it's definitely a fire hazard. I do the same thing when I stay anywhere with a door, though. Could he still force his way inside? Probably. But at least I won't sleep through it and wake up with a hand covering my mouth.

Panting, I get the chest of drawers slid all the way over, glad for the rug protecting the floors. Richy-rich up there probably wouldn't appreciate gouges in his hardwood. I would bet every cent in my pocket that they're real wood. Patting the top of the dresser, I check out the window to verify Dryden is still up at the house. He's moving around the living room, tall

form easily visible as he looks down at something in his hand. I wonder if he feels like he's living in a fishbowl with all that damn glass.

Feeling a little more secure now that the door is barricaded, I unzip my jacket and check the thermostat. The little room has warmed up nicely—a cozy seventy-eight degrees that I'm considering bumping all the way up to eighty. You only live once, right? And tomorrow, I could be back out in the cold, so I might as well reap the benefits while I can. Pressing the button, I raise it the last two degrees. Slipping my coat off, I drape it over the back of the chair I've got my little tripod balanced on. I'd been about to film when Dryden showed up, or at least preparing for it. I'd had a feeling he'd come down to check in and hadn't wanted to get too comfortable until he did. I'm dying to take a shower and crawl into bed, giddy now that Dryden is gone and I might have a chance.

Peeking into the stuff he brought, my heart thrums at the sight of so much food. Pulling the package of deli meat out, I laugh to myself. It's actual deli meat. The kind you need someone in an apron to cut and weigh for you while you wait on the other side of a glass display, the kind that costs twice, sometimes three times as much as the stuff that comes prepackaged. I'm a little surprised he eats deli meat at all, but if it's going to be any, it's for sure going to be this kind.

Putting it, along with the waters, into the narrow refrigerator, I place the bananas and orange on the counter. The bread and peanut butter follow, everything lined up and as tempting as a feast. It seems incredible that just yesterday morning I ate a full breakfast, and now I'm about to have a full dinner. *And* sleep in a bed inside a room with heating. I feel like I'm living someone else's life.

Fully smiling now, I reach for the final bit of food Dryden brought me. Lobster. Fucking *lobster*. I grin stupidly down at the container, unreasonably excited about it. Deciding that since I'm living like a king tonight, I might as well eat like one, I grab a plate and open the bread. Dumping half the lobster on one slice and the other half on another, I make two full sandwiches.

Taking my bread and lobster meat sandwiches with me, I settle cross-legged on the floor, facing where I've got the camera set up on the chair. Balancing the plate on my knee, I click the recording on and smile a smile that isn't fake.

"Boy, do I have a story for you," I tell the viewers.

I eat while I talk, deciding that showing my first time trying lobster might be something that turns people's cranks. You never know what will hit with the audience, and I have a feeling there will be one or two people who enjoy watching me chow down on a lobster sandwich.

The abject joy I get from the experience isn't manufactured either. This is, hands down, the best thing I've ever tasted, and that's saying something after the breakfast I had yesterday. I don't give any specifics about where I'm spending the night but feel like it can't hurt anything to show a little bit of the inside. It's not like anyone will see the wallpaper and know I'm sleeping in Dryden Roy's lair. Again, I don't have to pretend to be happy or grateful when I give the room tour—showing off the tiny kitchenette and the equally tiny bathroom, the bed—a queen!—and the love seat tucked into the corner that looks cushy and soft and is the most beautiful shade of forest green I've ever seen.

“Okay, so I might be a little bit in love with that couch,” I joke, knowing people will enjoy giving me a hard time in the comments for waxing poetic about upholstery. Sitting back down, I settle the tripod back on the chair. “Anyway, this is home for the night. The next time you see me, you'll actually be able to see me.” I stroke a hand over my beard, counting down the seconds until I can shave the monstrosity off. “Hopefully, it'll make the job search go easier.”

I hadn't had time to get to it yesterday, too focused on finding a place to stay, and, admittedly, detrimentally distracted by the diner. I shouldn't have wasted so much of the morning there, but it was just so damn cozy and inviting, with all those people around, enjoying their breakfast and chatting, the smell of bacon and coffee and bread doing just as much to warm me up as the actual heat. The daylight bleeds away fast here, in the winter, and although my visit is right on the cusp of spring, it's not yet close enough. I could, and should, have planned better.

I chat a little bit longer but keep it pretty short. This sort of content always makes me feel a little strange, no matter that I've been doing this for years now. It's pretty insane how many faceless strangers across the globe care about what I have to say or are interested in what my days look like. A couple have gone so far as to ask if I have a GoFundMe or even just a Venmo, wanting to send me money for food or lodging. Strangers. People I've never, nor will ever, meet. It blows me away and is the sort of kindness

I try to focus on each time things get hard. There *is* good, even when it's hard to see.

Like this, I think, looking around the little cottage as I unclip my camera and fold up the tripod. I've been in Siren's Point for a whole twenty-four hours, and although I let my mood get the better of me, the good is far outweighing the bad. I have so much more right now than I had yesterday. And despite my brain telling me I need to be smart about this, my gut is telling me that Dryden Roy isn't a bad person. A weird one, probably, since generosity like this unfortunately isn't a personality trait that most rich people possess.

I'm curious about him. And now that I'm here, basking in my eighty-degree sauna, belly full of lobster, I allow my imagination to play. Moving the chair back where it belongs, I put my tripod back into my pack and start methodically removing the things I need to shower. Lobster fishing isn't the kind of mega-million-dollar industry that would keep a person swimming in cashmere and riding around in Porsches.

Which means Dryden Roy probably came by his wealth the Bruce Wayne way. Family. It begs the question as to why my handsome new benefactor is lobster fishing at all. It seems like a strange job for someone like him to choose. Of course, I'm judging by appearances alone, so what do I know. Maybe he just likes fishing. Maybe he's one of those super-macho, hypermasculine guys who fall in love with things that have engines. He probably calls his Porsche his baby and waxes it by hand. All that time he spent in the boat shed yesterday was him stroking his lobster boat.

Smiling to myself, I bring my Dopp kit and my spare, somewhat clean, clothes with me to the bathroom. Closing the door, I tug off my boots and leave them in the corner. Shoes are the most important piece of clothing, which means I never let mine out of my sight. I still haven't decided whether I'll be wearing them to sleep like I usually do or trusting my makeshift blockade—and Dryden Roy—enough to remove them and leave them next to the bed.

Whistling, I turn on the shower, leaving it on the cold setting for now, and stripping off the rest of my clothes. The little cottage is so warm, I'm comfortable standing there naked as I hold my pants under the water and start scrubbing them. There is a little washer and dryer unit in the corner, but I can't find any detergent. This will work fine, anyway. It's better than I can usually do.

Using the bar of soap I carry around, I scrub the fabric against itself, tilting my face away when the cold water sprays into my eyes. Dirty suds swirl around the drain as I finish the pants and sling them over the shower bar to dry. Shirt and sweatshirt are next, followed by the long johns I was wearing under my pants. When I finish the socks and add them to my little makeshift drying rack, I'm shivering slightly.

Cranking the heat on the water, nearly as high as it can go, I step into the shower and sigh. It's almost hot enough to burn my skin off, but I don't care. Eager to be rid of the dirt layered on my skin, I grab my soap and pause. There's a fancy-looking bottle of bodywash sitting on the alcove built into the wall of the bath, next to an equally fancy-looking shampoo and conditioner. Glancing down at the scentless, utilitarian bar of soap in my hand, the scalding water sluicing down my back, I consider. Dryden didn't tell me I couldn't use the soap. In fact, he made it seem like I could use whatever I wanted in here. That the cottage, and everything in it, is mine for the night.

Putting my soap back into the little plastic tray I carry it in, I reach for the bodywash. It smells faintly feminine, in a dark, sensual way. Like how a burlesque dancer might smell or a drag queen in one of the shows I got to see in New York. I pour a generous measure into my palm and get to work. The water around my feet gradually turns from brown to tan to clear, soap suds mixing with the dirt as it's washed down the drain. I use my shampoo—which is meant to prevent lice—first, before also using the stuff Dryden has stocked in here. It's the same scent as the bodywash, which, for some reason, really tickles me. It seems like such a luxury, being able to buy matching sets.

The water is still running hot when I turn it off, even though I've probably been in here thirty minutes. More, if I counted the laundry I did beforehand. I dry off with a big, white, fluffy towel, smoothing my palms down it. I can hardly believe this is a towel at all, so used to the scratchy, papery ones that it's hard to wrap my head around the fact that something this soft exists. There's a matching dressing gown hanging on a hook by the door. I regard it, thinking about how clean I am right now. I don't want to put stiff, slightly dirty clothes on. I want to be wrapped in something soft, for once, not functional. Sliding the dressing gown off the hook, I put my arms through the sleeves and belt it around my waist.

Finally, I grab the shaving cream I found earlier when I'd snooped through every nook and cranny of this place. I don't often get to use shaving cream, as it's not a staple item and therefore not worth the money, and takes up too much room in my pack even if it was. Frivolous self-care items are not necessities. But, just like the bodywash and hair products in the shower, since it's here, I'm going to use it.

The face in the mirror after I shave is one I can hardly recognize. Without half my features being obscured by hair, my eyes look bigger, my bone structure sharper, and me younger. Sliding my fingers across my smooth cheeks, I swallow hard around the sudden burn in my throat. There is nothing like a good shower to make you feel human again. Turning away from the stranger in the mirror, I grab my boots and turn the light off, leaving the bathroom. I'm going to sleep in the dressing gown. I'm going to leave clothes at the end of the bed where I can reach them if I need to dress in a hurry, tuck my shoes underneath the frame, and try to relax enough to enjoy the incredible gift I've been given.

Yawning, I bring my laptop with me when I slide into the bed, almost groaning at the feel of the sheets against my bare feet and calves. Holy. Fucking. Shit. Abandoning my laptop on the cushy comforter, I bend over the edge of the mattress, looking for the corner of the sheet with a tag on it. I grin. One hundred percent authentic Egyptian cotton. Flopping onto my back, I spread my arms and legs in a starfish. This bed is the closest I'll get to Egypt.

I manage a couple of solid hours of editing as the rest of my electronics charge in the various outlets scattered through the room. When my eyes start to cross, I call it quits and slide from the bed, repacking my backpack so everything is ready if I need to leave in a hurry. I peek out the front window again as I brush my teeth, curious to see if Dryden is still swimming around in his fishtank. The lower half is dark, though, and although there is a light on in an upper window, it's muted by a curtain. I wonder if he took a shower tonight and if it was even half as satisfying as mine.

I feel like a king when I lie back down in bed, leaving the lamp on the lowest setting so the room isn't fully dark. Or perhaps not a king, but a pharaoh, I correct, sliding my palms across the sheets. I'm not even nervous right now, lulled into contentment by having all my basic needs met at one time. I forget, sometimes, that I used to live like this. Well, not exactly like

this, I suppose, but close enough. I had a roof, a bed, running water, electricity, and food. And I barely appreciated it at all.

Sighing, I roll over, facing the door, and scrunch one of the extra pillows up in my arms. Silk pillowcases, I'm pretty sure, smooth and cool against my cheek. Closing my eyes, I nestle a little further into my cocoon, listening to the low click of the thermostat as the heat turns back on. The fall into unconsciousness is smooth and quick. I sleep all the way through the night, with no dangers—real or nightmarish—to disturb me for the first time in years.

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Chapter Eight



DRYDEN

The first thing I do before I crawl into bed is look out the window at the guest cottage. The lights are still on inside, but I catch no movement behind the curtains. I feel a faint tug, like a fishhook caught in my navel, pulling me toward the little building. Toward Spencer. I should have gotten his phone number so I don't have to walk down and scare the shit out of him just to check and make sure he's fine and has everything he needs.

I really don't know why I seem to care so much. I shouldn't. He's a stranger and means nothing to me. But, as I also keep reminding myself, this is the grave I've dug, and there's nothing for me to do but lie in it. I invited him here, which means I have no choice but to make the stay as comfortable as possible.

Letting the blinds fall closed, I push Spencer from my mind and approach the wall panel next to the bed. After checking the security system is engaged, I slide my finger down the left side to dim the lights. Climbing into bed, I nestle a pillow between my back and the headboard and reach for my book. My current is a painfully dull tome about recent trends in mechanical engineering. Not a fun read, by any stretch of the imagination, but the subject matter is gripping enough to keep me engaged. I'm not looking for enjoyment, anyway. I'm looking for practical knowledge.

Sliding the pen out that was keeping my place, I idly click it as I read. It's harder to focus tonight. The house, which is always still and quiet, feels eerily so. It's strange, being in here while knowing there is someone out there, just a meager distance away. I've never invited people to stay, beyond that flippant offer to my sister, which never came to fruition. Shiloh spent a little time here, but never the night. Nor did I ever stay a full night with

him. And although it hardly counts—with Spencer sleeping not just in another bed but a whole other house—it still feels as though I’m breaking my own rules.

I didn’t let Shiloh stay here for a reason. I don’t invite Cody up for drinks, nor Ryan here for a quick, easy fuck for a reason. This is my space, and I do not want to share it. Yet, for reasons still unknown to me, I am. Sighing, I drop the pen back into the center crease of the book and close the cover. I can’t focus.

Sliding the book back onto my nightstand, I reach up and tap the lights off before putting the screen to sleep as well. The room plunges into full dark, barely a trickle of moonlight peeking around the blinds. Flipping around to my stomach, I deliberately turn my head away from the window and rest my cheek on the silken pillow. One hand lying palm down on the far side of the mattress, I think, as I always do when I’m trying to fall asleep, that I wish I weren’t falling alone.

In an almost comical parallel to my evening routine, the first thing I do when I wake up is look out the back window toward the guesthouse. I think there is a fifty-fifty chance that Spencer packs up and leaves with the daylight, quietly walking off into the sunrise. I don’t think the thirty-seven miles from here to town would deter him in the slightest.

The cottage unchanged and still, I force myself away from the window and into my routine. I’ve found, in the past few years of lobster fishing, that I am a bit lazier than I previously knew myself to be. When I worked in a corporate office and lived with Dylan, both of us kept similar schedules. At least insofar as our morning routines went. It made it easier, getting up and showering and fixing breakfast, when he was there doing the same thing. It also felt intimate and is one of the small, painful things I try not to think about, lest I miss it too much.

Now, on my own and working as a lobsterman, my days start even earlier. And, perhaps more detrimentally, there is an offseason. There are three full months of downtime, not spent on the water. Three full months of doing nothing but routine maintenance and repairs, and three full months for me to grow fond of sleeping past six in the morning and never changing out of my pajamas. I actually enjoy lobster fishing. More, in fact, than I’d been expecting to. I could really do without starting the day at the ass crack of dawn, though. And some of these fools, like Shiloh, actually *like* hearing their alarm go off at three-fucking-o’clock.

Downstairs, early morning light comes through the glass, reflecting off some of the furniture, which is also glass. Strange preferences the previous owners had. Peeking over my shoulder as I walk to the espresso machine, I squint at the guest cabin. No movement. Five minutes later, coffee in hand, I turn around and see him.

Spencer is moving slowly up the yard, blue jacket zipped into place and hands tucked into the pockets. I watch, noting the absence of his backpack and the obvious trajectory toward the house. When he's close enough for me to see uncertainty on his face, I walk across the living room. I can see the moment his eyes catch movement through the glass, and almost immediately, he removes his hands from his pockets, dangling them down by his side. Unlocking it, I slide open the back door and step out, coffee steaming in the crisp morning air.

"Morning," I greet him, leaning a hip against the open doorway and watching him. He's shaved his face.

"Good morning. Sorry to come up here like this." I shrug, taking a sip of coffee. I was right about him being handsome. He clears his throat, flicking his fingers back toward the cottage and continuing. "I, uhm...I can't figure out how to work the espresso machine."

I try to remember what sort of espresso machine is even in there. It's been so long since I decorated the space, and the moment I was done, I stopped caring. Rising, I take a drink of my own and regard him. There are two choices—either I let him inside and make him a mug here, or he lets me inside to show him how to make his own. He stares at me, the same conundrum clear in his brown eyes. Taking another sip of coffee, I decide, of the two of us, I'm the one least likely to come away worse off in an altercation between us, the least uncomfortable with his presence. No matter that the guest cottage is mine—right now, it's tangentially his, and I don't think he wants me inside.

"Come in," I offer, turning and walking back inside, back door open in welcome. I know without looking that he's hovering in the doorway, not following. Stopping in front of the espresso machine, I raise my voice to be heard across the room. "You can come in."

"Aren't you...aren't you worried I'll, like, steal your stuff or anything?" he asks. I snort.

"What are you going to do, stuff the flat-screen into your backpack?" Looking at him over my shoulder, I raise an eyebrow. "If you'd like to nick

some of the smaller things, go ahead. There's a nice set of coasters on the table there. Crystal."

He laughs softly and takes a hesitant step inside. "You're a weird guy, you know that?"

I have been called many, many things in my life. Most of them unflattering. Cold, heartless, robotic, and selfish among the most frequent. Emotionless was one of Dylan's favorites during the divorce proceedings. Unlovable. I can't remember a time I was ever called weird. Perhaps that means I'm growing as a person.

"Thank you," I tell Spencer, who chokes on another quiet laugh.

"You're not worried I'll attack you and steal your money?" he continues. The coffee drips slowly into the mug as I turn and lean my lower back against the counter. Spencer is standing two steps inside the back door.

"I suppose I should be worried about that since all my wealth is stored in gold bars and easily carried off." A flash of a smile flickers across his face. "Besides, don't take this the wrong way, but I doubt you're hiding much muscle beneath all that bulk." I wave a hand at his winter jacket and the sweater visible at the collar. "I imagine I'd have pretty good odds in a fight."

"You get into a lot of fistfights?" he asks doubtfully, eyes bouncing around the room before landing back on me.

"No. You?"

"No. I run away."

Tilting my head to the side, I ignore the buzz of the espresso machine telling me it's done. I like that answer and the guileless way it was given. I've never had patience for toxic masculinity, and I find it distinctly unappealing in a partner. Machismo just looks pathetic to me.

"Well, I suppose we can both agree not to shank the other and perhaps relax a little bit," I say lightly, grabbing both mugs and walking one over to him. I keep a little distance between us, holding the coffee out at arm's length. He takes it, careful not to touch my fingers.

"Cheers," he replies, flashing another smile my way as he brings the mug to his face, inhaling the steam.

"Close the door and have a seat," I instruct, skirting the edge of the room and sitting down in one of the armchairs.

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Spencer complies, sliding the back door closed and then, briefly, back open, as though to make sure it didn't automatically lock. Satisfied, he does a quick survey of the seating options available before choosing the one furthest away from me. I find myself looking forward to a time when he's a little more trusting of me and, right on the heels of that thought, have to remind myself that he will be gone long before that time comes. He fidgets, butt sliding across the leather of the couch, eyes squinted as he takes a sip of likely still-too-hot coffee.

"Nice morning. Not as cold as yesterday," he says eventually.

"Really? The weather?"

"Well, I thought it would be a more polite way to make conversation than to question your taste in furniture. This couch is rock hard."

I pinch my lips together so I don't smile. "Nice to look at, though."

"Couches are for sitting, not admiring," he retorts. "The one in my—the cottage is nice. Way nicer than this. Actually"—he gazes around, eyes bouncing from the art on the walls to the sharp, clean edges of the furniture—"did two different people do your decorating?"

"Yes." Leaning back, I cross my legs and rest an ankle on my knee, waving my free hand at the room. "This came furnished. I did the guesthouse."

"You did?" he asks, surprised. "Huh."

A low buzzing draws his attention to the kitchen, shoulders visibly tightening beneath his bulky jacket. If I thought he'd do so, I'd tell him to take it off and relax, stay a little while. I don't have anywhere to be for a couple of hours yet, and it's been a long time since another person has been in this room with me. Rising, I put my mug down on the coffee table.

"My phone," I explain, feeling the weight of Spencer's eyes on my back as I cross the room to retrieve it. Such a jumpy little rabbit.

Reclaiming my seat, I ignore him and check my messages. Lex, Cody, and Shiloh. The latter is the first I read, already knowing it'll be a status update on Oliver. The message is short but gets the point across. He's fine.

Hopefully going home later today or early tomorrow. Relief burns through me, warmer even than the coffee.

“Good news? About your boat?”

I look up, meeting Spencer’s eye. I’d say there is no way he could have read anything from my facial expression just now, yet apparently he must have. I’m usually better at hiding.

“A sternman on the boat that came to assist was injured. He’s in the hospital, but doing well enough to go home soon.”

“Oh no. I’m glad he’s okay,” Spencer replies, somehow managing to sound sincere.

“Me too,” I murmur, replying with a quick thank-you to Shiloh before checking Lex’s message. Spencer’s attention feels like a physical caress, eyes steady and watching. This time, he must not glean any strong emotion from my expression. He remains silent until I bring it up myself. “Looks like the mechanic can come a little earlier to look at the *Maiden*.”

“The *Maiden Seas*,” he says softly. I pause in replying to Lex, looking up at him. “I like that name.”

“Why?” I ask, curious despite myself. It’s just a name. The name the boat came with, in fact. I’ve never given it more than a passing thought.

“A maiden voyage is the first trip, right? The first time you set sail. And you never touch the same water twice, so every time you go out, you’re sailing on maiden seas.”

He smiles a little bit, eyes warm in the golden light bathing the living room. I’m unsure what to say to that, unable to think of anything cutting or flippant. Sailing on maiden seas. Clearing my throat, I look away and out across the yard, watching the trees along the property move gently in the breeze.

“What time are you meeting the mechanic?” Spencer asks into the silence. I check my phone, noting the time.

“In an hour.”

“I’ll get out of your hair, then. Thanks for the coffee.” He rises to standing, glancing uncertainly at me before looking toward the kitchen. “Shall I wash the mug?”

“You can leave it there. I’ll deal with it.” I wave a hand at the island and push up from the chair. Ridiculously, I’m disappointed that Lex is able to meet me early. I want to sit in the sun with a stranger a little longer.

I walk to the back door, sliding it open and stepping to the side so he can slip through. I look out across the yard toward the guesthouse and realize it at the same moment he does. I only offered him the one night, and it's passed.

"I'll be gone by the time you come back," he promises, and I'm treated to another sick swoosh of regret. He really would be gone, I know. Perhaps for good. Sailing on to his own maiden seas, as it were.

"You're welcome to stay," I tell him. His eyes snap up to mine. I shrug, gesturing toward the cottage. "Nobody else is using it. I can teach you how to run the espresso machine."

"Same rules apply?" he clarifies, gaze searching.

"Same rules. You have nothing I want or need."

He laughs, the sound sudden and sharp in the still morning air. This time, the smile remains on his face long enough for me to see a slightly chipped tooth.

"Okay, well...maybe I'll stay until one of the Libby Cottages opens up. She said it might be soon."

"Sure." I shrug, uncaring. I would rather cut off my own foot than live in town like that. If the options were the Libby's or the woods, I'd erect a tent.

Needing to put some clothes on and head to the wharf to meet Lex, I step back inside and start closing the door. Spencer takes two steps into the yard and stops.

"Dryden?"

"Mm?"

"Can I come with you? To see the boat?"

Chapter Nine



SPENCER

I speed walk back to the cottage. My bag—packed and ready to go—is resting next to the door where I’d left it. Glad I thought ahead and ate two peanut butter sandwiches this morning, I check to make sure the bananas and orange are still at the top of the pack. I don’t want them to get squished or bruised if I can help it. Satisfied, I close it back up and sling the whole thing over my shoulders. Locking up the cottage behind me, I walk around the perimeter of the big house and am standing, waiting, next to the Porsche for a full twenty minutes before Dryden comes out.

He’s changed from the lounge clothes into simple jeans and another turtleneck sweater. The open jacket pulled on over the top looks soft, like suede or sheepskin, and is a buttery caramel color. He looks casual and effortlessly cool, like he really did just throw the clothes on without a thought for how they might look paired together or on him. I suppose, when you look like he does, you don’t really have to worry about things working for you. Everything looks good.

“Not coming back?” he asks, dark eyebrow arched in question at the backpack.

“I can’t leave it behind,” I tell him. “What if you change your mind and abandon me in town? What if you forget I came along and drive back without me?”

He pauses, one foot in the car and a gloved hand resting on top. Even his gloves look soft and expensive.

“I won’t leave you behind,” he promises. I nod, but still, I’m not letting this backpack out of my sight.

This time, instead of waiting for permission, I turn on my heated seat the moment I get in the car. Dryden, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye, smirks but doesn't comment. He smells good, and insanely, I wonder if he can smell his fancy shower products on me as well. I often wonder if people can smell me, but it's usually because I'm worried about that smell being offensive rather than pleasing. Grinning, I turn my head and look out the window, hiding my face. I'm still riding the high of a full belly and a good night of sleep. Today feels beautiful and full of possibility. Today, I feel more like myself.

"Was everything okay in the cottage?" he asks awkwardly, voice a little less smooth than usual.

"Perfect. Heaven on earth, if I'm being honest. That lobster was the greatest thing I've ever eaten, by the way. Thank you for that. For all of it. I feel like I've won the lottery."

He drums his fingers lightly on the steering wheel, gloves resting on his lap, where he'd placed them when we got in. I'm a bit of a hand guy, and Dryden's are suitably matched to the rest of him. Smooth dark skin, long fingers, narrow bones, and prominent veins. I bet his forearms are phenomenal. I keep my own sleeves tugged down, partially obscuring my hands. I don't want him to see what's below.

"I've got plenty frozen. I'll give you more," he offers.

"Okay," I agree, because I'm in no place to turn down handouts and have little desire to. I've been thinking of that lobster since the moment I woke up. "So, what's the plan? Fix the boat and take her out for a spin?"

He sighs, glancing over at me again in a slightly exasperated manner, like I'm a precocious toddler trying his patience. I'm feeling a lot better about him today than I was yesterday, though, which means now it's time to figure him out. I'm here in Siren's Point to vlog, and a big part of that is meant to be footage of the lobster boats. Luckily, I found myself a fisherman.

"Lex will take a look at the boat. No spinning," he corrects. "I've got other things to do, in the meantime."

"Oh? Like errands?"

"Like putting together traps."

I perk up at that. Lobster traps! I didn't realize they were a DIY affair.

"Can I help? Or just watch? If you were comfortable, maybe I could film a little bit?" At the incredulous look this earns me, I hold up a hand. "I

vlog. Make videos and post them on the internet. Mostly on-the-road stuff while I'm traveling, but recently, people have started requesting certain content like...drag shows in New York. So, while I was in New York, I found a bar that would allow me to film parts of the show. People loved it."

"Vlogging is your job?" Dryden asks, frowning, but in a tone that sounds more curious than disdainful.

"Uh, sort of. It started as a hobby, I guess. A way to sort of...distract myself from life. There is some monetary benefit to it, but it's not regular income, so it's hard to rely on it as a job. Definitely enough work to feel like a full-time job, though. Filtering through all the footage, editing it down, recording voice-overs. It's a lot. Especially when I don't have guaranteed internet."

"Hm." He makes a small noise of acknowledgment, fingers still tapping on the wheel.

"Anyway, when Siren's Point came up as my next destination, everyone requested lobster fishing content. So, that's why I'm asking. But you're already helping me a ton, so no stress if you're not into it. I don't include anyone in the vlogs that doesn't consent to it."

"You're quite friendly this morning," he notes, avoiding the question. Reaching forward, I fiddle with the air vents. I'm going to get too used to being warm, and it'll come back to bite me in the ass in a few weeks when I'm sleeping on the ground again.

"I think you're all right. I don't trust you, but I think you're all right." He snorts softly, mouth curved into a small smirk. I look back out the window, watching the trees whip by.

"I don't mind if you film me," Dryden says eventually. "But fair warning, it won't be what you're expecting. It'll be tedious and unexciting."

I'm not sure what kind of high-octane life Dryden Roy must live to think this is tedious. From the moment we arrive at the wharf and park in front of his boat shed, exciting things are happening. A woman is standing next to a truck, chatting with a group of guys as we pull up. Heart hammering with anxiety and jacket pockets stuffed with my filming equipment, I leave my backpack in the passenger seat of the Porsche and climb out. Dryden, who looks over at me when I close the door, drops his gaze to my shoulders but doesn't say anything. Clicking the key fob to lock the doors, he tosses them over the top of the car to me. Surprised, I almost miss them, dropping my gloves to the ground as I fumble to catch the keys.

I clench my fingers around them, metal digging into my palm as I bend to retrieve my gloves and hide my face.

Leaving the backpack in the car felt a little bit like peeling my heart from my chest and putting it in the glove box for safekeeping. I'd been planning on sticking myself to Dryden like glue, never letting him far enough out of my sight to slip into his car and drive away with my entire world in the passenger seat. But now I'm the one with the keys. The one with the power to take and to leave. It has been a very long time since someone has trusted me with anything, and nobody has *ever* trusted me with a car that probably cost upwards of a hundred grand. Sure, I won't actually be driving it, but I could, and that's the point. He gave me these keys because he knew I was more worried about my damn backpack than he apparently is about his Porsche.

Lifting my coat to slide them into the pocket of my jeans, I look up at Dryden, but all I can see is his back as he walks over to speak with the others. I follow a little slower, not wanting to just jump right into the group but also curious and not wanting to miss anything they're saying. Every pair of eyes but Dryden's lands on me as I near. Well used to curiosity aimed my direction, I smile.

"Randy mentioned he'd seen you yesterday with a friend," the woman comments to Dryden, whose shoulders stiffen just a touch. She reaches out to shake my hand. "Alexandra Louise, but you can call me Lex. Rich, Mark, and Isaac."

I nod and shake the hand of each of them as she gives introductions, before stepping back to stand next to Dryden. Not too close, but close enough that there is something of a divide between us and them as we face one another.

"Spencer Davis. Good to meet you." Tucking my hands into my full pockets, I rock back on my heels. Lex eyes me with interest.

"Can't say I've seen you around before. New to town?" she asks.

"Yeah," I agree. Unsure whether I'm meant to tell anyone I'm staying on his property, I add on vaguely, "Thought I'd tag along with Dryden today and help out."

Isaac whistles lowly under his breath, and Lex's eyebrows shoot upward as her eyes bounce between Dryden and me.

"Shall we go in? We're wasting daylight," Dryden comments, sounding annoyed with the lot of us. I step back to let him pass, leading the way into

the boat shed.

I stand along the far wall, out of the way as Dryden and the rest approach the *Maiden Seas* and continue their conversation, voices low but echoey in the high-ceilinged room. The boat looks huge, sitting out of the water and raised up like that. It's a little intimidating, to be honest, and I can't help but imagine being out in the middle of the ocean on that boat. Stuck, engine dead, and a winter storm moving in. It was probably terrifying.

By the time Dryden makes his way back over to me, I've managed to properly freak myself out, thinking about it. I'm sure most days are fine and nothing bad happens. But shit, what if something goes wrong and you have to call for help? What if you call for help and they don't get there in time?

"If you need to use the bathroom, there's an outhouse on the north side," Dryden tells me, tucking his gloves in the back pocket of his jeans so they dangle out by the fingers.

"What?"

"You look like you need an enema."

I snort. "No, I was just...thinking about the boat breaking down while out on the ocean. I thought it sounded scary when you mentioned it before, but now..." I look at the boat, sitting peacefully. "I don't know."

When I meet Dryden's eyes once more, they're dark and contemplative. Steady. He listens to me like I'm spinning gold with my words, giving me a level of attention I'm not used to. It's not as though I'm saying anything particularly interesting, but maybe he's just short of conversational options, and I seem interesting by default.

"Pop the trunk," he requests, brushing past me and out the front door. I fumble, fishing the keys out of my pocket, and click the button, hearing the beep through the metal walls of the shed. A handful of seconds later, he's back, roll of rope looped over his arm.

"I can watch? And film?" I clarify, trailing after him as he strides toward the far side of the warehouse.

"If you'd like," he replies flippantly, not sounding as though he cares at all.

I peek over his broad shoulders at the back corner of the shop, eyeing the stacks of what are clearly lobster traps. They appear brand-new, and if I had to estimate just by looking, I'd say there are dozens, at least. Maybe

more. So many questions pop into my head, I have a hard time holding them back.

Dryden sets his rope down next to a pile of, well, a whole lot of rope. There are different colors and, I notice when I look a little closer, different sizes. There's actually a whole lot of stuff piled back here, none of which I know a name or a use for. I turn my body as I scan it all, letting the GoPro clipped to my jacket do all the heavy lifting with filming right now. Dryden slips off his jacket, draping it over a workbench, and drops his gloves on top. Pushing the sleeves of his sweater up to his elbows, he ignores me, kneeling down next to one of the bundles of cord.

"What're you doing with that?" I ask. I'll be quiet if he wants me to, but most people enjoy talking about their work. Most people I encounter blossom under a little attention, and I'm hoping Dryden is one of those. This all looks like a whole bunch of random crap to me, and I'm dying to know how it all fits together. He glances up at me.

"Replacing fifty of my traps out there"—he points in the direction of the ocean—"with new ones."

"Why?" I take a step closer. Sitting back on his heels, he considers for a second. I wonder if he's going to brush me off, ask me to be quiet and let him get this done. Sure, a lot of people like to talk, but they also like not having their time wasted. He obviously has a lot of work to do, and I doubt I'll speed that up by making him provide commentary. I add, "If you don't mind me asking."

Standing, he brushes a hand over his chin. If it weren't for the blank expression on his face, I'd think he was uncomfortable.

"It's a constant struggle for us to keep equipment functioning," he answers finally. I nod, understanding the "we" in that sentence to mean fishermen. "The quality of things degrades very rapidly when you leave it in the water. The traps, the boat"—he nods toward the *Maiden*—"all of it ages quickly."

I nod again. That makes perfect sense.

"So, all of this is used for each trap?" I gesture vaguely toward the piles of stuff scattered about in organized chaos. One side of his mouth lifts up into a semblance of a smile.

"Traps, dog bones, float rope, flat rope, sink rope, floats, spindles, weak links." He stops to consider, glancing around. "Sharpies," he adds. "There's more that I'm forgetting, but you get the idea."

“Holy shit,” I mutter. “That’s a lot of rope.”

“Indeed.”

He kneels back down next to one coil of said rope, and I take the opportunity to pull out my other camera and affix it to the little tripod. I’ll set it up at an angle so that I can get different views and stop worrying about making sure I keep my chest facing him. I’m not sure what’s going to be more popular once this vlog is finally edited and posted, the lobster content or Dryden himself. People respond to beauty, and he has way more of it to offer than I do.

Fiddling with the tripod in my hand, I’ve almost completely forgotten about the presence of other people in the shop with us. Earlier, I’d thought maybe I’d ask Lex and her crew if it was okay for me to watch, but now I’m glad I stuck with Dryden. I can’t tell if he’s just not an enthusiastic person by nature or if he’s annoyed by my presence, but either way, he hasn’t asked me to leave him be. Even if nobody else in the world appreciates the video I’m getting now of him measuring out a length of rope, at least I’ll have it for myself.

I kneel down across from him, and he glances my way before dropping his eyes to the camera. When he turns his head to the side, once more paying attention to the rope, I notice how long his black eyelashes are.

“Making a jigger,” he tells me before I can ask. Delighted that he offered up the information on his own, I nod and stay silent, putting the tripod down and sliding it gently across the floor to try and get a different angle on him. “I have to cut up a bunch of this for bridles, and the jigger is what we use to make sure it’s all the same length.”

“Unless you cut that one wrong.”

He raises an eyebrow at me. Knees protesting the concrete, I sit back on my butt and cross my legs, palms flat on the cool floor as I watch. He doesn’t make any small talk as he works, just uncoils a length of rope, holding it against the jigger, before pressing it against the floor and cutting it. Tossing the one he just cut to a slowly growing pile, he does it again. And again. And again.

When he climbs back to his feet, groaning, I snatch up the camera and follow, watching as he tips one of the lobster traps onto its side. It’s tall, almost as tall as me, and although I’m not usually the biggest guy in any room, it still feels large when I consider that it’s a lobster trap. He pats it.

“To tie the traps together, we need a connection point,” he tells me without preamble. Reaching over to the bench he draped his coat on, he snags a metal piece in the hand not holding one of the lengths of rope he just cut. He lifts it. “The dog bone is connected to the trap by the bridle and allows the trap to spin around underwater.”

“So the ropes don’t get twisted,” I realize verbally. Dryden nods. Resting the dog bone on top of the trap, he taps each corner.

“Hitch knot on each of the four corners.”

I move a little closer, watching his long fingers as he loops the rope through holes in the trap, tying it with the kind of speed and dexterity that can only come from muscle memory. One corner tied, he slips the end of the rope through the dog bone, positions it in the middle of the trap, and brings the rope to the next corner, poking it through the cage again. As I watch, he moves a little slower, giving me a better view of exactly what his fingers are doing. When he’s on to the fourth and final corner, he pulls the rope and the dog bone cinches tight, perfectly centered in the middle of the trap. I can’t help but smile, watching as he finishes the final knot.

“Does that hurt your hands?” I ask him, peering at the rope. It looks rough, and although he was efficient, quite a few steps went into tying each knot.

“After doing fifty? Yes,” he replies.

“Is there a faster way to do it? Or...an easier one?”

“Yes, and no. Everyone will do this differently. Some just use a single bridle. However, the four-point method is a little better for handling. Fewer snarls, and less chance of the lines twisting. I learned it from a friend,” he adds, a strange look crossing his face for a quick second before it’s gone. “I intend to fish these traps for the next five years. I won’t cut corners just to save a little skin off my palms.”

Dog bone secured, Dryden reaches for another piece of rope. Slipping it through the little piece of plastic, he ties another knot.

“See?” he prompts, and indeed, I do. No matter how he manipulates the rope, it rotates around the dog bone easily. No twisting.

Untying it, he reaches for a little piece of metal, holding it up for me to see. “This is a fid, which is simply for bringing the tag end back through the inside of the rope. Keeps it secured and prevents fraying.”

Stabbing the little silver tool through the middle of the rope, he pushes the tag end inside and pulls it back through, like a seamstress might do with

a thread. Bending down and snagging yet another bit of rope, he opens the trap and begins tying this one on the inside.

“Bait bag string,” he mutters, tugging on it to make sure it’s secure and closing the trap once more. Looking around, he adds, “One down, forty-nine to go.”

Dryden doesn’t talk me through the four-point bridle each time; he just gets to work. I find a good spot for the tripod and leave it there, not wanting to move around Dryden too much and get in his way. For the most part, he works in silence and doesn’t pay me any mind. A handful of times, without looking at me, he’ll speak a soft request, always addressing me by name.

“Spencer, can you pass me the fid, please?” or “Spencer, can you put this with the others, please?”

I jolt a little bit each time, like hearing my name is the equivalent of an electric shock. I don’t hear it often, that’s for sure, and hearing it from him feels almost intimate. It’s hard to remember that we only just met days ago. In the space of a few hours, comfort has bled into the air between us that before had been nothing but fear and mistrust.

I wonder if he’s going to stop and take a break, or just do half and finish the rest later, but Dryden bridles all fifty of the traps himself. Toward the end, I notice some of the smoothness in his movements is lost, and he flexes his hands after each hitch knot is tied. His skin probably feels more raw than my own.

“Wow.” I look around at the traps, all freshly bridled, and feel a little impressed. I’m no slouch, but even I might have found this task laborious to do all by myself.

“Not done yet,” Dryden tells me, pulling a water bottle from a case sitting on the floor and tossing it to me. He grabs one for himself, taking a sip and eyeing the tripod I have set up on one of the benches.

“I can show you the video before I post it,” I offer, unable to parse the emotion in his eyes. “I can edit out anything you want removed.”

He shrugs as though it doesn’t matter, capping the bottle and putting it down to pick up a Sharpie in its place. Pulling a stool out from under the bench, he sits on the edge of it, legs spread wide, and points toward one of the buoys. Before he can ask, I snag it, bringing it over.

“License number,” he says, balancing the float in his lap and scratching off a series of numbers across the middle. He taps against it. “And here we’ll put the buoy number. One through ten, five traps per buoy.”

I expect him to hand it back to me to put with the others but am instead pointed toward another piece of equipment I don't know the name for. I hand it to him—nod when he utters “spindle” and twists it onto the back of the buoy—and take the whole thing when it's eventually given back to me. Without prompting, I put the finished one down and pick up a blank one, handing it to Dryden. He labels, twists on another spindle, hands it back, and waits for another.

“Thank you,” he says when I take the last one from him and stack it with the rest. He looks at his wrist, adjusting the watch there so he can see the face, and sighs.

“What's next?” I ask. We haven't used half of the rope that's stacked around here, and I'm dying to know what all the different colors and sizes mean.

“Nothing today. The bottom warps will need to be connected to the top warps and attached to the buoys—”

“Warp?” I interrupt, not having heard him use that word yet. He sends me a slightly withering look, and I shrug. Sue me. I'm invested in this now.

“Pot warp—it's the rope used to connect the traps, which lie on the seafloor, to the buoys up on the surface.”

“Got it. Thanks. So, trap is connected to the warps, which is connected to the buoy.”

“Correct. The bottom warp is connected to the top warp by a weak link, which ensures that if a whale becomes entangled in the lines, they'll break apart.”

I gape at him. That would never have crossed my mind, but now that he says it, it makes sense.

“We'll do that tomorrow,” he continues, rubbing a thumb into the palm of his left hand. He nods toward all the rope lying on the warehouse floor. “Measure them out to the length we need and coil them all back up together so they're ready. That's the rope for the ground lines.”

I follow where he's pointing, turning my body so the GoPro can catch it.

“It's sinking rope—again, to avoid entanglement of ocean life—so it lies on the bottom.” Sighing, he rubs a hand across his forehead. “Unfortunately, because it's being dragged and sawed over the seafloor, it wears thin. It breaks. When we lose traps, most often it's the ground lines to blame.”

“You said you were retrieving lost traps when the *Maiden* died, right?” I realize, squinting at the equipment again and seeing it in a new light. A lot of work and, I’m sure, money goes into setting these traps. Even without understanding the financial nuances, I can see why anyone would be pressed to salvage anything that had been lost.

“Correct. Four of them.”

“Can you replace any of them with these?” I ask, pointing at all the traps he’d worked on today.

“It’s not only the trap itself that’s the loss. It’s the tags on them. We receive a set number of tags per year, and they are not reissued if lost. What you have is what you get.”

“Got it.” Biting my lip, I look around the warehouse. *We’ll* do that tomorrow, he’d said. We. “Can I tag along when you come back tomorrow?”

“If you’d like.” He tips one shoulder in a half shrug. “Not bored of watching me tie ropes together?”

“Honestly? No. This is really fascinating. I’d like to be more help, if I can.”

“Looking for a job?” he asks, eyes on mine and hands dangling casually between his spread legs, forearms resting atop his thighs.

“I’m not expecting you to pay me,” I rush to say. Hell, if anything, I would owe him free labor for letting me stay in the guest cottage. “I’m just interested in this, so I’d like to help if possible. But, to answer your question, I do also need to look for a job, yes.”

“Staying long?”

“Long enough.” It’s my turn to shrug. I don’t know how long I’m staying. Long enough to see everything Siren’s Point has to offer. Long enough to give my feet and knees a rest. Long enough to gain back some of the weight I lost on the road.

Someone shouts an inarticulate request into the boat shed, drawing Dryden’s attention off me. He waits, staring at his boat, until Lex comes around the front and walks toward us. Rising, he slips around the traps we’d stacked up throughout the day and goes to meet her.

I hang back, not wanting to eavesdrop on private conversations, no matter how invested in the outcome of this whole endeavor I’ve become. Running my fingers along the cage of one of the traps, I tug on the dog

bone anchored to the top. I wonder if Dryden would teach me to tie a hitch knot if I asked.

“Figure out what’s wrong?” I ask Dryden when Lex walks off and I deem it safe to approach. I’ve been able to mostly ignore their presence in the boat shed with us, tuning out their voices in favor of putting all my attention on Dryden.

“Possibly,” he replies noncommittally.

I’m surprised to find it’s nearly three in the afternoon when we step outside, the sun weak and already making its steady way downward. I feel invigorated, though, and already excited for tomorrow. I wait for Dryden to lock up the boat shed, keeping an eye on him and the activity at the wharf at the same time. It’s important I don’t let myself get too comfortable with him too soon. Probably best not to get comfortable with him at all. He seems all right, but I can’t start to rely on him for things nor expect him to shuffle his life around for me. It’s important to remember exactly who I am and precisely where the power lies between us.

Silently, I hold out the keys to the Porsche when he turns around. His fingers brush mine when he takes them, both of us having left our gloves off. My skin tingles at the contact, jolting me a little bit. When I meet Dryden’s eyes, they’re black and unreadable.

“Sorry,” he says, voice a little thicker with what I take to be sincerity. Usually, his words seem to be carved with a fine edge of sarcasm and disdain, like the only reason he’s speaking at all is to humor the world and not because he wants to.

I nod in acceptance, hand resting on the passenger door as I wait for him to unlock the car. My demand for him not to touch me had been literal, but not quite so all-encompassing. *Don’t touch me* means don’t come up behind me and press your groin against my back. It means don’t grab my hand or my wrist or my forearm, and it means do not crowd me into a corner and cage me in. It doesn’t mean that accidental brushes based on simple proximity are something that needs to be apologized for.

“No worries,” I tell him out loud, pulling the door open the moment the locks click. Relief seeps into my veins as I settle in, brushing my fingers over the fabric of my pack. Knowing it hadn’t disappeared and verifying that with my own eyes are two separate things.

A few people put up a friendly hand to Dryden as we leave. He responds with a slightly less-friendly version of a greeting, only going so far as to lift

two fingers from the steering wheel. He doesn't say anything, and for the first time all day, I feel like I shouldn't either. Instead, I sit back, hand looped into the strap of my backpack, and watch the town pass us by out the passenger window.

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Chapter Ten



DRYDEN

Social exhaustion and a desire to be alone is something I often ascribe to being a nail in the coffin of my marriage. Even when I was working as an engineer and spending upward of ten hours a day in an office building, I rarely talked to people. I'd go home at the end of the day and want to stay there. I'd go home, exhausted by people, and look forward to spending time alone with *one* person. Even if I had to keep working, it was the company I'd enjoy and one of the first things I learned not to rely on. Dylan had never known social fatigue and could never truly be happy with an audience of one. Now, of course, I recognize social butterfly to mean cheating bastard, but at the time, I'd simply kissed him goodbye and tried not to feel too disappointed that he wanted to go to a bar instead of sit on the couch.

Spencer rests quietly beside me, and while a part of me wants to talk to him, the larger part is grateful for the break. I'd regretted letting him tag along the second we'd gotten in the car, exhausted by the notion of babysitting him while so much work needed to be done. I'd wanted to sit in the boat shed in silence, putting the traps together alone. Had, in fact, been looking forward to it, craving the sort of calm that only seems possible while doing a mindlessly tedious task. If I'd wanted help, I would have called Cody.

But Spencer, with his big, soft, eager eyes, had sat next to me with his camera, and suddenly, talking hadn't seemed quite so much of a chore as it usually did. He's certainly more comfortable today than he was yesterday, and I highly doubt even half of that can be attributed to me. I imagine, after

a night of rest and a full dinner, it's easier to control fears and worries that loomed impossibly large while starving and exhausted.

Fighting the urge to look over at him, I slow the car down and turn into the parking lot of the grocery store. It's less busy than I'd been thinking it would be, which is an unexpected blessing. With any luck, we'll be able to get in and out without too many distractions. Usually, the locals let me get away with nothing more than a nod of greeting. Today, with Spencer in tow, I doubt I'll be so fortunate.

"I'll wait outside," he offers as I park, firming his grip on the red backpack. I feel a quick, sharp pain of discomfort, realizing we're so soon back to where we started. He's once more acting as though I'm going to take from him.

"Come in," I reply, unable to keep the bite from my tone. We're here for him, not me. Taking the keys from the ignition, I dangle them across the center console. "You can leave your things here. We won't be long."

He's quiet as we exit the vehicle but leaves the backpack where it is. I'm grateful. He's going to draw enough attention as it is without a giant, ratty bag on his back. The Porsche keys disappear into his pocket, and I tug a shopping cart from the line, leading the way inside. I'm giving this five minutes before I call it and check out, regardless of whether I have everything I need or not.

I lead us up and down the aisles, grabbing things off the shelves with little regard for what they are. There isn't a full-sized oven in the guesthouse, so I skip the frozen foods and instead go a little heavier on the canned soup and snacks. Bagels and cream cheese, another jar of peanut butter, two loaves of bread, and enough chips and crackers for him to throw a pool party find their way into the cart before I steer us toward the beverages. After sliding two cases of water onto the bottom shelf of the cart, I speed through the cold section, tossing in deli meat, cheese, and anything else that catches my eye. I usually prefer to get the non-prepackaged stuff, but I can feel eyes on us, and I have very little patience for grocery shopping.

"Anything else?" I ask Spencer, addressing him for the first time since we came inside. His eyes widen beneath the short fringe of brown hair, bouncing between me and the cart.

"Uhm. Not sure you can fit anything else," he comments.

“We can always come back,” I agree, pushing the cart around Judith Long and pretending I didn’t see her open her mouth to speak.

Spencer looks like he’s in need of smelling salts as he watches the total rung up on the register, eyes following each item as it disappears into a bag before silently reaching out to take it. He loads the cart and surprises me by pushing it outside as I finish paying. When I meet him at the car, he’s hovering uncertainly at the rear of the Porsche, keys held in his hand. He gives them back and waits for me to pop the trunk as though unsure whether he’s allowed to touch the vehicle or not.

“Will all of this fit?” he asks.

“We’re about to find out,” I reply, uncaring. If I can’t stuff it all back here, he can hold some on his lap. Ninety percent of this isn’t for me, anyhow.

By the time we are on the way home, the silence in the car has started to feel slightly abnormal. He’s likely waiting for me to bridge the gap—ask questions or offer to answer any more of his, of which I am sure there are many. I’ve never been particularly adept at small talk, though, so I let it rest. Having realized that he doesn’t know this food is for him, I imagine he’s going to have quite a bit to say once we reach home.

“Need help unloading?” he offers, swinging his backpack up onto his shoulders and taking enough steps back from the car to keep him safe from an explosion, were it to do so.

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

He frowns at me, hands clenched around the straps of his pack, eyes bouncing between me and the open trunk. Hooking as many bags as I can on my fingers, I stride off toward the guest cottage. I’ll leave it all outside in the snow for him to take or leave.

“Wait—what? Hold on.” Sputtering, he starts to follow me before cursing lightly under his breath and turning back around to grab some of the bags.

He mutters unintelligibly a few paces behind me, and when I get to the point where I can put the bags at his door and turn around, he’s glaring mutinously. I smile, and his eyes narrow nearly to slits.

“What is this,” he says through clenched teeth, in a way that’s not quite a question but more of a demand.

“Food. Help me with the rest of it.”

I can feel it as I walk past him—a ballooning of the air around us, almost, or a displacement of gravity—like he wants to reach out and grab my arm. To stop me. When I meet his eye, I can't help but wonder if there is another winter storm on the way. I can feel the change in pressure.

He devolves into silence then, doing the same as me and leaving everything on the ground outside the cottage, making trips back and forth from the car, still carrying his backpack. Dropping the case of water down next to the door, I brush my hands off and say, somewhat sarcastically, “Well, have a good night.”

“Hey, wait,” Spencer replies immediately, taking a step toward me in sync with the one I took away. I raise an eyebrow at him, and he frowns, confusion flitting across his face as he retreats once more. “I can't pay you back for this, and I'd prefer not to accept this much charity.”

“The point of charity is, in fact, to *not* expect payment in return,” I point out. He scowls, lines creasing across his forehead as his brows lower. He has a remarkably sweet, handsome face for such a feral little thing.

“It's too much. I can get my own food.”

“Of that, I have no doubt. Consider this a legality. While you're staying on my property, I'd prefer you to not starve to death. I haven't got the time nor, frankly, the desire to deal with that.”

His cheeks puff out as he makes a snorting noise, the consternation replaced with incredulity.

“I'd post a video beforehand, implicating you in the crime.”

“Charming,” I deadpan and feel a little pleased with the humor that flickers to life in his eyes.

“Seriously, though, this is—I thought you were buying your own groceries.” Spencer waves a hand at the paper bags sitting on one of the only patches of grass not covered in snow. One is tipped over, bag of apples tumbling out the top.

“I'm stocked. And now, so are you.” In my pocket, my phone buzzes. Probably Lex, calling to follow up on the *Maiden Seas* as she'd promised. “Come up to the house if you need anything.”

Turning, I note Lex's name on the screen and bring the phone to my ear, striding off across the lawn. Lex's voice is loud enough to almost drown out the softly spoken thank-you from behind me.



There are very few things I love, but watching Colorado play hockey is one of them. Draping an arm across the back of the couch, I tilt the glass of bourbon, swirling the liquid idly. Spencer was right; this monstrosity is dreadfully uncomfortable. I put my feet up on the glass coffee table, ignoring the way the hard surface digs into my heel, and cross my ankles.

Usually, I do this in bed, as it's the only truly usable piece of furniture in this house. But even if it weren't, I think I'd find myself there more evenings than not. Dylan would be appalled to find out my ideal evening is lying in bed, room dark, hockey game up on the flat screen and a book on the nightstand, ready to be utilized during intermissions. Sometimes I even switch out the bourbon for a cup of tea. Shifting, I settle in a little deeper into the couch cushion, glancing out the wall of windows as I take a sip from my glass.

I know why I'm not upstairs, in my bed, comfortable. I know why tonight, suddenly, I'm sitting in the living room with all the lights on. I know precisely why I'm having trouble focusing on the game and instead keep glancing across the yard at the guesthouse. Tipping my head back, I sigh. On the TV, a commercial break comes on. Perfect time for me to go upstairs.

Instead, I stay where I am. I finish my glass and leave it carelessly on the kitchen counter as I fix a mug of tea. Two drinks per night is the limit, no matter if it was a good day or bad. And perhaps chamomile is the secret for making that abhorrent couch comfortable. The bourbon certainly didn't manage.

The lights are on inside the guest cottage as I reclaim my seat on the couch, and I really wish I didn't notice or care. It's none of my business what Spencer is doing. I'm unsure where this curiosity for that man has come from, and the intensity of the feeling is a little concerning. I don't *want* to be curious about him. Yet it's there, sitting beneath my skin like a sliver and begging me to pick at it. On the television, Grayson Brody scores a tip-in goal, and I hardly care, too busy glancing out the window toward the cottage and wondering if my tenant is also watching the game. Wondering if he'd watch it in here, where I could contemplate him in closer proximity.

Disgusted with myself, I take a sip of tea despite how hot it is and almost miss the sound of tapping against the glass. Looking over the back of the couch, I lock eyes with Spencer. Biting his lip, he lifts a hand and

steps back. I can feel his eyes on me when I rise and reach for the lock, the attention sending goose bumps down my spine. *You did this to yourself*, I think acidly, sliding the door open with a gust of cool evening air.

Spencer must see some of that self-censure in my expression, his voice laced with uncertainty as he says, "Evening."

"Something not working?" I ask, glancing back at the cottage. If it isn't, he'll have to live without tonight. I'm useless at home repairs and have no desire to learn. I can call someone in the morning.

"No, everything is fine. Perfect." He pauses, glancing at the bright living room behind me. I feel oddly satisfied to know he had a crisp, clear view of me inside as he approached across the lawn and then wonder what the fuck is wrong with me. He clears his throat, smiling carefully as he meets my eyes again. "I was just doing some editing and noticed your light was still on."

He'd have had to be blind not to notice. Interesting that he was apparently just as nosy about me as I've been with him. Maybe the curiosity is catching, and we're only concerned with each other based on proximity and novelty. Once he gets used to me, and I to him, neither of us will care. Although, I suppose there is little hope of ever reaching that point. He'll be gone long before that day comes. Fighting against the urge to say something flippant or cutting, I try instead to offer the same courtesy he just gave me.

"No work for me. I'm watching hockey."

"I don't know anything about hockey," Spencer replies. He looks pleased—eyes glinting in the light and a dusting of five-o'clock shadow on his jaw. I don't think he's an overtly attractive individual by most beauty standards. Generic, I suppose, would be the correct way to describe him. Rude, but truthful. And yet, I like the little chip in his front tooth, putting a sharp angle where a smooth line should live. I like the creamy, golden-brown color of his eyes and the way they look framed by a curtain of thick lashes. I must find something pleasing in the shape of his face since I can't seem to stop looking.

"Second period just started," I tell him, moving back so I'm no longer blocking the door. "If you'd like to give it a shot."

He doesn't ask if I'm sure. Doesn't look worriedly around the yard or longingly back at the cottage. He doesn't make an excuse about why he can't or shouldn't. He doesn't pretend he came up here for any reason other than to seek out company.

“Thanks,” he says, stepping inside.

He doesn’t make a single move to take off that blue coat or to sit down. He stands five paces to my left, back to a wall, and watches as I close the door once more. I leave it unlocked. Feeling twice as idiotic as I did before now that he’s in the same room, I ignore him and reclaim my seat, hooking a finger through the handle of my mug and draping an arm over the back of the couch as I recline. Lifting my fingers, I gesture vaguely at the sitting area.

“Have a seat,” I tell him, annoyed with how pleased I am that he’s here. At least now I won’t have to give myself a neck injury looking out the window at the damn guest cottage.

“Who’s playing?” he asks, perching awkwardly on the end of the chair furthest away from me and glancing up at the television, where the teams who are playing are visibly displayed.

“Colorado and Minnesota.” A commercial break comes on, and I take a sip of tea, watching him watch me. There’s something more than curiosity in his eyes, although it’s not quite fear. Perhaps he came here for a specific reason after all. “Did you need something?”

“No. I wanted to ask you, though, if you wouldn’t mind me riding with you when you go to town tomorrow.”

“I thought we’d already established that you would be doing that,” I comment. He’d been excited about the rope, of all things, and had looked childishly eager when I’d told him my plan for tomorrow. Perhaps the time between getting home from the grocery store and now allowed him too much space to remember I’m a stranger and he shouldn’t trust me.

“Yeah, we did. And I’d rather go back to the warehouse with you and work on the traps, but I need to try and find a job as soon as possible. I’ve already been here a couple days—usually, I would have already found something by now.”

“Really? People hire you?”

He scowls at me, and I raise an eyebrow. “Yes, of course. Manual labor-type things, usually. When I was in New York, I walked a Pomeranian. Sometimes I can get a position as a busboy.”

“I think you’ll find people around here walk their own dogs.” The game comes back on, barely drawing my attention before I fix it back on Spencer. “And it’s not the season for landscaping. Nobody needs a gardener in winter.”

Spencer sighs, turning his face to watch the game. He's sitting ramrod straight in the chair, hands resting on his knees, coat slightly bunched up around him. I have the oddest desire to laugh. He looks ridiculous and uncomfortable.

"You can loosen up your corset, if you'd like," I offer, smirking at the look this earns me.

"I'm not going to stay long. I don't want to bother you; I just wanted to ask about tomorrow." Despite his words, he unzips the coat and scoots back just far enough in the chair to touch the backrest.

"Probably an hour left in the game, at least. Don't rush off on my account. And I can drop you wherever you'd like tomorrow. That's not a problem."

"I can walk, too. You're just pretty—"

"—far from town, yes," I agree. Purposefully, I might add. There is nothing I desire more than quiet and solitude.

"Okay. Well, thanks."

"Isn't vlogging your job?" I ask. Fuck it, I'm curious. He spent all day flitting around with a camera in his hands, taking photographs of inane objects and asking me idiotic questions. What was the point of all that if not to make money?

"It is. But I don't earn much. I mostly do it for fun. I'm good at it," he adds, voice just a touch stronger, as though he's proud of that fact.

"Can I see?"

He frowns, those lovely brown eyes a soft mahogany color in the brightness of the living room. I wonder what I'd have to do to get him to smile again.

"Sure. I mean, they're online. Free and all. But you...you don't have to."

"Believe me, Spencer, I have long stopped doing anything I do not want to do."

And there it is. A fast quirk of the lips, corners tipping upward. I take a sip of tea, glancing at the television in time to see a replay of my team scoring a goal I apparently missed.

"You can find me if you search 'walking with Spence.' There are shorts available if you just want a quick look, but my favorite stuff is the long-form content. All that footage I got today, I edited it down to twenty

minutes. Once I clean it up a little more and add a few things, I'll show you so you can veto if you'd like."

I shrug, not particularly concerned. I doubt many people who'd recognize me watch his videos, and what would I care if they did? It's not as though I'm hiding here, nor making it a secret that I haul lobster for a living now.

"So, not a big payout. Hence needing to look for other work," I prompt. Spencer nods.

"Yeah. I need to save, and I also need to pay you rent."

I raise my eyebrows at him. "I have no recollection of asking you for rent."

"No, but if I was staying in a long-term rental, I'd be paying for it. You offered me your guesthouse for a night, which I really appreciate, but if I'm going to be staying, I need to pay for it."

"I'd really prefer if you didn't."

"Why?" he asks.

"I don't think I can stress enough how very little I need your money." I lift my hand off the couch to gesture at the room. Spencer glances up at the vaulted ceilings before looking back at me.

"You gave me groceries, too. There's only so much charity I can accept before it crosses a line. I don't deal in favors, so you'll have to take money."

"Consider it robbery if you're uncomfortable with charity." I shrug. On this, I won't budge. *Rent*, for fuck's sake.

"I'm not uncomfortable—" He stops, making a small, aggrieved noise in his throat like he hadn't expected me to argue and is annoyed that I am. "I'm not uncomfortable with charity. I'm just saying, there is a line between what is acceptable to take and what is not. If I live in your house for months and contribute nothing to bills, that's not charity; that's freeloading."

"And if I steal money from a homeless man, that's not good business; it's being a dirtbag."

"Most people don't argue when you try to give them money."

"Most people don't mind keeping it when someone declines it either," I reply. His nose crinkles a bit as he frowns down at his knees, trying to think up an argument. Settling back into the couch, I look away from him and up at the television. "Colorado is on a power play."

"I—what?"

"Power play."

He opens and closes his mouth, glancing between me and the game. I don't think he has any idea what a power play is, nor why he's meant to care. I wait, giving him time to decide if he's going to be stubborn and push me on the money issue or if he'll let it go.

"That's your team, then?" he asks hesitantly.

"Yes." Taking a drink, I feel Spencer's eyes shift back onto me. "Tea?" I offer.

"Sure. Thank you."

"Fix it yourself, Spencer. I'm not running a charity."

He laughs, and this time when I look over, it's a full smile on his face, complete with chipped tooth. Shaking his head, he stands up, slipping his jacket down off his shoulders and draping it over the back of his chair. Resolutely, I do not watch him as he walks to the kitchen. I don't care to see what he's been hiding under that bulky coat. I don't care about him at all.

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Chapter Eleven



SPENCER

I look down at the resumé in my hand. I'd updated it and printed off a few a couple of weeks ago, paying fifty cents at a public library. It's not much of a resumé, truth be told, but most legitimate employers won't even talk to you without one, and Dryden already told me I'm not going to have any luck finding under-the-counter landscaping work this time of year. Glancing up at the empty road the Porsche just drove off down, I feel an odd sense of disquiet. I wish I weren't canvassing for a job and was instead back in the boat shed with Dryden, watching his pretty fingers tie knots and listening to him explain things in a neutral monotone.

Sighing, I walk the few feet down the sidewalk to the little office for the Libby Cottages and open the door. I'm going to try my luck here first before moving on to the other rental and hotel options in town. Housekeeping is a job that's usually hiring and requires little experience. I have no problems getting my hands dirty.

"Hello again!" Amy greets me, smiling as she rises from her chair.

"Hi. Nicer weather today," I joke, and she laughs kindly.

"It is! Anything stick up at Dryden's?"

I pause. Up at Dryden's? How the hell does she know I've been up at Dryden's? Scrambling to think of a reply that isn't *what the fuck*, I clear my throat.

"Uh, no. The snow hasn't been too bad."

"That's good. We've had a horrible winter, and those back roads can get awful with the ice. Dryden drop you off on his way to the wharf?"

Good lord, this woman can read minds, I think, staring dumbly at her. I'm unsure whether to be impressed with her fact-gathering abilities or

frightened by them. Maybe I won't have to give her my resumé at all. She probably knows everything on it, as well as the date and time I was born and how much I weighed.

"Yeah," I agree, shaking off the surprise enough to slip my papers from my pocket. Separating one from the bunch, I hold it out to her. She smiles as she takes it. "I was actually wondering if you needed any help around here? Cleaning—housekeeping, or anything like that?"

"You know, I actually don't. But I'll tell you what, Spencer, I bet we can find you something else." She's still smiling as she puts my resumé down on the counter and taps it. "I'll hold on to this in case anything changes and I need to give you a call, okay?"

I nod, watching as she rips a page from a notepad and clicks open a pen. I step a little closer, unsure but willing to see where this is going. One thing is clear—this woman knows what's up in this town.

"Meryl Thompson and her husband, Doug, have been wanting to clear out their shed for ages. Their son lives in Tennessee—a lawyer, actually, if you can believe it!" She looks up at me, smiling. I nod, even though I have no idea who this person is. "They're getting on in years, so they need a little help with things like this. There's the house phone. You can give Meryl a call and let her know Amy Libby sent you, okay?"

"Okay," I agree faintly.

"Now, what else... Oliver Martin—he lives up on Mariner Road. Well, Portsmouth now, but nobody calls it that. Strange how they change the names of things for no reason, isn't it? He's got a lot of overgrowth on his land, and I imagine he wouldn't say no to a little help. It's not quite the right time for landscaping, but...I'll jot his information down just in case, okay?"

She doesn't wait for me to agree, bending low and writing out the name and phone number in a beautiful, flowing hand. I wonder if this woman is the mayor or something to know so much about people's business.

"Oh! I cannot believe I didn't think of it sooner!" She laughs again, shaking her head and reaching for a tray of business cards. Plucking one out, she hands it to me. "Rudy has been needing a spare set of hands for *ages*. I tried to get my teenage nephew to apply, but he wanted to drive his car and work for tips. He delivers pizzas, and that boy is happy as a clam. But anyhow, stop by and see Rudy. He'll be absolutely glowing; hire you on the spot, I guarantee."

Heart sinking, I look down at the business card. Caring Claws Animal Clinic. Instead of explaining precisely why I can't work for Benjamin Rudy, D.V.M., I meet Amy Libby's eyes and smile. It's not her fault the best option in town is one that's a bad fit for me.

"Thank you. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me."

"Oh, it's nothing! Here you go. And I'll call you up if I have an opening, okay?"

Outside, I sigh and fold up the paper she gave me, tucking the business card inside. Even though she didn't mention it, I'm still stopping by the hotel first. Just because she didn't bring it up, it doesn't mean they aren't looking for someone to clean the toilets.

They aren't. And even though the manager was kind enough to sit down and chat with me in an informal, impromptu interview, that still doesn't change the fact that they didn't have any openings. As I walk down the main street and stop into businesses, the common refrain seems to be "not right now, but come back in the high season, and we'll talk." Apparently, Siren's Point doesn't revolve around the sun like the rest of the world. It revolves around crustaceans and tourists.

Sitting down on a bench and pulling off my gloves, I unfold the paper Amy Libby gave me. I really prefer not to work for individuals if there are other options available, liking the safety of W-2s and Human Resources. But I'm a beggar, so I cannot also be a chooser. If Meryl Thompson and her husband, Doug, are too old and frail to clean out their own storage shed, they're probably also too old to assault me. Typing in the number, I bring the phone to my ear and listen to it ring.

"Hello?" a loud, female voice answers on the second ring. I can't help but smile. I have a soft spot for older folks.

"Hi, my name is Spencer Davis. May I speak to Meryl Thompson, please?"

"You've got her! How can I help you, Spencer Davis?" she replies cheerfully and still a touch louder than necessary for talking on the phone.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mrs. Thompson. Amy Libby passed along your name, though, and mentioned that you might be looking for some help cleaning out a shed?"

"Oh, bless her. And you can call me Meryl. Mrs. Thompsons are a dime a dozen, but have you ever met a Meryl?"

“No, ma’am,” I reply, smiling. A man walking his dog past my bench catches my eye at the same time and smiles back cheerfully.

“Meryl it is. And my husband is Doug, but don’t bother calling him because he can’t hear worth a damn anyway.” I snort, leaning against the hard back of the bench and stretching my legs out. I have a feeling this is going to be a long phone call. “Now, the shed out back. It’s an awful mess, Spencer, and could use a good spring clean. Most of the junk isn’t worth anything, but Doug’s got his tools and different bits back there, you know. There’s a lawn mower that hasn’t worked in years, and we don’t mow our lawn, anyhow. April through November, every Saturday, a couple of youngsters come take care of that. High schoolers, I think. I don’t know who organizes it—their mothers, I suppose. They do a good job, though, you know, and it’s good for them to get out of the house and have some fresh air. Keeps them out of trouble, too, I would think.”

Tipping my head back, I look at the sky as I listen. It’s a nice, nearly cloudless day, the sky a pretty, robin’s-egg blue. By the end of the phone call, I’ve learned quite a bit about the Thompson family and half a dozen other people in Siren’s Point and have a better understanding of exactly how Amy Libby had seemed so knowledgeable about me. These Siren’s Pointers are terrible gossips.

Meryl asks me to stop by this coming Saturday and hands over her address as though I’m not a perfect stranger who walked into town days ago. Shaking my head, I memorize the address to put into my phone once we’re done chatting. It takes her another ten minutes to say goodbye. I’m still smiling when we hang up and, honestly, looking forward to helping them out this weekend. Even if all I earn for my trouble is fifty dollars in cash, it’ll be worth it. It’s been a long time since I had a grandma, and I miss it.

The business card that was tucked inside the scrap of paper with Meryl Thompson’s phone number slides into my hand as I tip it. A single day of work isn’t enough. I need the promise of more income, or I’ll have to move on from Siren’s Point a lot sooner than I’d been planning.

And I don’t want to. I’m tired. Not just physically from walking, but mentally from the constant battle of not knowing when the next meal will come, where I’ll be sleeping, and the fear that never goes away. Fear is a good emotion, I know—a silent passenger that has whispered in my ear and

saved my life more times than I probably even realize. Fear keeps me smart, keeps me on my toes.

But it's also heavy. I want, more than anything else, a break. I want to sleep another night in Dryden Roy's guest cottage—sheets soft, mattress thick, and a lock on the door. I want another day of three meals. I want more people looking me in the eye and smiling, instead of crossing to the other side of the street when they see me coming. And, almost as much as I want the food, I want to talk to Dryden Roy, the first person in a very long time to speak to me as though I'm a sentient being and not a piece of trash on the sidewalk and to listen when I reply.

If I want all those things for a little while longer, then I need to earn them. Nothing is free, not even rest. Sighing, I get up, and business card clenched in my hand, I walk down the street toward Caring Claws Animal Clinic.



“Dryden?” I call, poking my head into the boat shed, my voice bouncing off the metal walls back at me.

“Here,” he replies, his tone implying a *duh, idiot*. His car is outside, to be fair, but still, it felt strange just walking in. Closing the door behind me, I walk around the front of the boat, reaching up to trail gentle fingers along the white paint.

“Hey,” I greet Dryden, stopping a healthy distance away from him and stuffing my hands into my pockets. He glances up at me but doesn't reply, focusing his eyes back on his hands. I watch as well, finding something oddly peaceful in the quick, sure movements of his fingers as he ties a knot.

“Need help?” I offer eventually.

“No. Finished.”

And indeed, he slips the knot through and tightens it with a decisive movement before using his elbow to begin coiling the length into a neat circle.

“Oh. You're done? Those are the...the warps, right? That you told me about yesterday. Two different colors.”

He looks over at me again, the blank expression slipping just enough to let amusement peek through.

“Correct,” he agrees. “Once the *Maiden* is ready, we can pull fifty traps and replace them with these.”

“They figured out the problem?” I perk up, looking over at the boat looming above us on the risers. “That’s awesome. Can they fix it soon, or?”

“By the end of the week, hopefully.”

“Expensive?” I ask, curious enough not to feel bad about the slightly rude question. Dryden snorts.

“You do not want to know,” he warns. Dusting off his palms, he raises an eyebrow at me. “Successful afternoon?”

I nod, even though the question makes me want to cringe. I should be happy. I *am* happy. An incredible amount of good fortune has found me here in Siren’s Point, and today was just another cherry added on top of the sundae. Perhaps presenting me with a job at a vet clinic is the universe’s way of balancing the scales. On one side, I’ve got a roof over my head and food to eat. On the other, a job that terrifies me. Dryden is still staring at me, waiting for me to continue. I clear my throat.

“I’m going to help the Thompsons clear out their storage shed on Saturday, and Monday, I start work at the Animal Clinic.” Dryden’s eyebrows rise. Before he can ask, I add, “I started with Amy Libby, and she pretty much told me exactly where to go and who to talk to.”

He snorts, plucking the car keys from where they’d been sitting on a workbench.

“Oh, yes, a wealth of information, that woman. Knew where you were living, too, I expect?”

“Yeah. I think maybe she missed her calling as a private detective.”

Dryden doesn’t laugh, but there’s a definite light in his eyes to go along with the smirk. He doesn’t give a whole lot away with his expressions other than disinterest, but I get the feeling that he finds me amusing. I hope so, anyway, because I’m starting to really like him, and I’d prefer the feeling be mutual.

Going up to his house last night had felt like a massive step over the boundaries I maintain to protect myself. I’d been sitting in the cottage, relaxed on the sofa, working through some editing, and unable to stop wondering what Dryden was doing. He already admitted to hiring cleaning staff, so I knew that wasn’t it. Is there any work he can do from home that maybe he was taking care of? Or was he already in bed, early to sleep and early to rise. I didn’t know the answers to any of my questions, and

eventually, the curiosity had driven me out the door and across the lawn to the big house, glowing like the light at the end of the tunnel. To Dryden, sitting perfectly visible in the center of the spotlight.

Slipping into the passenger seat of the Porsche, I settle back and wait as Dryden pulls out of the lot. I want to ask if there's another hockey game tonight and if I could come up and watch with him again. I don't, though, because it's an outlandish desire for me. I'm so good at being alone. I like it. All the years I've been walking across the country, I've never once felt the kind of draw toward another person that I'm feeling toward Dryden. A physical pull like he projects a gravitational field and is tugging me in. I have to care what people think of me for survival's sake, but with him, it feels a little deeper than that. I'd like to know that he likes me and enjoys my company, that I'm not the only one stepping across a boundary, and that he'll meet me on the other side.

"How did you fill out the W-2 if you don't have a permanent residence?" Dryden asks suddenly, voice soft over the low purr of the engine.

"I have a PO box. I'm originally from Utah, so that's where my 'permanent address' is." I make sure to emphasize the air quotes that were implied. Dryden glances at me and then back at the road. "Sometimes employers won't accept a PO box as a mailing address, but Rudy did."

"Is the permanent address a fake?" he asks, again not sounding as though he's angry, but merely trying to understand. It doesn't bother me. If questions about my life made me uncomfortable, I wouldn't be able to do the kind of work I do.

"No, it's a friend's address."

"I see." He lapses back into silence, and I consider bringing up all the concerns I have about working for Rudy at the vet clinic. But there's a difference between answering a question when someone inquires and offering up the information unasked. He probably doesn't care.

When we get to the house, I hover uncertainly near the car. Dryden glances at me and away, unconcerned. Feeling undecided, I take a few hesitant steps toward the guesthouse. My eyes snag on the pool and hold there. Heated, he'd said. Unused, he'd also said. Hating how ridiculous this internal battle I'm waging feels, I clear my throat. Maybe I can't ask for another evening watching hockey, but I can ask for this.

"Dryden?"

“Mm.” He makes a low noise to let me know he heard me but doesn’t look up from where he’s bent over the trunk of the Porsche.

“Would you mind if I used the pool?”

Now he glances up, brows dipped in a slight frown. Straightening, he rests a forearm on the raised lid of the trunk.

“Sure. I can uncover it.” Frowning a little harder, he rubs a finger thoughtfully under his full bottom lip. “I’ve got testing strips around here somewhere. We should check the pH before you swim. It’s been a little while since I’ve had it treated. I’ll call the pool guy tomorrow and get him out.”

I wince. I should have known unused meant it was also uncared for. Now all I’m doing is giving him more things that need to be done and more money that needs to be spent on me.

“You know what, that’s okay. I don’t need to use it.”

“I’ll grab the testing kit,” he replies as though I didn’t speak at all, slamming the trunk closed and stepping around me toward the front door. Sighing, I tip my head back and glance up at the sky, puffing my cheeks out in a sharp exhale.

I’m waiting next to the pool when he returns, still frowning as he fiddles with the kit in his hands. When I see that it’s the directions he’s looking at, I smile. My dad had been of the *never use instructions and just figure it out yourself* variety, and it had frequently led to fights with my mom. I can’t help but find it endearing that Dryden doesn’t seem to have a problem using them.

“Easy enough,” he tells me, dropping the kit onto a lounge chair and pushing up the sleeves of his sweater. Walking around the edge of the pool, he indicates the corner opposite. “Grab that.”

Obediently, I squat down, and together, we begin rolling back the cover. It’s heavy, and by the time we get to the end, I’m wondering why the people who built this house—clearly filthy-stinking-rich—didn’t pay a little extra for an automatic pool cover.

“Good lord, why the hell isn’t this automatic, like everything else in this damn place,” Dryden comments. I burst out laughing, surprising myself and him, if the look on his face is any indication.

“Sorry,” I say, bringing it down to a chuckle. “Sorry. It’s just, I literally had the exact same thought a second before you said that.”

After sending a somewhat teasing smile in my direction, he crouches down, legs spread wide, and drifts his fingertips through the pool water. I do the same from the opposite side, surprised when it's already warm.

"Doesn't look like there is any visible algae," he comments, shaking the water off his fingers before wiping them across his thigh. "It'll take a bit to heat up fully, though. I cranked it to the highest setting while I was inside so you don't freeze. It'll be a hot tub shortly."

"Oh. Right." Feeling slightly idiotic for assuming the pool wouldn't get any warmer than this, I clear my throat. "That cover works well. No leaves or anything."

"Mm," he agrees, rising and picking up the testing kit. I wander over to stand closer, wanting to help since I'm the reason he's going through all the trouble.

It turns out the pH is just fine, and I'm touched when Dryden checks multiple water samples from different spots in the pool. That warm, fuzzy feeling evaporates slightly when he says, "I suppose we won't know if there is any bacteria in there until you get in. Hopefully, you've got good health insurance."

I roll my eyes, huffing out an amused snort of breath. He knows I don't have any health insurance at all. Before he can leave and disappear into the big house, I gesture toward the pool and ask the question I've been working up to this entire time.

"Want to join me?"

It's probably strange to be asking him that about his own pool, but he already admitted to never using it, and I know he wouldn't have hopped in with me on his own. The thing is massive. I don't mind sharing it, and honestly, I kind of hope I have to. He stares at me, face implacable, as he thinks through the offer.

"That's all right, I'll leave you to it," he replies, and I try not to feel too let down by the dismissal. Nodding, I smile a tight-lipped smile.

"No problem. Thanks again."

We separate, him retreating into the big house and me crossing the yard to the guest cottage. Inside, I dig my swimming trunks out of my backpack. I haven't unpacked, nor do I have any plan to. Dryden could tire of my presence at any moment, and it's best to be ready to leave right when that happens. Undressing and slipping the swimsuit on, I pause to look at myself in the bathroom mirror. I should probably put a shirt on. There's nothing

particularly attractive about my body, and in fact, the view is a little disturbing. My stomach is a bit concave, and every single bone in my chest is visible. Skinny arms and skinny legs and a skinny face only make the image worse. Dryden—whose clothes are often tight enough for me to see exactly what’s hidden below—is muscular and healthy-looking.

“Ridiculous,” I mutter, turning off the bathroom light and leaving. I’m being ridiculous. I don’t want to swim in a shirt, and why should I, anyway? Dryden doesn’t care what I look like, and I usually don’t either. I’m not trying to attract him; I’m just trying to enjoy the pool.

Pulling my winter jacket back on, I half zip it up before bending to tug on my shoes. Outside the cottage, I pause with the key held out in front of me, halfway into the lock. I don’t need to lock it...right? Biting my lip, I fight against the anxiety that tightens my chest at the thought. Dryden has a key, so locking this is pointless, anyway. We’re way out in the middle of nowhere, and the likelihood of someone sneaking onto the property from the woods and getting into the cottage without me seeing is slim. Besides, I’ll be right there in the pool and can watch the door.

Resolutely, I step back from the unlocked door and tuck the key into the pocket of my jacket, zipping it closed. It feels dangerous to leave it unlocked. It feels like I’m asking for someone to steal from me. It feels like I’m letting myself trust Dryden Roy, which is something I haven’t done with another person in a long, long time.

Before I can change my mind, I turn my back and stride toward the pool. The air is cold against my bare calves. Kneeling down, I tuck my shoes under one of the loungers and lay my coat over top. Swiftly, I move to the pool and step in. At first, it still feels a little cold despite the steam rising from the surface, but the moment I’m up to my chin in the water, it becomes comfortable. I can’t help but grin, sliding my arms through the water and languishing in the silky smooth feeling against my skin. I *love* swimming.

Putting a foot flat against the side of the pool, I push myself backward, floating toward the deeper end where I can tread water instead of stand. After a handful of minutes, I duck my head underneath before resurfacing and scrubbing my eyes. The cold air on my wet face feels sort of nice as I languidly move around. I’m not here to get a workout, so I don’t swim laps. I want to take a break that doesn’t have a single thing to do with survival or vlogging. I just want to float.

The sound of a door sliding open startles me. Sputtering at the water I splashed into my own face, I wipe a hand across my eyes and turn to watch as Dryden steps out of the house. I sink a little lower in the water, letting it lap gently at my chin. Dryden stands next to the open door, glass in his hand and still wearing the clothes he was in earlier. Meeting my eye, he gestures toward one of the lounge chairs.

“Mind?” he asks, as though this isn’t his house and his pool and his chairs. I shake my head. Hating the urge to hide, I straighten so my whole face is above the water. I don’t know why I’m suddenly so concerned about what this guy thinks of my body, and it’s not as though he can see clearly when I’m in the pool anyway.

“Of course not.”

He nods, closing the door to his house and walking toward the chair he indicated. It’s the furthest one from where my jacket is placed, I can’t help but notice. I turn in the water, keeping him in view. He moves a little bit like a dancer, actions smooth and oddly lovely, even though he’s not doing anything particularly exciting. He gives the impression of someone who’s never run into a doorframe or caught a hip on the edge of the counter in his life.

“Not coming in?” I ask him once he’s seated, long legs stretched in front of him and crossed at the ankle, glass resting in his lap.

“No. Hot enough?”

“It’s perfect. Thanks again.” Treading water, steam rising slowly around me, I smile at him. He shrugs, taking a sip of whatever brown liquid is in that glass.

“Someone should use it,” he replies carelessly.

Legs scissoring lazily, I move my arms through the water and watch him. He’s staring out at the woods behind the guest cottage, as calm and casual as though this is his routine every night. And maybe it is. I look at him, enjoying the way the light from the house hits him from behind and puts a glow on his rich brown skin. He’s probably the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen. Definitely the most beautiful person I’ve ever met. Swimming closer, I cross my arms and rest them on the edge of the pool. He tracks the movement, dark eyes immediately looking me over.

“What happened to your arm?” he asks. I look down at them, stomach clenching so violently it feels like a muscle cramp. I should have crossed them the other way to hide the scar. I had momentarily forgotten it was

there. Fighting the urge to slip my arms back into the water and out of view, I take a deep breath.

“Dog.”

“You were attacked by a dog?” he asks, sounding surprised, as though I’m the first person to ever have been a victim of an animal attack.

“Yeah. A handful of years ago. I used to work as a vet tech.” Feeling like the wounds are raw and not long healed, I look up at Dryden. They’re ugly, I know. The type of monster-of-Frankenstein scar that draws people’s attention and keeps it. The kind that disgusts them.

“Does it pull?” he asks, and it takes me a minute to figure out what he’s talking about. Lifting my hand, I clench it into a fist to show him the full range of motion. Nobody outside of the doctor in the surgical department has ever asked me that.

“Not really. When it was first healing, yeah, but I made sure to move it a lot so it didn’t heal strangely.” I pause, looking at the scar that curls around the meat of my thumb and over the back of my hand, up my forearm where the patches of discoloration between the raised scars show where I needed skin grafts. “Well, it still healed strange, but you know what I mean.”

“That happened at work? At a veterinary clinic?” he asks.

I push back from the wall, slipping both arms into the water and pulling myself to the center of the pool where I can tread water. It did happen at work, and to this day, I have no idea why. Why a sweet dog, who would take a treat from my hand with a soft mouth and lick my fingers afterward, would snap so suddenly. I’ve turned that day over and over and over in my mind, trying to come up with a reason. Maybe I moved strangely, or maybe I had blood on my scrubs from the procedure we’d done earlier that morning and she could smell it. Maybe the barking of the other dogs had wound her up, or maybe it had scared her when I opened the kennel door and reached for her collar.

Whatever it was, a dog who had never shown aggression before bit into my forearm and didn’t let go. I remember it in flashes—the pain and the noise and the way she’d shaken her head from side to side, front paws planted and body straining backward; how the other dogs started barking and the way she was growling and the soft fur beneath my fingers as I tried to push her away with my free hand. I couldn’t dislodge her—a sudden and violent display of just how strong a hundred and ten pounds of dog really is. I remember feeling like the mauling lasted for hours when it was less than

two minutes. I remember her pressing back against the rear of the cage when someone came to help me, growling and baring her teeth in a snarl. And I remember the blood, shiny and red and slippery beneath my shoes when I staggered to my feet.

I'd hyperventilated in the ambulance—arm a burning mess of pain and shredded skin and muscle, the visible bubbles of yellow fat, and the iron smell of blood. Shock, they'd told me later, but at the time, it had felt like I was actively dying. Barely two minutes of time, and that dog attack sent ripples into my future that I'm still feeling today. Lifting my eyes to Dryden's, I nod.

"Yeah." I have to swallow around the weight in my throat as I add, "They put the dog down."

Dryden's ebony eyes glint in the light from the windows. He's idly rolling his wrist, the liquid in the glass turning gently.

"Don't they usually?" he asks, voice entirely devoid of emotion.

"Yeah," I agree. It takes me a second to decide whether or not I want to pick the scab off this particular wound and if Dryden is the one I want to bare it to. I lower my voice, speaking softly to try and cover up the emotion. "But dogs don't just attack people for no reason. I did something wrong. It was my fault."

Dryden takes a sip of his drink, and I look down at the pool, swinging my arms idly through the water. It's an odd feeling, loving something so much but fearing it at the same time. I love dogs. All animals, really. I couldn't have gone through school and worked in an animal hospital if I didn't.

But I also had panic attacks after that day. I'd wake up from nightmares of dogs barking—a cacophony of noise echoing through the room and ringing in my eardrums the same way it did at the clinic during the attack, the other dogs stressed, barking and clawing at their kennels. I'd walk past someone taking their dog to the park, and my heart would pound so violently I felt like I was going to be ill.

Now, the fear isn't quite so visceral. It plays nice with the love and lets me enjoy something I used to take for granted. I can pet those dogs in the park, kneel down in the grass and let them kiss my face. I can be the one to give them the treat passed over by their owner. But it's still there, always lingering in the back of my mind—the memories and the pain and the *noise*. It doesn't require much to bring me back to that day.

Sometimes, all it takes is for me to look at my arm. To see the shiny patches of healed skin and the raised scars, faintly red to this day. To remember the way I'd begged the surgeon to *cut it off, cut it off, just please cut it off*. It didn't look like my arm. It didn't feel like my arm. I wanted it gone. I struggled with aftercare, unable to stomach touching the wounds, let alone even looking at them for long. I'd bend over the sink and dry heave every time I had to replace a dressing, tears slipping down my cheeks. I stopped wearing short sleeves and avoided looking at myself in reflective surfaces.

"I told Rudy." I look up at Dryden to find him back to gazing out at the tree line and not at me. He glances over. "About the attack. And about the... well, I told him everything."

"He hired you anyway," Dryden comments, either because he knows Rudy or simply because he remembers I told him I was working at the clinic starting Monday.

"Yeah. I'm not certified as a vet tech anymore. I let it lapse when I wasn't able to afford the continuing education credits any longer. He said he needed help with cleaning cages and exam rooms, stuff like that. I won't be doing anything directly with the animals. Not right away."

Or, possibly, not ever. I doubt I'll be here long enough for my new boss to put me in charge of anything with four legs. And I can't blame him. Honestly, I did my best to talk him out of hiring me in the first place. I told him everything I remember from the attack, and I told him about the hospital. I told him about losing my job, my apartment, and what felt like my sanity, all in one unstoppable downhill slide. I told him that I might have PTSD, self-diagnosed through the internet since I haven't been to a doctor in three years unless a quick trip to the CVS for a flu shot counts. I told him everything, and he smiled kindly at me and offered me a job.

"May I ask a question?" Dryden inquires. I nod, finding it easy to talk to him. He has such controlled, calm reactions. Most people, when they find out, gasp and offer strange, useless apologies like they're the ones who attacked me.

"Did you quit your job? You mentioned letting the certification lapse. Were you unable to continue working at the animal hospital?"

I smile wryly. This is what I get for saying he could ask a question. I should have guessed it would be one I don't want to answer.

“I didn’t quit. They fired me. Well, layoffs was the company line. I...I missed a lot of time after everything happened. The doctor wouldn’t clear me to go back to work at the clinic, at first, worried about infection risk. But after a certain amount of time passed, my job said they’d no longer pay me, so I had to go back on severe work restrictions.”

I squint my eyes and look down at the vague shape of my feet in the water, legs moving gracefully, keeping me afloat. Workers’ compensation had been a nightmare from start to finish. Claims denied, medical treatment delayed, and finally that crisp white notice in the mail stating no further payout would be given. They had denied every single referral my doctor made for plastic surgery, stating it was cosmetic and therefore unnecessary, no matter that half of my arm looked like ground beef, and I still hadn’t regained feeling in parts.

For a long time, looking down at my own forearm caused a wave of revulsion so thick and cloying, bile would rise in my throat, and my vision would tunnel. I’d needed more help beyond the surgical. But I’d given up. I still had a fully functioning arm, no matter what it looked like. I didn’t want to go back under the knife and subject myself to more pain and healing and time off. I wanted to work. So I’d gone back, and everything had gotten so much worse.

“And even though technically I was allowed to be there, the work restrictions made my job almost impossible to do. Like, I wasn’t allowed to lift more than two pounds of weight. What weighs less than two pounds in a vet clinic? A pen? I was useless,” I continue. “But it wasn’t just that. It was...it was the barking and the smell and lights.”

“You were frightened of the dogs,” Dryden fills in.

“Oh yeah,” I agree readily. Frightened is putting it mildly. The moment I walked into work, my heart would start pounding and my hands would shake and it felt like I was underwater, trying to breathe through a straw. All I could hear was barking. “The thing about workers’ compensation is they’re trying to get you physically ready to return to work. They don’t worry at all about whether you’re mentally stable enough to be there.”

“I’m not a lawyer, but I believe wrongful termination of employment is both unethical and illegal. They cannot fire you because you became unable to do a job you were injured while doing.”

I shrug. I’d thought so, too. But the woman in Human Resources had given me a stack of paperwork thicker than my arm and explained

everything to me in a way I hadn't understood. I'd signed papers and taken my final check and thanked her before I walked out the door. Right then, I hadn't felt like my rights had been violated. I'd felt relieved. I didn't want to be in that room with all the cages and the shiny chrome tables and the barking dogs ever again.

"Maybe not. I don't know. I think after a certain period of time off, they can? Like I said, they didn't 'fire' me; the company was performing layoffs, and I was one of them."

"Spencer, you were fired," Dryden replies, and I laugh. Yeah, I was.

"I tell you what, I learned really quick how fast money burns. I thought it would be easy to find another job. And maybe it would have been if I hadn't had healing skin grafts on my arm that prevented me from working in food service or nerve damage that was so painful at times I couldn't move. I was a mess. Nobody wanted to hire me, and none of my bills were getting paid. My apartment complex gave me three months before they evicted me, and I got through another one living in my car before that was impounded by collections. After that, I moved in with a friend until the doctor gave me the all clear."

"And then you left."

"And then I left," I agree, sweeping my arms in an arc and rippling the surface of the pool. When I lift one hand out, the skin on my fingers is pruned.

"That is an appalling story," Dryden comments. I chuckle, lifting an eyebrow at him.

"Imagine how it felt to live it."

He lifts his hand in a cheers motion and takes a sip of his drink. Switching his legs so the bottom ankle is now crossed over the top of the other, he settles the glass once more in his lap. He's not staring out at the woods, but at me. Right into my eyes, in what should probably be the most awkward, uncomfortable eye contact known to man but somehow isn't. It feels like an acceptance of all the ugly parts of myself I just showed him. He's not looking away.

"Why walking?" he asks.

"Because I like to walk," I reply dryly and can't help but add, "Obviously."

He smirks like the sarcasm pleases him. I swim a few lazy lengths of the pool in the ensuing silence, casually frog kicking my legs and keeping my

head above water in case he talks. He doesn't. Instead, he watches and finishes his drink, ease settling between us like a blanket of fresh snow.

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Chapter Twelve



DRYDEN

Spencer, despite his apparent love of walking, is a fish. After leaving Saturday morning, before I'd even woken up to walk his way over to the Thompson property, three miles west of here, he'd come back later that evening filthy and carrying a Tupperware of fresh-baked goods. I'd admonished him for walking instead of asking for a ride, to which he'd replied, "Have a muffin, Dryden," before bustling off to the cottage. He'd been in the pool less than thirty minutes later, apparently not so tired from the yard work that he couldn't swim. Every evening since has been the same.

Two of those evenings, I forced myself to remain inside. To push myself back into my routine and settle into bed for a hockey game and an hour of reading. And if I also watched the exterior cameras during intermission to check on the occupant of the pool, it was only to ensure he wasn't floating face down.

The rest of the evenings, I joined him. I settled back in my lounge and tried to enjoy the view of my yard and the woods pressing against the boundary. I tried not to look at him when he started swimming a lazy freestyle or notice the ropy, thin lines of muscle down his back and in his arms when they lifted above the water. I tried not to stare at his stomach when he flipped around to a backstroke.

And now, hands pressed into the marble island as the water slowly boils behind me, I try not to notice the smile on his face as he strides across the lawn toward the pool. He sees me through the glass and waves, kicking off his shoes and dropping his coat before hopping into the water. Fixing my tea, I carry the mug over to the back door. He saw me and waved, so it

would be rude not to at least say hello. In the back of my mind, I wonder when I started caring about that.

"Afternoon," he greets me the second I've got the door open.

"It's freezing," I comment, steam rising off the mug in my hand.

"Not in the water, it's not. You should come in."

I consider it. I don't even like to swim, and yet I consider it. *Careful*, a low, internal voice warns. I need to pull back and distance myself. I need to go back inside and do my own thing. I need to forget about big brown eyes and find good conversation somewhere else, with *anyone* else. Instead, I sit down on the side of a lounge.

"Any updates?" Spencer asks. I stare out at the trees, not looking at him.

"She's going back in the water Monday."

"Really?" In my periphery, I see Spencer swim closer. "And then what?"

"And then Cody and I need to empty the traps that are out. Legally, we are obligated to check them at least once a month."

"It hasn't been that long, though, right?"

"No. But we don't like to push it. The weather is unpredictable this time of year. If we decide not to go Monday, it might be a week or two before the wind dies down enough for us to try again. If the weather is fine, we have to take advantage."

I bring the tea to my mouth and rest it there, feeling the burn of the mug against my lips. It's too hot to drink. Spencer is right there, perfectly visible, if I turned my head. I shouldn't. I spend far too much time looking at him already.

"Rudy doesn't need my help every day," he tells me. "I have Monday off."

"I know." I've been giving him rides to town this week, after all, and he blathers on about his schedule whether I want to hear or not. Which, I do. It doesn't seem to matter how hard I'm trying to stay away. He's always right there, and even when I can't see him, I can feel him. If I were half as smart as I proclaim to be, I'd kick him out and wave him off down the road.

"Can I come to the harbor with you? To film the *Maiden*?"

"Yes," I agree, despising that fizzle of happiness in my chest at the thought.

"Your video is ready, by the way. I can show you."

That gets my attention away from the trees and onto him. His short brown hair is dark and spiky from the water, and he's close enough for me to see droplets clinging to the fringe of lashes around those pretty doe eyes. A better view than the woods.

"My video?"

"The footage I took when we—you were doing the bridles on the traps. And labeling the buoys and stuff. I added it in with other things so it's a whole, thirty-minute day-in-the-life-type blog. I'll show you," he offers again, a slightly tentative look on his face.

"Now?" I ask, curious despite myself. I don't have any desire to ruin his livelihood, so no matter what the video contains, I won't tell him not to post it. Somehow, I know it won't be anything I need to worry about.

"Oh. Sure, yeah, I can grab my phone. It's just in the pocket of my coat."

He plants his hands on the concrete surrounding the pool as though he's going to push himself out. Sighing, I stand up and wave him back into the water. It's cold, and he's wet.

"I'll get it. Which pocket?"

I reach for the jacket, for a moment forgetting whose it is. It's in my hand, and I'm looking back over my shoulder at Spencer when I remember. He's watching me, shoulders and arms back under the water, the lights from below shimmering up and sparkling on his skin. If I were able to trust my own intuition about people, I'd say the look in his eyes is soft and intimate, trusting. Because I cannot trust myself, or Spencer, I place the coat gently back where I found it and step away.

"Sorry," I tell him. This is the man whose eyes scan a room when he walks in, picking out all the exits. The man who remained zipped up tight the first few days he was here, fully clothed in physical and metaphorical armor. He is the man who very explicitly asked me not to touch him or his things. I have, apparently, become so used to the growing ease between us that I've forgotten his rules as well as my own. Another reason it's time to evict him and send him away.

"That's okay," he replies after the silence stretches and warps between us, solidifying slowly. He swims a little closer, curling his fingers around the lip of the pool. "Left pocket. Could you hand me the towel, too? So I can wipe my hands."

I start with that, passing the folded towel over and turning my back. I am so adept at never letting the outside world affect my inside one, practiced in keeping everyone and everything on the exterior of my boundaries, and myself protected inside. I am alone, and this is how I prefer it. I zip up the pocket after slipping out a bruised and battered cell phone, turning and silently handing it to Spencer. His fingers brush mine as he reaches a scarred hand to accept it, face tilted upward and brown eyes on mine. Not so alone after all, I realize, stomach plummeting to my toes. It would appear that Spencer walked right through a door I'd thought was closed and locked years ago and am only just now realizing was slightly ajar.

"Thanks," he says now, awkwardly holding his phone far enough away from the pool that it wouldn't hit the water if he were to drop it. I wait, fighting against the conflicting urges to tell him to get out and leave and the desire to ask him to stay.

Spencer chews thoughtlessly on the corner of his lip as he taps on the screen. Finally, he lifts it up in my direction and smiles a small, uncertain smile.

"Take a seat and hit Play," he instructs. I can feel the press of his gaze on my back as I reclaim my lounge, this time stretching out and reclining instead of sitting propped up on the edge. Who do I think I am fooling anyway; I'm not going back inside.

Spencer floats idly around the pool like a jellyfish as I watch, volume raised enough for me to hear it over the ambient noise of the yard. The video opens on an image of a dirty, bearded man with flat eyes that looks so different than the Spencer bobbing around my pool that it feels shocking. It's hard to pay attention to anything beyond the sunken cheeks and scraggly hair, and I almost miss the moment the vlog is spliced and a new, familiar setting is introduced. There's a sharp pain, low in my stomach, as I watch Spencer—still dirty and unkempt, but with a smile behind the beard that knocks a full five years off his age—take a bite of a sandwich. Not really a sandwich, actually, since it's nothing but lobster pressed between two slices of bread. He looks so happy, it's almost hard to watch. I had put no thought into what food to bring him other than what would be easy to make, and there he is, acting as though I'd handed him a steak dinner. And then it's the following day, and suddenly, we're brought into the present with Spencer showered and shaved and perhaps no less haunted-looking in

the eyes, but certainly more alive than he'd appeared in the footage just five minutes prior.

I can't help but lose interest as the video begins to be less of Spencer and more of myself. He has carefully edited the view of my boat, I notice, cutting all shots that show her name. My name, too, is noticeably absent, even though I remember him using it several times during the course of the afternoon. It's charming, this attempt to maintain my anonymity, and I find I appreciate it, even though I hadn't been worried about it. We're a fishing town, settled along a coast of many more fishing towns. Anyone from around here would recognize both me and my boat by this alone.

I watch the full thirty-two-minute-and-fifty-seven-second vlog, aware of the chill in the air and the soft sounds of the pool water lapping against the edges as Spencer swims. When I look up, he's facing me, arms pulling him backward through the water, legs drifting upward. He smiles cautiously.

"I knew you would barricade the door," I tell him. He tips his head back into the water, face to the sky, lips parting as the smile widens.

"Still am," he admits.

"I could come through the window."

"With those shoulders? Please." He scoffs.

"This is good," I tell him, lifting the phone into the air. He adjusts his stroke, feet falling languidly to the bottom of the pool, and swims toward me, once more resting his arms on the edge.

"Thanks. You're sure you don't mind being in it? I can blur your face out and distort your voice if you'd like."

I raise an eyebrow. "I don't think that's necessary. Nobody will care who I am, Spencer. All I did was tie knots." And say his name approximately two dozen times, apparently. I hadn't realized until now.

"Oh, people will definitely care." He chuckles softly, propping his chin on his crossed arms. Already, they're pebbled with cold, hair standing up as the cool temperatures react to the water on his skin. "You look like an L.L. Bean model."

"That sweater is Gucci, Spencer," I correct, making him snort out another adorably unattractive laugh. Rising, I return the phone to his jacket and retake my seat.

"I'll probably post it tomorrow. Maybe the day after. There are a few spots I need to clean up before it's perfect. Or, well, as close to perfect as it can be." He shrugs.

It didn't seem to need any cleaning up to me, but I know nothing of vlogging and so keep my opinion to myself. I so rarely engage in small talk with people, it takes me a few seconds to even think of something to say.

"Did you film work this week?" I ask. Spencer shakes his head and then yawns.

"No. All I did at the clinic was fill out paperwork and watch these onboarding videos that looked like they were made in the eighties." I pinch my lips together to keep from smiling. I'm fairly certain Rudy was born in the eighties as well. "I might ask him if I can film this coming week, but I don't know. I don't really want to run the risk of catching a panic attack. The world doesn't need video footage of that."

"You still have panic attacks?" I ask, surprised. I don't imagine Caring Claws is going to be the type of caring environment it's meant to be if he's frightened every time he walks through the door.

"No. I just... I actually got chased by a dog a couple weeks ago in Massachusetts. It's like dog behavior one-oh-one to *not* run away when one comes at you, but I panicked and just"—he holds a hand up and swipes it through the air—"ran for it. And when I finally stopped running, I made it even harder to breathe by having the first panic attack I've had in, oh, a year and a half? So now I'm worried I'll slip back into old habits."

I hardly think a trauma-induced fear response is a habit, but I understand what he means. He continues before I can think of a reply.

"But I was fine the three days I was there this week, and I'll be fine every day in the future." He sounds determined to make it so, which is something I can appreciate. I, too, work hard to always be fine.

Spencer dips his head under the water and uses his arms to push himself to the bottom, which I take as him wanting this particular conversation to be over. Tipping my head back, I look at the slowly darkening sky. It's almost too cold to be sitting out here now, and certainly ridiculous to be doing so when there is a perfectly warm house not more than five feet behind me. Spencer is going to freeze the moment he gets out of the pool.

"Game tonight?" he asks when his head is back above water. I look at him.

"Many."

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He stares at me, water reflecting in the deep brown pools of his eyes and dripping down his cheeks. *Calculated risks*, I remind myself. *Think things through before acting.*

“Want to join me?” I ask Spencer.



Monday morning dawns cold and blue. The sky is a hazy indigo color that elicits a small gasp from Spencer when he opens the door to my knock. It's the first view I've had into the inside of the cottage since he moved in, and it looks just as pristine and unused as it did prior. Even the bed is made, corners tight and comforter smooth, like he's worried I'll inspect for wrinkles.

“I haven't broken anything,” he says. I stop staring over his shoulder and look at him—angled slightly to the side, hands in his pockets and shoulders tight. I take a step back, slightly chagrined.

“It wouldn't concern me if you had,” I tell him lightly. I hadn't been inspecting the room for a mess; I'd merely been curious if he'd unpacked. Judging by the bulging backpack propped up against the wall, he hasn't. He's still ready to run. “Would you still like to join me at the wharf?”

“Yeah.” He sounds cautious, and I berate myself for knocking on the door and probably scaring him. I have his phone number now. I should have just texted. “If you don't mind?”

“I wouldn't have invited you if I minded,” I reply, the words coming out with a bite.

“Okay. I'll grab my stuff.” Nodding, Spencer makes a twitching motion like he's going to close the door but changed his mind halfway through. Frowning uncertainly, he turns to the side and gestures vaguely. “Do you want to come in?”

“It’s your space, Spencer. You don’t have to invite me in.” Turning, I stride back up the lawn. “I’ll meet you at the car.”

He’s quick. I’ve barely settled into the driver’s seat and started the engine before the passenger door is opening and he’s sliding in. His gloves and hat are clenched in one fist, and his face is flushed like he sprinted across the yard as though he was worried I would leave without him. Discomfited, I clear my throat and wait for him to put his seat belt on.

“Ready?” I ask lightly, unsure how precisely I’m meant to bridge this strange gap between us. I never should have gone to the cottage door. It clearly scared him.

“Yeah. Sorry that took so long.”

Sighing, I flatten my palm on the steering wheel and rotate the wheel, pointing the car down the drive. Silence sits between us like an uninvited passenger wedged into the car with us. I don’t know how to break it, and so I don’t try. Spencer shifts in his seat, tugging on the ratty beanie and his gloves. I reach forward, bumping up the heat before slamming on the brakes as a deer steps out into the road.

Spencer falls forward, the seat belt locking and catching him across the chest. The deer bounds away into the woods, and I become aware of my hand on Spencer’s leg. I don’t remember reaching for him.

“Sorry,” I apologize, pulling my hand back to my side of the car with a degree of difficulty that makes my stomach roll. I shouldn’t want to touch him, and it shouldn’t be hard to keep myself from doing so.

“Thank you for catching me before I went through the windshield,” Spencer says seriously. The sarcasm makes me relax.

“Automatic reflex,” I tell him, but he only hums in response. Wrapping my hands around the steering wheel, I clench and unclench my fingers.

The rest of the drive to the wharf is, thankfully, uneventful. Spencer spends the time looking out the window, perhaps in search of more wildlife or perhaps trying to avoid conversation. I shouldn’t have put my hand on him. I shouldn’t still be thinking about the firm curve of muscle beneath my palm. Skinny as he is, he’s definitely strong and fit from all the walking and swimming. But I don’t care. I cannot let myself care.

Cody is sitting on the tailgate of his truck when I pull into the lot. He waves cheerfully, which I ignore, parking the Porsche alongside him. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Spencer pinch his lips together in amusement.

“Hidey-ho, Captain!” Cody greets me as I slam the driver’s door. I sigh. From day one, Cody has misinterpreted his job description, apparently under the impression that it includes being an annoyance.

“Cody,” I reply. His eyes slip off of mine and settle over my shoulder as I approach. He grins.

“This must be the stray you told me about.”

“Yes. Don’t worry, he’s very well-behaved,” I reply, pleased when I hear a snort of laughter behind me. I step to the side. “Cody, this is Spencer.”

“Hell yeah it is. Nice to meet you.” Cody hops off the tailgate and shakes Spencer’s hand. Tipping my head back, I close my eyes. He’s going to be insufferable all day. “Me and my girl, Lindy, watched some of your videos last night. Subscribed and everything. I feel like I should be asking for your autograph.”

“Oh dear lord,” I mutter, going to unlock the door of the boat shed.

As I suspected, Cody agrees wholeheartedly to being filmed and is so excited by the prospect that several times throughout the morning, Spencer has to gently remind him to just go about his normal work and not stare directly into the camera. Every time I meet Spencer’s eyes, he’s grinning. Once, he winks at me, and I look away, immediately thinking about how it felt to put a hand on his leg this morning.

I wouldn’t say ecstasy is what I’m feeling when the *Maiden* slips back into the water, but it’s certainly something close to joy. Not quite elation, but the nearest I’ve ever come. She’s not meant to be hobbled on land. She’s meant to be in the water, looking for maiden seas, as Spencer would say. I glance over at him, seeing my own internal happiness reflected openly on his face as he smiles and holds a camera in front of him. Feeling my gaze, he looks over.

“This is amazing,” he tells me. It’s not, really. It’s an average occurrence in a fishing town.

“Yes,” I agree anyway.

Once she’s tied up at my slip, Cody and I board. Spencer hovers on the pier, uncertain until I wave a hand and gesture him on. I’m curious as to how he’ll fare on the boat, already resigned to the eventuality of him coming out to haul with us. He stumbles slightly, gripping the rail tightly as though we’re actually moving and not docked.

“Soften your knees,” I murmur to him before ducking under the standing shelter and starting the engine. The *Maiden* tilts so gently with the water, I don’t even notice it. After a moment, Spencer comes to stand next to me, comfortable enough to walk around.

“What’re you guys doing? Are you going to go check your traps?” he asks, gloved hand holding on to the doorway.

“No.” I point at one of the screens mounted to the wall. “Wind is thirty-seven miles per hour. We try not to go out when it’s above thirty-five. But we can prep her for tomorrow, or the next day, or the next. One morning, the weather will cooperate.”

“Right,” he agrees. “Do you mind if I—”

“You can watch and ask questions and film, Spencer. Stop asking me. I already told you it was fine.”

The rest of the morning, Spencer moves around the *Maiden*, trying to catch everything that’s happening between Cody and me. He prompts dialogue with questions and occasionally props his little tripod somewhere and jumps in to help. He laughs in a way that twists my stomach into a knot when Cody begins reciting *O Captain! My Captain!* Incorrectly, glancing at me with a smirk on his face, checking to see that I’ve noticed. He does this, sometimes, and looks pleased when I call him out and prove I’d paid attention in my college English courses. Cody’s two favorite hobbies are poetry and annoying me.

“I like your friend,” Spencer says to me later.

“He is not my friend. He is my employee. Former employee, soon enough.”

Cody laughs, and Spencer just smiles. He doesn’t seem bothered by the cold, even though the day hasn’t warmed up any with the sun fully in the sky. His cheeks are rosy and his nose red. He hasn’t complained once. Perhaps I *should* fire Cody, who sometimes seems to think it’s his life’s purpose to aggravate me. I’ll train Spencer to take his place and finally enjoy some peace on this boat.

At one point, I overhear Cody asking Spencer how it is to live up on Count Dracula’s property.

“Great. There’s a *pool*,” Spencer says enthusiastically.

“Dude, it’s twenty degrees out here,” is Cody’s incredulous reply, which gets a huff of laughter from both Spencer and me. He grins at me, and I return it, the expression feeling strange on my face.

By the time we're climbing back into the Porsche, Spencer's smile has become pasted on, and I'm having a hard time looking away from that chipped tooth. I don't think I've ever spent time with someone so happy with mundane tasks like performing safety checks and diagnostics on a lobster boat.

"Your job is so cool," he comments, clicking his seat belt into place and adjusting the strap. Without waiting for me to do it for him, he turns on his heated seat before doing the same to mine. I stare at his fingers and wonder if he'll go for a swim tonight; if he'd mind if I joined him.

"My job is exhausting and backbreaking," I correct before conceding. "But also cool, yes."

"Do you like it?"

I frown out the windshield, one hand on the wheel and the other resting on the gear shift, fingers tapping. Nobody has ever asked me that.

"Yes and no. I don't particularly enjoy the early mornings."

"But everything else?" he pushes.

I think back to my first weeks in Siren's Point, adrift in more ways than one. I was fresh off a traumatic, two-year divorce and realizing that lobster fishing wasn't going to be the kind of job I could self-teach nor do solo. I had a boat and all the equipment and no way to use it. I'd felt like a piece of flotsam washed up on the beach, wrung out and unwanted. Discarded. I'd gone to the local bar and locked eyes with Shiloh Lepage.

"Everything else I enjoy," I say quietly, remembering Shiloh's careful tutoring on knots and tides and weather patterns, the long hours we spent on my boat in the dark, stretching the day into the night as he showed me the *Maiden's* secrets. I remember hating myself, and him, sometimes, and I remember wishing that kissing him would make me feel something.

Chapter Thirteen



SPENCER

I jump at the sharp bark, my brain immediately identifying a large-sized dog. Cognizant of that reaction, I take deep breaths in through my nose and let them out through my mouth, spraying more cleaner on the bottom of the cage and scrubbing. Behind me, the door leading to the exam room hallway opens, and I peek over my shoulder to see Rudy step into the kennel room. He smiles at me.

“You take your lunch break yet, Spencer?” he asks, and I wonder for a moment if that’s a polite way of telling me to do so now, of getting me out of the clinic while a dog is here. Embarrassment and something a little too close to relief burns through me.

“Not yet. I was going to finish this first.” I gesture toward the last two kennels that need cleaning.

“All right,” he agrees amiably. “But don’t leave it too late. I don’t want you passing out from hunger.”

I smile in acknowledgment. I can go weeks without food. There is absolutely no chance of me passing out from hunger. Passing out from fear, maybe, but hunger? No.

Rudy whistles to himself, taking a seat and badging into the computer sitting on an old desk in the corner. Turning, I get back to work, the task so mindless that I barely pay attention and instead spend the time thinking about the editing I’m going to do later. I posted the long-form content of my first few days in Siren’s Point this morning, and I’m eager to log in and see how it’s doing.

Sometimes the process of filming and editing and just finding interesting things *to* film can be a drag. A lot of the time, it doesn’t feel like

a fun hobby, but rather a job I'm required to clock in and put in hours for. But sometimes, like right now, my enthusiasm recharges, and I feel motivated. *Really* motivated. The tedious bits suddenly seem exciting, and the fun bits feel like the best kind of adventure. I'm hoping some of that emotion comes through in the vlogs and my subscribers are just as invested as I am. I really don't see how they couldn't be, with Dryden's pretty face and smirking mouth and nimble fingers stealing the show. If that video doesn't have a thousand views by tonight, I'll lose all remaining faith in humanity.

Rudy leaves the kennel area with a murmured reminder about taking my break. I nod, watching him disappear through the door that leads to the exam rooms. This time, when the dog barks, I don't jump. I wonder what kind of dog it is and what they're here for. Vaccinations, maybe, or just a routine exam. Vomiting, perhaps, as that's a common reason dog owners get nervous and bring them in. Hopefully nothing too serious, whatever it is.

When I finish the cages, I put my hands on my lower back and stretch. Dutifully, I log in to the old computer and clock out for a thirty-minute break. I brought a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, slightly squished in the plastic bag. Needing a break from the artificial indoor lighting, I take my sandwich out front. It's cold as hell, and the bench feels freezing beneath my legs when I take a seat. The fresh air is nice, though. I hate being trapped indoors for long periods of time and find it hard to believe I ever enjoyed working ten- and twelve-hour days at the veterinary hospital, all without ever leaving the building. It makes me itch to think about it, a bit of claustrophobia finding me as I remember.

Taking a bite of my sandwich, I fish my cell phone out and bring up the streaming service I post my videos on. Clicking my profile, I suck in a sharp breath and choke, turning my face into my elbow and coughing so hard my eyes water. Wishing I *had* some water, I take a couple steadying breaths and lower the hand holding my sandwich down to my leg, focusing on the screen of my phone.

"This can't be right," I say to myself, looking at the view count on the "Welcome to Siren's Point!" vlog. I have never, in all the time I've been doing this, had that many views in less than twelve hours. Hell, I've never had that many views in twenty-four.

Toggling over to the comments, I read through a few. The top messages are from regulars. People who comment on every single video, without fail,

even if it's just a simple *love this!* I grin as I scroll through, taking a few screenshots of the best ones. I fucking *knew* people would lose their minds over Dryden.

I almost forget to eat and spend the last five minutes of my break swallowing down my sandwich as fast as I can. My jaw is still stuck closed with peanut butter when I go back inside, waving to Shelby at the reception desk. She pretends not to see me, pecking away at her keyboard as I slip into the back.

The rest of the day seems to pass slowly. Or perhaps I'm just too focused on watching the time, eager to head home and find Dryden. When I'm finally released from my duties, I step outside and can't help but smile at the sight of the Porsche idling at the curb, paint gleaming in the murky winter light. Opening the passenger door, I slip inside and aim that smile Dryden's way.

"Hey," I greet him.

"Hello," he says, sounding somewhat confused. I suppose I'm not usually this enthusiastic, but I really have been spending the day counting the minutes until I could see him. I can't wait to tell him about the video.

"Have a good haul?" I ask, reaching for my seat belt. I was disappointed to wake up to a text message from him, sent at three thirty this morning, letting me know he was hauling today and wouldn't be able to drive me into town. Disappointed less because I'd have to ride in with Rudy and more because I was jealous. I want to go hauling, too.

"Fine," he tells me, the car sliding smoothly away from the curb. "Good day?"

"Yeah. Hey, listen to this, you'll never believe—wait, where are we going?" Dryden, who is supposed to take a left off Main, has gone straight through the light and missed his turn. Frowning, I sit up straighter in my seat, trying to ignore the immediate stab of fear in my gut.

"Picking up dinner." He glances over, lips turned down in a frown. "But I can drop you off if you'd prefer."

"No, that's okay." Relaxing back in my seat, I twist my fingers together. "Dinner from, like, a restaurant?"

"Yes. It won't take long," he tells me, as though I have anywhere else to be. "What will I never believe?"

"What?"

"You said 'you'll never believe.' What will I never believe?"

“Oh.” Chuckling, I pull my phone out of my pocket and open the photos, clicking one of the screenshots I took earlier. “I posted a new video this morning—your video—and it blew up. A hundred and fifty thousand views already. The internet is frothing at the mouth for you.”

“Excuse me?” he asks, and I have to swallow down a laugh at the haughty tone. Clearing my throat, I start to read.

“Hello, tall, dark, and gorgeous.” Pausing to receive the incredulous look Dryden sends to my side of the car, I hold up a finger for him to wait. I read the next one. “I may be naught but a simple landlubber, but I sure do admire the cut of his jib. Oh, this one is good, too. Those knots are a little sloppy, maybe he needs something new to practice on. I volunteer.”

“Stop,” Dryden says.

“Hold on, it gets better. How about this one: he can shiver my timbers anytime he wants. Or, my personal favorite: I now identify as a lobster.”

“You’re making these up.”

“The internet is a wild place, Dry, and you just became the latest thirst trap. No pun intended.”

Instead of laughing the way I’d hoped he would, Dryden pulls the car to a stop at a red light and looks at me, draping a hand casually over the gear shift. It’s the same way he always looks at me, but with a touch of something new. I resist the urge to fidget, holding eye contact with him until the light turns green, and he’s the first to look away. Tugging down the zipper on my coat, I try to give myself a little air. It’s hot in here.

“My knots aren’t sloppy,” he says, breaking a silence that had felt somewhat alive with possibility. For just a moment, I thought he was going to reach across the car and touch me.

“That’s not what Tif says,” I reply, raising my eyebrows when he side-eyes me. “But don’t worry, she’s volunteering to help you practice.”

“I’ll try to contain my excitement,” he deadpans.

“Most of these comments are from women who want to...marry you,” I tell him, giving the PG version of what most of these commenters actually want to do to him.

“I cannot imagine anything less tempting.”

I laugh softly, trying to cover up the way my interest perks up at that. Is he saying he’s not interested in women at all or just the people openly hitting on him on the internet?

“It’s a bit. A gag, you know,” I explain, heart thumping strangely hard in my chest. “People are just kidding around, trying to leave the funniest comment and get the most likes. They don’t mean anything by it.”

He glances at me. “I know, Spencer. I’m not concerned or offended.”

Turning my head, I look out the window at the trees whipping past, broken up here and there by houses. There’s something about the way he says my name that feels like fingertips dragged down my throat. I want to know what he meant about not being tempted by women. Before the moment passes and I can no longer bring it up, I clear my throat.

“I never asked, are you seeing anyone? Romantically?”

For a moment, I don’t think he’s going to answer. He rubs his thumb in a circle on the leather of the steering wheel, the car silent but for the growl of the engine when he accelerates and the hot air blowing from the vents.

“No.”

“No single ladies in Siren’s Point?” I push, feeling reckless and insistent. Right now, nothing is more important than hearing his answer.

“I wouldn’t know about single ladies in Siren’s Point, and the single gentlemen no longer appeal to me.” My heart pounds as he meets my eye for a breath before looking back at the road. “I’d rather be alone.”

“But for the occasional stray,” I reply softly, watching his hands clench and release around the wheel.

“Yes,” he agrees.

The restaurant Dryden pulls up to is so fancy the only parking option is valet. Wide-eyed, I scramble out of the car and watch him hand the keys off to a man in a crisp black uniform. He gestures me to precede him inside, hand rising as though he’s going to put it on my lower back. He doesn’t, but my skin burns from the imagined contact anyway.

“I can’t come in here,” I whisper to him, face hot as the doors are held open for us. I’m wearing scrubs and am covered in cat hair. I smell like an unpleasant mixture of bleach and urine.

“We’ll be quick,” Dryden replies, totally unconcerned.

Even he’s underdressed for a place like this, clothes dirty from a day spent on the boat. I can smell the fish on him, and although it doesn’t bother me, I’m pretty sure everyone having dinner in goddamn black-tie attire is going to take offense.

“Dryden,” I hiss before withdrawing and trying to hide as much of my body behind his as I can. Let him have all the attention if he’s so indifferent

to silly things like dress codes. Perhaps when you have as much money as he does, the rules simply do not apply.

“Reservation?” the woman at the slim hostess stand asks, smiling serenely at Dryden and tapping a manicured finger against the iPad in front of her.

“Carryout,” he replies. “Roy.”

“Just a moment.”

She clicks off across the marble floor in heels that hurt the soles of my feet just looking at them. I glance up at the ceiling and the chandelier hanging above us. I can’t even imagine what kind of food they must serve here. Something seasoned with gold, no doubt, and costing twice as much.

“This is ours,” Dryden says, holding a bag out to me once his order is delivered. I take it, surprised by the weight. He picks up the remaining two and nods toward the door, silently instructing me to head toward the exit.

We wait as the Porsche is brought back around. Ridiculously, I want to laugh. We were inside for fifteen minutes. Maybe less. What a waste of a valet ticket.

Dryden exchanges his keys for cash I hadn’t noticed was even in his hand. The valet nods, bending at the waist in a shallow bow, and steps back to wait for the next sports car to drive up. Food loaded into the back of the car, we climb back in, and Dryden barely has his door closed before I can’t hold it back any longer.

“I cannot *believe* they let us in there.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” Dryden asks with the air of a man who has never been denied entry to anything in his life.

“Because I’m wearing scrubs! And you smell like ass!”

“I work on a boat, Spencer,” he says, dryly enough that I laugh.

“Well, you must work hard to be that hungry.” I hook a thumb over my shoulder, indicating the three massive totes of food we put into the trunk.

“Most of it isn’t for us.”

I want to ask who it’s for, but am distracted by the *us*. “You didn’t have to buy me food.”

“I’m hardly going to get some for me and not you.”

“You could.”

“But I wouldn’t,” he replies, voice tight. Settling back in my seat, I let it go. Quietly, I watch out the window as the view bleeds from city back to rural, trees multiplying as buildings become more scarce. I’m happy to see

the Welcome to Siren's Point sign as we pass it, and once more curious as to whom the mysterious recipient of the food is.

"Whose house is this?" I ask Dryden when he's parking in front of a beautiful navy-blue colonial.

"Come along," he says, ignoring my question as he gets out of the car.

"Awesome, so now I really am a dog," I mutter to myself, opening my door and looking up at the house as I climb out. Deciding he can carry everything himself, I wait until we're walking up to the front door to add, "By the way, this is what houses are actually meant to look like."

"My house is modern." He lifts a hand and knocks.

"Modernly hideous," I murmur, just loud enough for him to hear me. I catch the curve of a smile trying to force itself onto his mouth just before the door opens.

A pretty man stands in the doorway, blond hair mussed and blue-green eyes slightly shadowed with sleep. He looks a little ill and more than a little surprised to see Dryden. Apparently noticing the same thing, Dryden sighs like a man born to suffer and says, "I told you I was coming, Oliver."

Shuffling back so we can step inside, the man—Oliver—smiles.

"Well, yeah, but I didn't think you were actually serious," he says, eyes finding me and smile widening. "You're Spencer Davis."

"Oh, hell, not another one," Dryden says. Oliver laughs, reaching out a hand to shake mine. I've never shaken so many hands in my life as I have during my short time in Siren's Point.

"Come in, have a seat. What have you got there, Dryden? You didn't really bring food, did you?" Closing the door and wrapping an arm protectively across the front of his stomach, Oliver doesn't wait for an answer before continuing. "Nils is out back, checking on the chickens. One of the heaters is a bit spotty, and it's been so cold. Have a seat. Do you want anything to drink? Eat? I love watching your videos, by the way."

This last is directed at me, and unlike it usually does, the compliment doesn't make me feel embarrassed. Sincerity drips from his voice, and his eyes are kind when they hold mine.

"Thanks. I appreciate that." And I do. If this man has viewed any of my videos, then he is directly responsible for putting food in my stomach.

"Oliver, sit down," Dryden instructs testily. "Where is the kitchen?"

"It's through there, but I can—"

“Sit down,” Dryden repeats, putting a hard stop between the command. Sighing, Oliver complies, shuffling slowly over to the couch and lowering himself down carefully. I remain by the door, more sure than ever that he’s ill. I’m also wondering how common the name Oliver is and whether this is the same Oliver Martin that Amy Libby mentioned might need help with yard work.

“You wouldn’t happen to be Oliver Martin, would you?” I ask him.

“That’s me,” he agrees, frowning when he sees me standing on the rug directly inside the door. “Come in, have a seat. Do you want anything to drink? I’ll grab you something. Water?”

“I’m fine,” I reply swiftly, wiping my shoes again before moving to sit in the nearest chair. “Amy Libby gave me your name and mentioned that you might need help with landscaping.”

“Did she? That was nice of her.” He relaxes back against the couch, eyes closing slowly before opening once more like he’s struggling to stay awake. “She’s right, I do need help. A problem for summer, though, I think. You’ll still be here?”

“Maybe,” I murmur, not willing to commit to a timeline and trying not to acknowledge the niggles of fear when I consider it.

“Well, you’re hired, if and when the time comes,” he says, tilting his head back to watch as Dryden walks around the edge of the couch, plate in hand. “Wow. Thank you. You don’t have to serve me. I can get it myself.”

Silently, Dryden stands and waits until Oliver takes the plate carefully from him. I try to peek at the food piled on top, eager to see what it might be, but it just looks like normal food to me. Settling into the other chair, across from mine, Dryden crosses an ankle over one knee and rests his hands on his stomach. He raises an eyebrow at Oliver, who takes a small bite and chews like it’s the hardest thing he’s ever had to make himself do.

“Comfy,” I note, patting the arm of the chair I’m sitting in, unable to help but needle Dryden a little bit. Every time I sit and watch a hockey game with him, I leave with an ache in my lower back.

“This is Nils’ house,” Oliver chimes in, lowering his food to his lap and smiling at me. “Nils Lee. He’s the one who decorated. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Mm-hm,” I agree, pressing my mouth closed when I catch the expression on Dryden’s face.

“I live next door,” Oliver continues, putting another minuscule bite into his mouth and swallowing. “In a fixer-upper. A bit of a mess, but it’s getting

there. Honestly, I'm having fun renovating, so it doesn't really bother me. I tell you what, I'm definitely getting one of these when the time comes."

He pats a hand on the couch cushion under his leg. I nod.

"Don't get one like Dryden's," I caution. "They went the pain-and-torture route instead of comfort when they made it."

Oliver laughs, short and quick, but stops with a wince and a hand pressed to his belly. Dryden, sharp eyes on his friend, clears his throat.

"Eat, Oliver," he instructs.

"I don't think I can finish all this," Oliver replies morosely.

"Really? How rude. And after I drove all the way to get it for you."

Oliver opens his mouth, closes it, opens it once more, and puts a bite of food in. Dryden smirks and looks pleased with himself.

We don't stay long, as it's clear Dryden is tired of socialization, and Oliver is just tired in general. I meet Nils Lee, the owner of the beautiful house, who says nothing except a quiet thank-you to Dryden for the food. After that, Dryden says we're leaving, and Oliver tells him we can stay longer if we'd like. When it becomes clear that Dryden has no intention of doing anything except walking out the door, Oliver tries to push slowly to his feet.

"I know where the front door is, Oli. I can see myself out," Dryden tells him, exasperated.

And, indeed, we have no trouble finding our way, with Oliver saying one last thank-you for dinner and Nils following us to the door to lock it behind us. Outside, I tug my beanie back on and eye my companion, walking swiftly to the Porsche like he's fleeing a crime scene.

"Your friend is nice," I tell him when we're seated inside.

"He's an acquaintance, not a friend."

"Right," I agree in a tone that makes it clear I know he's talking bullshit. He slants a look at me out of the corner of his eye, driving slowly down the gravel drive. "He's the guy who got hurt when your boat malfunctioned, isn't he?"

I'd guessed it inside, watching Oliver with the practice of a person well used to paying attention to everything around them. He'd looked sick, but he'd moved and reacted like a person guarding an injury. And Dryden, though he'd done a good job of smirking and looking disdainful the entire time, hadn't quite managed to completely cover up the concern and guilt in his eyes.

“Yes,” he agrees and then follows up with a silence long enough for me to think that’s the end of the conversation. After a moment, he adds, “He’s a sternman on Shiloh Lepage’s crew. A man I used to date.”

Butterflies erupt in my stomach. It’s a feeling so close to nerves that it takes me a second to distinguish it for what it really is. Yearning.

Shifting in my seat, I frown, turning my face away under the pretense of looking out the window. It’s dangerous to want Dryden. To want anything from him, but to want a relationship most of all. The disparities between us are glaringly stark, and class differences can’t be bridged as easily as people think. Already, I’m at a severe power disadvantage, living on his property for free, eating the food he gifts me, and accepting the rides into town. I don’t think there is a single thing in this world that would enable me to rise to his level and make us equals, nothing at all that I bring to the table. As far as Dryden is concerned, I’m a parasite. A leech, sucking up money and time and resources, and giving him nothing in return.

“Well...he was really nice,” I repeat, too stuck in my own head to think of anything else to say. Feeling unduly sweaty, I reach for my half of the controls at the same time Dryden does. His fingers brush against mine, and the fluttering in my stomach increases, making me feel sick.

“Sorry,” Dryden says immediately, withdrawing to his side of the car. I shift my shoulders, wishing I could wipe away the sweat suddenly dotting my skin.

“You don’t have to—you can touch me, it’s fine. You don’t have to apologize.”

He thinks about this for a second, staring out the windshield. I pull off my beanie, tucking it into my pocket with the gloves, and once more reach for the heating to turn mine down.

“That’s not what you said before,” he comments.

“Right, because I didn’t know you, and I didn’t want to get raped or solicited,” I reply. Dryden glances over at me, dark eyes unreadable. I suppose the upper class probably considers it rude to talk about sexual assault in anything above a whisper.

I’ve always considered myself to be a good barometer of emotions. Gut instincts are, many times, the only thing I have to rely on. I trust that feeling that tells me Dryden won’t test any of the boundaries I erect. He hasn’t given me a reason to run, and every instinct is telling me it’s safe to stay.

The weight of the air between us remains heavy as we drive back to Dryden's house. He doesn't speak again until the car is in park, engine off and more weight added to the silence between us. There is no way I'm the only one who can feel this. No way in hell.

"Would you like to come in? Or we can split the food. Whichever you prefer," he offers.

"Together," I tell him, opening my door and getting out. The cold air feels heavenly on my face. I can't wait to get inside and take this coat off.

In the house, Dryden spreads containers across his kitchen island, tossing the empty bags to the floor like he's going to deal with them later. I leave my jacket draped over the back of the couch and slide onto a barstool, chin propped in my hand as I watch him uncover everything. I'm surprised when he doesn't hand me a plate, just a fork. Perhaps seeing that on my face, he pauses.

"Spoon?" he asks as though questioning whether the disbelief is stemming from his choice of tableware.

"Fork is fine," I murmur. "Thank you."

Instead of taking a seat next to me, he leans a hip against the island opposite and dips his fork into one of the pasta dishes, swirling the noodles around the tines. I watch, still unable to believe that Dryden Roy is the kind of man to eat a shared potluck with anyone, let alone me, a person who had, up until my arrival in Siren's Point, only brushed their teeth three times a week.

"What do you think?" Dryden asks after I finally take a bite of something. He watches while I chew, somehow managing to smirk at me around his own fork. "Taste like a sixty-dollar entrée?"

"Please don't tell me that. It'll give me a stomachache."

He chuckles softly, and then, as though unable to help himself, adds, "The cheapest one, too."

Groaning, I stab my fork into something that looks like a spring roll and bring it to my mouth, biting off the end. Everything is a little chilled, and, again, I'm surprised that Dryden didn't feel the need to warm anything up in the oven. This is pretty close to eating cold leftovers, and I wouldn't have pegged him as the type of person to put that sort of thing in his mouth.

"It is good," I admit about the food. Not sixty-dollars-for-a-single-plate good, but, then, I'm not the person this sort of thing is catered toward

anyway. “Is this Oliver’s favorite restaurant? Is that why we went so far to get it?”

“No. He’s a chef by training and hobby, though. If anyone can appreciate good food, it’s Oliver.”

“Not friends, though, huh?” I tease, needling him a little bit. I don’t know why he feels the need to provide a degree of separation from everyone. He did the same thing with Cody, pretending as though they were merely in a business relationship and that he doesn’t like the man. I don’t care what he says, though; nobody—and I mean *nobody*—would drive forty minutes to pick up hundreds of dollars’ worth of food for anyone less than a friend.

“Cute guy,” I add recklessly.

“Not my type.”

“I don’t know, he seemed pretty clean.”

Humor flashes across Dryden’s face, there one moment and gone the next, both of us remembering what he’d told me when we first met. It melts away into something else as his dark eyes drop away from mine and flit across my face like he’s memorizing my bone structure. The butterfly wings that had gone dormant flutter back to life, and this time, I know I’m not the only one who can feel it.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” he says quietly, lowering his fork to one of the trays and resting it against the edge.

“You’re the one who invited me in,” I reply, voice equally low.

I should not keep pressing. I should eat my dinner and go back to my cottage to edit, check on the video I posted and see how many more views have accumulated. I shouldn’t be engaging in this way with the person who, in many ways, currently holds my life in their hands. Heat can be smothered just as easily as it can be fed.

“Yes,” he agrees, “and you’ll be the one to go.”

I pause, not wanting to lose my footing on the fine edge we’re walking. I so rarely get to want things. I take the bare minimum and am grateful for it—never asking or wishing for more. Intimacy has always fallen into the *more* category of things I can’t have. Food, water, shelter, and, on the rare occasions I can get it, safety—those are all needs. Anything beyond that is asking for too much. But sometimes I want to be on the receiving end of longing and not revulsion. Sometimes, I’d like to allow myself the opportunity to be a little selfish.

“Yeah. But not yet.” There’s no sense in lying. I *will* leave. We both know it. But not today, and very likely not tomorrow either. Not next week, and maybe not even next month.

“No, not yet,” Dryden agrees softly, picking up his fork and putting a bite of cold pasta into his mouth. I watch him chew, tracing the lines of his jaw with my eyes, down his throat and over his chest. Possibilities crowd my mind as I look—a whole world of things I could do to him if he’d let me.

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Chapter Fourteen

DRYDEN

Now falls thickly from the sky, gathering at the edges of the windows and covering the pool. I can only barely see Spencer's cottage in the distance, the gray exterior fading into the white winter morning. A sharp flare of annoyance stabs at the back of my skull, and I roll my neck, trying to relax the muscles. Another day we can't haul. I never should have left traps in the water through the winter.

Sighing, I rub a finger over my eyebrow and turn away from the window, texting Cody as I walk back to the kitchen to brew some coffee. I need something stronger than tea this morning.

As I fiddle with the machine, my phone buzzes. I ignore it, having already said to Cody what he needed to know. If I reply to him, he will continue to respond back, texting with me all day like I'm his significant other. It's exhausting. Yawning and considering the merits of crawling back into bed, I cup my hands behind my neck and drop my head back. I need to schedule a massage.

Grabbing my phone to do just that, I pause. There is indeed a reply from Cody, but there is also a message from Spencer. Clicking the notification, I lean back against the counter and cross my socked feet.

SPENCER

Rudy is closing the clinic today. Emergencies only.

DRYDEN

Good. The roads will be icy.

SPENCER

Staying in?

DRYDEN

Yes.

SPENCER

Want company?

I type out another yes, but pause. Deleting it, I write no and hover my finger over the arrow to send it, pausing once more. Putting my phone down, I distract myself with the espresso machine. It's infuriating to feel this incessant pull toward Spencer. It's like I'm waging a constant tug-of-war with myself, half of me wanting to get closer to him and the other half aware of how dangerous that would be. All of me wants him. Reaching for my phone, I type out a quick yes and lock the screen. Fuck it.

Coffee in hand, I pad over to the back door and unlock it. I have a momentary thought for the amount of snow Spencer will have to wade through and wonder if I should call the removal company to see if they can come a little earlier and clear a few paths through the yard. It's too late to worry about it now, as I see movement near the cottage and watch the shape of Spencer coming into view. He trudges in my direction, shoulders hunched and face angled downward, away from the wind. He slips twice, righting himself easily, but slowing down as he skirts around the pool and approaches the back door. I slide it open, watching as he fruitlessly tries to kick the snow off the soles of his boots.

"Fancy a swim?" I ask him. He looks up at me through his lashes, bending down to untie his boots and leave them at the door.

"Or we could build a snow fort," he replies. I stare down at the top of his head, unable to remember a time anyone has suggested that to me. Straightening, he tugs off his beanie and looks me up and down, grinning. "Or not, since you're still in your pajamas."

"It's early," I remind him, deciding to ignore the fact that it's hours later than the time I'd already be at work, usually, on a morning I was hauling.

"I can help you shovel, if you want," he tells me, shrugging off his coat and leaving it draped over the back of the couch like he usually does.

"No need. I hire a snow removal company."

He laughs, tipping his head back and smiling up at the ceiling. I stare at the curve of his throat and the slope of his jaw. He must shave every day. I haven't seen him with facial hair since he got rid of the beard.

“Of course you do.” It’s not derogatory, and in fact, he sounds happy at the realization, like I’ve done the exact thing he expected of me. I shrug, unconcerned. I don’t like shoveling snow. I can afford to pay someone to do it, so why wouldn’t I?

“Coffee?” I offer, waving him toward the kitchen. I’m curious as to what he thinks we’ll be doing during this visit. It’s the earliest he’s ever come over to my half of the property. Usually, in the evenings, we’ll sit together during his swimming sessions. Occasionally, he’ll join me for a hockey game. Other than that, the only time we see one another before noon is when I’m able to give him a ride to work.

“Thanks.”

Leaning against the counter, I sip my own while I watch him at the machine. He goes through the steps smoothly, familiar after I showed him how to use it. Unlike me, he’s dressed for the day and not leisure—jeans and a sweater that I’ve seen him wear four days this week. I’m fairly certain he has a revolving door of two outfits, plus the medical scrubs Rudy gave him for work at the veterinary clinic. Part of me wants to buy him more—and, it has to be said, better-quality—items, but most of me understands this would be crossing a line. I haven’t yet forgotten the way he’d made a point to let me know he doesn’t deal in favors. If I’m not careful, things I mean as gifts may very well come across as trying to buy him.

Leaving him to grab the milk from the fridge, I take a seat on the couch and sigh. I’m really starting to hate this thing. Briefly, I wonder what would happen if I retreated back to my bedroom, whether Spencer would follow and join me.

“What’re you thinking about?”

I glance up, shifting my legs as Spencer walks in front of me and takes a seat one cushion over from mine. I stare at the middle distance, momentarily distracted. He’s never sat so close to me outside of the Porsche before.

“Mm?”

“Your face. You looked mad. What’re you thinking about? Work?” He lifts his mug to his face, inhaling.

“Bed.” At his blank stare, I clarify. “I was thinking about going back to bed.”

“It’s almost seven in the morning.”

“And so?”

He contemplates me, and I have no compunctions about staring right back. I really do admire the color of his eyes. His face is too sharp to be boyish, features a little too mismatched to be considered beautiful. But those eyes. Framed by thick, dark lashes, he's got the loveliest caramel-brown eyes I've ever seen.

"Still thinking about bed?" he murmurs, lowering the mug and turning sideways on the couch to face me, one shoulder pressed against the back. I raise my eyebrows at the come-on. I hadn't been, but now I am.

"Thinking of joining me?" I ask, letting the offer settle on that couch cushion between us. He can do what he wants with it.

Spencer takes a breath deep enough that I can see the rise and fall of his chest, the clavicle peeking out the stretched collar of his sweater. He's a rather thoughtful individual, prone to thinking things through before speaking, and I find myself unable to help but compare him to Shiloh. I'd wanted someone as unlike Dylan as I could possibly find after we'd separated. Dylan who was loud and boisterous and the recipient of every spotlight. There hadn't been much that attracted me to Shiloh physically the first time I saw him, too used to desiring gym-toned bodies and meticulously groomed faces. But it had happened, eventually. More than the physical, though, it was his personality I liked. Quiet where I'd been used to loud. Thoughtful where I'd always dealt with selfish. Kind, even when I didn't deserve it or do anything to earn it.

I should have left Shiloh alone, should have kept our relationship professional. I shouldn't have soothed my broken edges with his and taken things I didn't deserve or often appreciate. But, as I learned and was constantly reminded of during my divorce, I am nothing if not self-serving. I felt safe in the understanding that Shiloh would probably never love me and already knew the same thing about myself. That was the other thing I learned in my divorce—that what I thought was love for my husband might not have been love at all, and that maybe I wasn't even capable of it.

Looking at Spencer now, I wonder if this will turn out to be more or less of a mistake than my previous relationships. Perhaps it will work out perfectly. We can enjoy each other's company, and when we're both through, he can walk away, and I can go back to how my life was before. I won't run the risk of hurting my presence in Siren's Point the way I did dating Shiloh. Spencer will be gone, I'll remain, and everything will be

fine. And, unlike with Shiloh, physical attraction will apparently not be a problem.

“Yeah,” Spencer says, and I’m impressed he’s admitting it at all. “But I recognize that this is a bit of a strange situation, and you might not be comfortable.”

I raise an eyebrow, taking a sip of coffee. Me being the one uncomfortable?

“How so?” I ask.

“Well...because I’m homeless, I guess. There’s not exactly a line of people slobbering for the opportunity to be with me.”

“I’ll take you to the vet for a checkup. Get all those vaccinations up to date.”

Spencer makes a choking noise, coughing slightly. I probably should have waited for when he wasn’t taking a drink.

“More stray dog jokes?” he asks. “Really?”

“If the collar fits.”

Sighing, he shakes his head and holds his mug out to me. I stare at it. He widens his eyes, waiting for me to take it from him. When I do, he fishes his cell phone out of his pocket and taps away at it.

“Here.” Taking back his coffee, he replaces the mug in my hand with his phone. I glance at the screen as he explains. “Lab results. I don’t want hepatitis or anything else any more than I want to pass it around.”

I look at the lab information at the top of the screen, noting the date and location.

“Community centers will occasionally partner with healthcare providers to offer low-income or free services,” Spencer explains unnecessarily. “That’s my most recent. But nobody has, nor will, come in contact with my bodily fluids, so the possibility of me passing anything along is pretty slim. Also, I’m on PrEP.”

I glance up at him over the phone. Perhaps I’ve misunderstood the flirtations. I had thought we *were* discussing the exchange of bodily fluids. Handing his phone back, I stand and retreat to the kitchen to fetch my own. In the spirit of sharing, I bring up my testing and pass it over.

“Thirty-five years old,” he notes.

“Impressive mathematics,” I deadpan, making him snort.

“Yours are more recent than mine.” He hands my phone back, and I toss it down onto the glass coffee table.

“I do it after every time I sleep with someone.” I pause, thinking about the two years I spent with Shiloh and the number of times I visited the clinic. “And I, too, am on PrEP.”

Spencer looks at me, quietly contemplating the insinuation behind that statement and utilizing those math skills to figure out exactly when the last time I had sex was.

“Thanks for showing me,” he says. I shrug, drinking the last of my coffee and looking across the room toward the kitchen, wishing for more but unwilling to get up and fix it myself.

“In my divorce, I got the boat and gonorrhea. I’m eager not to relive the experience.”

“Sounds like there’s a story there.”

“Another time.” Deciding I want the coffee more than I want to be lazy, I rise and turn my back to him.

I’d really rather not talk about Dylan. There’s something incredibly humiliating in how our marriage unraveled and what was revealed when light was shined into our dark corners. It’s a series of events I prefer to keep to myself. In fact, I never even told Shiloh I was ever married. Why I’ve done so just now with Spencer is anybody’s guess, and I frown down at the espresso machine as I contemplate it. I’m a little too comfortable with him. A little too eager to fall into the liquid brown of his eyes and drown.

Coffee made, I rejoin Spencer on the couch, unable to help but notice that the cushion between us is now half of one. Adjusting the fabric of my sweatpants, I bring a leg up onto the couch and remove that final sliver. We’re mirror images now, facing one another. Spencer, elbow on the back of the couch, has a cheek resting on his fist and his mug in the other hand.

“Explain what you meant about bodily fluids,” I request, earning a wide smile, complete with chipped tooth.

“You said that with a straight face,” he muses wonderingly.

“I’m thirty-five years old, as you pointed out. I’m far beyond the age where talking about sex is embarrassing.”

“Well, I meant exactly what I said. I don’t ever...share my bodily fluids.” Spencer scrunches up his nose a bit, as though not liking how that sentence came out. Neither do I, to be honest. I still don’t understand.

“So you wear a condom,” I fill in, unsure why he didn’t just say that to begin with.

“No, I mean... I never know the right way to explain this. And, honestly, I rarely have to.” He trails off, nose still wrinkled as he scowls. I refuse to acknowledge how cute an expression it is. “I don’t like sex being done to me, so I don’t...participate in that way.”

I frown. *Done to me* is a telling turn of phrase. My ex-husband, who seems to be looming over my shoulder more than usual today, loved sex being done to him. That was my role—the giver—and he the taker. I hadn’t particularly liked always being the top, but Dylan had never asked, and I’d never considered that I could say no. Shiloh and I had more of a vers relationship in the bedroom, which I had found more comfortable. Something tells me Spencer isn’t meaning quite that, though. I wait.

He sighs, taking a sip of coffee and puffing out his cheeks. “Sex is meant to be equal, right?”

“Sure,” I agree. Nothing is ever equal.

“I like to be the one performing—doing things to someone else. But I don’t want anything done to me. Ever.” He stares hard into my eyes after this pronouncement, as though waiting for me to put a hand to my chest and gasp in shock. I am a little bit surprised, but I’m also thinking of his earlier entreaty not to touch him.

“You don’t want anyone touching you,” I fill in, making him sigh again.

“No, it’s not that.” Sitting up, he reaches a hand toward me, wrapping his fingers around my wrist. I flip my hand, my own fingers resting gently against the underside of his arm. I wait for the discomfort to come—I hate holding hands—but it doesn’t. Carefully, I brush my fingers along the soft skin of his arm.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had this much discussion before sleeping with someone,” I comment. He huffs, rolling his eyes like I’m joking, even though it’s the truth. Sex, in my experience, is something that happens and I go along with. I like it sometimes, and I certainly seek it out when I want it. But I don’t make a production of asking for things I want, nor, I realize now, have I ever asked a partner what they might want. Maybe that’s why I find myself so fucking unsatisfied all the time.

“It’s kind of a requirement for me, since I think I’m on the asexual spectrum,” he admits. “But I don’t know, even when I do discuss my limits, I feel like I do a poor job of explaining. I don’t mind you touching me, I really don’t, as long as it’s not sexual. I just can’t have your mouth or your

hand or anything else on my dick. I don't want you to blow me or give me a handy or go anywhere near my ass. None of it."

He lets go of my arm and puts both hands on his mug, bringing it to his mouth and drinking the last of his coffee. I watch him. Even I—selfish and narcissistic, according to my ex-husband—can pick out a few issues with this scenario. One party doing all the work and getting nothing in return doesn't sound like it would end up being enjoyable for anyone. Sure, I've had sex I wouldn't rave about and some I felt forced into, but at least both people involved came by the end of it.

"Sorry." Spencer's lashes obscure his eyes as he looks down at his hands.

"Don't apologize unless you have something to be sorry about."

"Do you get what I'm saying?" He raises his eyes to mine, wide and intent and beseeching. He badly wants me to understand.

"The parameters? Yes. The execution? Unsure."

"Only way to know is to find out," he says carefully, voice just unsure enough to show his discomfort. Reaching forward, I cup a palm under his chin and tilt his face up, looking for a clearer view of those eyes.

"You can tell me what to do. I don't mind being bossed around—thinking can be exhausting sometimes."

The corner of his mouth tilts into a half smile, and he leans into my hand, chin pressing harder into my palm. I like how it feels, so I pull away, unable to help but swipe a thumb across his cheek as I go.

"Excellent. Then it's time to get up," he tells me, standing and stepping around my foot to bring his mug to the kitchen. "Go put on something warm. We're going outside."

I don't often get taken by surprise, but that does it. Looking out the wall of glass toward the backyard, I frown.

"It's snowing," I remind him, staring at what has already accumulated on the ground. Nearly a foot already would be my guess.

Walking over to his coat, he shrugs it back on. I watch him pull the beanie over his hair, tugging it down to cover his ears before zipping the jacket shut. He raises his eyebrows.

"Thought you wanted to be told what to do," he says, sliding on his gloves. I drum my fingers on the back of the couch. Spencer hovers by the back door, smirking at me, a challenge in his eyes.

“Fine.” Rising, I discard my mug on the coffee table and walk around the back of the couch, heading toward the staircase that leads upstairs to my bedroom. “But I’m not shoveling snow, no matter how nicely you ask me.”

His laugh echoes in my ears as I go upstairs to change, slipping out of my sweats and leaving them on the bed for later. I have every intention of coming back and lying around after whatever it is Spencer thinks he can coerce me into doing. I’ll finish reading the book I’ve been working through and find something to put on the TV. Perhaps I’ll just lie in bed thinking dangerous thoughts of brown-eyed men.

“Absolutely not,” I tell one such man and the current bane of my existence, standing outside the back door and scowling at him.

“It’ll be fun,” Spencer tells me, crouched down in the yard and running his gloved hands through the snow.

“No. It will be cold and wet,” I correct. “And a waste of time. The snow will melt eventually.”

Spencer laughs, standing up and forming the snow in his hands into a hard-packed ball. If he throws that at me, I’m going to drown him in the pool.

“The point isn’t to have it forever. The point is to experience the joy *now*. Come on, come help me.”

Exhaling hard enough for the cold to fog in front of my nose, I fidget with the cuffs of my gloves and wade through the snow to join him. Fat flakes float lazily from the sky, making soft pattering noises when they hit our jackets. I stop when I’m near enough to see them clinging to Spencer’s eyelashes.

“Here. You take this one.” He puts the snowball in my hands, ignoring the way I’m glaring at him. “I’ll start another one.”

“This is going to be a tiny snowman,” I point out. Spencer laughs.

“That’s just the start of it. You have to roll it around and gather more snow. Haven’t you done this before?”

“No.”

“Watch closely to see the magic happen.” He laughs when I sigh again, squatting down and rolling his ball of snow through the yard. He looks ridiculous and uncomfortable, shuffling after it with his knees splayed wide. Deciding that maybe the quickest way to get this over with is to accept my fate, I kneel down and copy him.

Spencer, just a few feet in front of me, eventually stands up and starts rolling his snowball by bending at the waist instead of squatting. I curse my longer legs, unable to do the same thing without giving myself a slipped disc. Every now and then, he glances over his shoulder and grins at me, cheeks pink and eyes bright against his pale face. I've been smoothing my snowball out with my hands as I go and am pleased to see mine looks better than his.

"Lumpy," I note later, standing with hands on my hips and looking down at Spencer's giant snowball.

"Mine will be the base since yours is prettier. Let's make it a little bigger. This snow is *perfect*."

Together, we continue pushing his ball across the yard, a divot trailing behind us in the snow and our footprints parallel alongside. Eventually, Spencer starts pushing us into a curve, trying to head back the way we came.

"Let's put the base closer to the pool so we can see it from the windows," he instructs. I grunt, shaking the snow off my wet gloves and continuing to push the snowball. It's as tall as my knees now. When we get it situated in a spot that makes Spencer happy, he beckons me over to the one I made. "Careful, we don't want to break it. This one goes on top of the big one."

"I know what shape snowmen are, Spencer."

Snorting, he squats down and waits for me to grab the other side. He smiles at me over the top of the snowball, beanie almost entirely white with snow sticking to it.

"Shouldn't you be filming this?" I ask as we shuffle across the yard, snowball surprisingly heavy. He shakes his head.

"No, this is just for us." I look up from where I was gauging our distance from the base snowball, meeting his eyes. He smiles again, and this time, I return it.

We get the middle section balanced on top, Spencer scooping a bit of the snow off the ground and smoothing it around where the two pieces meet like he's trying to cement it into place. That done, he stands up, shoulder pressed against mine as we admire our two-thirds of a snowman.

"Time for the head?" I prompt, thinking it might be best if I make it. Spencer doesn't seem to know how to make the snowballs smooth.

"Yeah," he agrees, striding off to a fresh patch of untouched snow.

We kneel down and form the head together, not rolling it around quite as long. I carry it myself this time, and hold it in place on top of the body as Spencer smooths a bit of snow around the neck.

“Okay, you can let go,” he tells me. We stand back at the same time, appreciating our handiwork. Nothing falls off or collapses. Wiping a glove under my nose, runny in the cold, I think about the next logical step in this process.

“We need sticks, correct?” I ask, picturing all the snowmen I’ve seen in Siren’s Point. Ours looks better than the kids’, it has to be said. Also, much bigger. This thing is as tall as Spencer.

“Yeah, for the arms. Let’s go find some.”

We trudge off in the direction of his cottage, heading around the back toward the woods. I dig up sticks poking through the snow on the ground, but each time, Spencer shakes his head. He walks around, looking seriously at all the trees as though he’s picking out an engagement ring and not snowman limbs. Sighing, I follow after and dutifully break off a branch when he chooses one.

“Be careful when you put the arms in. We don’t want the middle to crumble,” he warns me, both of us pushing a stick into place on either side of the body.

“I’m an engineer, Spencer,” I remind him, making him grin.

“You’ve got coal, right? Since you probably got some in your stocking from Santa?” he asks casually, once the arms are in place, smirking cheekily when I look at him.

“I don’t have any coal,” I correct. “I do have a carrot, though.”

He smiles widely, brushing his palms together, snow falling off his gloves in puffs of white. We go inside, shedding our boots and winter clothes in a careless heap by the back door. Standing in the kitchen, I pull the carrots out that I bought with the intention of making stew at some point. Spencer chooses his favorite, tapping the end on his chin as we stand in front of the open refrigerator and contemplate the rest of the offerings.

“Black plums, perhaps?” I pull one out to show Spencer.

“That’s perfect. Oh, and the grapes!”

Purple grapes and a handful of plums in hand, we head back to our discarded and slightly scattered clothing. Dropping the fruit onto the couch, I reach for my jacket.

“Wait, we need clothes!” Snagging his coat, I hold it out to him, and he laughs. “No, not for us. For the snowman.”

And so we raid the hall closet, Spencer joking about my daring color palette and whether I was aware that other colors exist beyond neutrals.

“Is it sacrilege to use a Hermès scarf on a snowman?” he ponders, fingering one. I pull it from the hanger for him.

“No. Here.” I slide a tan-and-cream Burberry one off as well, draping it over his neck. He doesn’t have one. “Do we need anything else?”

“Hm.” He hums, glancing around the closet and idly stroking his fingers down the soft fabric of the scarf. I watch his face. It looks nice with his eyes. “Let’s see how this looks, and then we’ll decide.”

Leaving the closet open and in slight disarray, we redress by the back door. Snow has melted off our gear and puddled onto the floor, squeaking under our boots as we shift. Spencer slips a little bit, chuckling when I steady him with a hand on his elbow.

“Don’t forget the fruit,” he says, voice warm and eyes like melted chocolate as he looks up at me.

Spencer wraps the scarf around the snowman’s neck while I twist the plums into place down the center of its chest. He jokes that they’re crooked, but when I step back to check, they’re perfectly straight. We work together, poking the grapes into place, curving a smile underneath the carrot and above it, two little eyes. This time, they really are crooked, and I pull Spencer’s out to redo it, squinting at the face to make sure it’s straight. We retreat together, standing shoulder to shoulder and looking at our creation. It is, if I do say so myself, the best snowman I’ve ever seen.

“We need a hat,” Spencer muses.

“Hm. You’re right,” I agree, wondering how we could get a beanie to stay in place on it without flopping or falling off.

“I don’t suppose you have a fascinator, do you?” he asks, leaning his shoulder into me when I slant him an unamused look. I cast my eyes up at the sky, resigned.

“No. But I do have a bowler,” I admit.

Spencer, far more delighted by the prospect of a hat than he should be, follows me back inside the house. For the second time in so many minutes, we strip off our winter gear, and he trails me up the stairs to my bedroom. He laughs when I pull a hatbox down from the top shelf of my closet and pouts his lips a little bit when I refuse point-blank to try it on for him.

“Come on,” he cajoles, mouth pressing together, lips curling inward as I take it from his hands.

“No.”

“Fine.” He sighs, leaving the walk-in closet and gazing around the master bedroom on our way back out the door. He gets redressed and then holds the bowler for me while I do the same, the puddle of water spreading even further after two trips inside. I find I don’t care about the mess at all.

“Why do you even have this?” Spencer asks, spinning the hat in his hands and brushing snowflakes off the top as we stand in front of the snowman.

“Engagement party. It was a required part of the dress code.”

“Do you have photos?”

“Put it on the snowman, Spencer.”

With a little flourish, he props it on the snowman’s head, tilting it just slightly to the side so it sits at a jaunty angle. Sniffing, he rubs a gloved hand under his nose and steps back, brushing against me. Silently, we look at the snowman.

“Isn’t it supposed to come to life?” I deadpan. Spencer laughs like it was actually funny.

“Not a magic bowler, I guess. You’ll have to write it in your review so Lock and Co. Hatters know how they might improve.”

Spencer turns his face and looks at me, nose bright red and cheeks bitten by cold. There’s damp around his eyes where the temperature has made them water, and the melted snow is soaking through his beanie. He hadn’t taken the time to wrap the scarf properly when we last came out, too eager to finish the snowman. I do it now, bringing one end around and draping it over his shoulder.

“Think he’ll get lonely out here in the cold?” Spencer asks. I look at the snowman, grape mouth forever smiling, arms raised as though cheering.

“Yes, probably,” I agree.

And so, Spencer and I make another one.

Chapter Fifteen



SPENCER

My hands are red and frozen when I peel off my soaked gloves inside the door to the big house. Beside me, Dryden does the same, shedding his winter gear methodically. Untying his boots, he toes out of them and steps far enough away that he's safe from the puddles. We need a towel.

"Hey, Dry, do you have a vent?" I ask him. "For heat? Growing up, our house had some in the floor, and we'd prop our gloves on them to dry."

"No, but I could start a fire, and we can lay them on the brick." He gestures toward the electric fireplace, and I nod. That'll do.

Dryden takes the gloves and my hat, socked feet quiet on the floors. The fireplace clicks on, a small whoosh of air as the flames spring to life. Taking our coats, I leave him to put the gloves equidistance apart on the bricks and head toward the hall closet. Pushing everything else aside so nothing gets wet, I hang our coats on two open hangers. They'll probably drip a little bit, but it's the best way to get them dry.

"This okay?" I ask Dryden, pointing at where my coat is hanging next to his.

"Yes," he replies, barely glancing in my direction.

"We need a towel to clean up your floor. It's a slipping hazard." I gesture toward the pond of water currently blocking his back door.

"I'll get it. Make some tea."

He disappears, and I dutifully get the hot water boiling in the kitchen. Putting two mugs on the counter and dropping a peppermint tea bag in both, I turn and look out the wall of windows toward our snowmen. I made sure we decorated the sides that face in so Dryden can see the good side every

time he comes downstairs. Muffled footsteps approach, and I watch as he comes back into view, carrying a massive white towel. He drops it to the floor and steps on it, using his feet to move it around and soak up the water. I chew my lip, watching, unable to remember if I've ever seen him do anything quite as wholesome as that.

"You're wet," he notices, joining me in the kitchen, the towel abandoned by the back door.

"Little bit," I agree, shrugging and reaching for the kettle as it clicks off. It's warm in here—being damp won't hurt or even bother me all that much. Not the way it would if I was spending the day outside, curled under a bridge or in a doorway, huddled underneath an awning.

"I'll get you something," Dryden says, accepting the mug I pass him and opening a cupboard door. I peek around his shoulder, surprised to see the array of snacks. He pulls out a box of toaster pastries and strides off. "Come along."

Tea in hand, I trail him back to his bedroom for the second time today. He puts his own mug on top of a book resting on a nightstand, box of pastries next to it, and disappears into the massive closet. Taking the hint, I put my mug on the other nightstand and start looking for the switch to turn on the electric fire that's installed into the wall in here too. There's a panel thing that must have controls to everything electronic, and I have a few seconds of fun messing with the lights before I find the one for the fireplace. As it whooshes to life, Dryden returns with a neatly folded stack of lounge clothes. They're buttery soft when he hands them to me and, surprise-surprise, black.

"Bathroom is through there." He points toward an almost perfectly concealed handle in the far corner that I hadn't noticed before. I shake my head, unsure why anyone would feel the need to hide their own bathroom from themselves. "Or you can change in the closet."

There are sweats discarded on the end of the bed—the ones Dryden had been wearing earlier, I realize—and it's these he reaches for as I stand still in the center of the room. He's obviously changing out of his wet clothes, too, and intending to do it right here in the room. I give it a few moments of consideration, wondering if I'm feeling quite brave enough to give the same thing a try. I don't mind being naked in front of people, but for some reason, stripping down to my underwear in front of Dryden is making me pause. I'm not at my best right now—too skinny and pale and covered in scars.

Dryden practically glows with health, brown skin beautiful and unblemished, body strong. I retreat to the bathroom just as he grasps the hem of his sweater and pulls it over his head. I close the door on the abdominal muscles peeking into view.

The bathroom lights click on automatically when I close the door, warm and inviting like a spa. It even smells a little bit like a spa, thanks to the candle sitting on the vanity. Putting Dryden's clothes on the counter, I strip down and look at myself in the mirror, wondering if maybe this fancy mirror will show me a better version of myself than the one I'm used to. I can notice a difference in my cheeks already, all these days of three square meals adding up. I feel like I actually look closer to my age, for once, instead of ten years older the way I usually do.

"Oh boy," I mutter, stepping into Dryden's sweats and pulling them up to my waist, only to let go and watch them fall back to my knees. So much for feeling like my body has filled out a bit.

Pulling them back up, I cinch them as far as they'll go and tie the strings before rolling the waist a couple of times. Bending, I pull on the thick wool socks he gave me and cuff the bottoms of the pants as well, not wanting them to drag or catch under my feet. Dryden's definitely a lot taller than me, but I hadn't quite appreciated the difference until just now. I feel like I'm trying to fit into a giant's clothes.

The sweatshirt is just as big, but after rolling the sleeve cuffs back twice, it fits just fine. It also feels like a dream, like I'm wearing clothes made of the softest cumulus clouds. I rub my palms over my stomach a few times, watching the hand with the scar to make sure the rolled sleeve doesn't show too much of my forearm. I can handle seeing it now, but I don't like to. I wear long sleeves and shower that arm without looking at it, unwilling to spend any time staring unless absolutely necessary. It makes my stomach swoop with discomfort to touch it, and for months after it healed, I'd throw up every time I had to put lotion on it.

Shaking off the memories, I squirt a bit of the cream sitting on the vanity into my palm, rubbing it into my hands. I struggle with dry skin, unable to waste the space in my backpack carrying lotion and unwilling to spend money on it now that it's not required by a doctor. Gathering up my clothes, I open the door and step back into the bedroom.

Dryden is seated on the end of the bed, knees spread wide and socked feet pressed together between. He's fiddling with the television but looks

over when I walk out of the bathroom. My face flushes as he looks at me. I hadn't been feeling particularly sexy before, but the unchecked desire that overtakes the blank expression on his face makes me feel like I'm naked after all. Taking a deep breath to dispel the nerves, I remind myself I'm safe, and I want to be here. I can leave if I want.

"I can wash and dry those," he tells me, rising and holding out a hand, giving me something new and equally mortifying to feel embarrassed about. I don't think Dryden's pretty hands are meant to touch my ratty old socks, dirty and wet and probably a little sweaty. I want to say no, that I'll wash them later, using the machine in my cottage. Dryden, perhaps seeing some of this internal battle waged across my face, sighs. "It's fine, Spencer. Give them here."

He trades my clothes for the remote, telling me to find something to watch and leaving the room with a wave of his hand toward the bed. Watching him until he's gone down the stairs, I puff out my cheeks and crawl onto the mattress, situating some of the pillows behind my shoulders. In for a penny, as they say. Legs stretched in front of me, I cross my ankles and point the remote at the flat screen mounted on the wall above the fireplace.

I click idly through the channels before backtracking and settling on a house renovation show. Trading the remote for my tea, I settle back into the pillows and wait for Dryden. He doesn't take long, and I grin when I see he's got more snacks in his hands—a box of cheese crackers and a bag of flavored popcorn. He tosses them onto the bed and slides in on his side.

"What are we watching?" he asks, shifting around, arms stretched behind himself as he situates the pillows to his liking.

"Home reno. You need fresh ideas."

He gives me an unamused look, pulling the pastry box into his lap and digging for one. He chooses a strawberry before holding the box out to me. I grab blindly, uncaring what flavor I get. I'll eat absolutely anything.

"Thanks."

"That's fucking ugly," he comments, eyes on the television. I snort, carefully opening my pastry, cognizant of crumbs.

"Orange was an interesting choice," I agree, wondering if maybe the color just isn't coming through right on the screen. Nobody would want walls the color of traffic cones, surely.

Dryden finishes his toaster pastry and is onto his second before I've eaten half of mine. He leaves the box between us, along with the rest of the snacks. Like me, he's stretched out, ankles crossed, and his top foot swings calmly back and forth. A couple of times, I find myself distracted by that foot, having to swallow through a tight throat every time I see how he pulled his socks up over the bottom of his joggers.

We crack open the cheese crackers when the second episode starts, and our judgments of the houses and decorating choices become harsher. Dryden sends me into a fit of laughter so violent I introduce popcorn into my lungs when he says "I prefer my molding to be filigreed" in a tone so dry he sounds like he actually means it. I nod along when one homeowner vehemently extrapolates that they'd never live in a house without a pool.

"Me either," I agree stoutly. "Wouldn't even consider it."

Both of us groan in sync when the pool they end up building isn't heated and has built-in loungers at one end.

"What a mockery," Dryden comments.

"A complete waste of space! Now they can hardly swim."

We share a look over the empty box of cheese crackers. Dryden grabs a fourth toaster pastry, and I scoop up another bite of popcorn.

"You're pretty lazy, huh?" I comment, charmed by Dryden's choice of how to spend the remainder of the day. Even before I was living on the street, I never spent time lying around in bed like this. It feels dangerously extravagant.

"I am. I never tried it before I moved here, and now I'm too slothful to change."

Chuckling, I put another kernel of popcorn into my mouth. "I never would have guessed you've got a sweet tooth either."

"These aren't sweets," he protests, foot still gently swaying, body relaxed back against his pillows. "They're carbs and fruit."

"I don't think pastry filling counts as fruit."

"Corn is a vegetable."

Now I laugh, holding out the popcorn to him as he reaches for a handful. I scoop up another couple of pieces of popped vegetables, too, smiling as I chew. I've never been with Dryden and had him quite this relaxed. Even the evenings where he sat outside while I swam or I joined him for a hockey game, he didn't act like this. It's like a whole new persona

was unveiled when we came through the doorway, like he slipped off his mask and left it in the closet, giving the real Dryden a chance to breathe.

I feel...happy. Not happy in the way I'm used to, when I get a lot of views on my videos or I'm able to eat multiple days in a single week. But happy in a way that feels as soft and cozy as the sweats he loaned me, like I'm being cradled in someone's arms and know if I close my eyes, I'll be safe to sleep.

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"Did you have fun?" I ask Dryden softly, putting the popcorn off to the side and tucking my hands into the sleeves of my sweater.

"Mm?"

"Building the snowmen."

"Yes," he replies, so quickly that I know it must be the truth. I grin happily, staring sightlessly at the television. "Good thing I kept the bowler."

"Good thing," I agree, looking over at him at the same time he turns his head toward me.

He's lying nearly flat, the pillows scrunched up under his neck and shoulders, hoodie fabric rucked up enough to show me an inch of brown skin along his back. His hands are resting on his chest, half a toaster pastry sticking out of the foil packaging. He looks sleepy and open, like I could ask him anything at all right now and he'd tell me. Slowly, I reach my hand across the bit of mattress between us, only to snatch it back when I realize it's my scarred one. He won't want me to touch him with that. On the TV, a woman's laughter can be heard over the sound of an electric drill.

"Sun's already going down," Dryden notices, yawning slightly as he glances out the windows on the far wall. I check the time on my phone.

"Took us a bit to build the snowmen," I say fairly. Not to mention, after we crawled into this bed, we haven't once crawled out. At least five separate episodes have played while we've been watching, and nearly all the snacks have been consumed. I'm probably going to have a stomachache.

Scooting down so I'm less on the pillows, I roll to face him, propping my head up on my hand. I'm still a little afraid of him, I realize, although it's slowly bled into a different breed of monster. Gone is the thrumming awareness of how he could be dangerous, how the energy between us had been stretched taut with fear and mistrust. I'd looked at him and added up all the ways he could cause pain, and he'd looked at me and done precisely the same.

Now, the fear is less of the bodily harm kind and more of the emotional. I really like him. I like being here. A little too much, if I'm honest with myself, because I don't belong. I walked into his life, and both of us are well aware of the fact that I'll be the one walking out. My brain acknowledges that I should be more concerned with losing the comforts I've found here—shelter and food and a job I so far enjoy. But the rest of me is dreading the day I put my back to Siren's Point, tiny little fissures of pain already cracking the glaze around my heart. I'm going to miss Dryden, whether our relationship stays as it is or stretches a little further.

Carefully, I touch my fingertips to his arm, gently pressing against the firm mound of his bicep beneath the bulky hoodie. He's still watching me, as he usually does, with that firm eye contact I've grown accustomed to. Intimidating, sure, but also somehow reassuring. I've never felt like I've had to fight to have or hold his attention. It's there, and it's obvious.

"I have an uncle with a prosthetic leg," he tells me, seemingly out of nowhere. "The residual limb and the scarring doesn't bother me."

Ah. That's why.

"You only saw the scars from a distance. When I was in the pool. It's bad up close, and you can feel them if you touch my forearm. It makes people uncomfortable."

"It makes you uncomfortable," he comments, and I sigh, unable to deny it.

"Sometimes, especially if I'm in front of a mirror, I'll catch a glimpse of it and think, *whose arm is that? That's not my arm*. It doesn't happen as much recently, but sometimes I'll get phantom pain. The nerves grew back eventually, but for a long time, bits of my skin were just numb. And then other times, I'd wake up in the middle of the night feeling like someone had dipped my forearm in kerosene and struck a match. It's kind of wild, the things your brain can convince you are happening."

"Or not happening. That is your arm, after all."

I smile at him, a soft huff of laughter escaping. No punches pulled with Dryden.

“It is,” I agree, but still I keep the cuff of the sweater caught between my fingers so it doesn’t fall down my forearm. Free hand still on his arm, I slide my fingers down to his wrist, stopping just before I find skin. “Can I?”

“Yes,” he says, black eyes still on mine. I can feel the press of that gaze even as I break eye contact, watching my hand as I trace the bones of his fingers.

“What were you going to do today if we hadn’t made snowmen?” I ask, gently turning his hand over so I can touch his palm.

“Read. Maybe paint some buoys.” His voice is even, with barely a hitch in breathing as I stroke my knuckles down the outside of his leg. After a moment, he puts the last of his snack on the bedside table, foil packaging crinkling beneath the low murmur of the television.

“I can help you paint,” I offer, shifting a little closer on the bed so I don’t have to reach so far. He doesn’t answer—doesn’t move at all—as I wiggle my fingers beneath the hem of his hoodie.

His skin is soft, warm underneath my palm as I flatten my hand and spread my fingers. I rest there for a moment, enjoying the shallow rise and fall of his belly as he breathes.

“You can’t sleep here,” he tells me. I look up at his face.

“Okay.”

“I don’t do that,” Dryden continues, as though I’d argued.

“Okay,” I repeat, gently circling my thumb across the ridges in his abdomen. Later, I’ll tell him that I wouldn’t have slept here anyway, that I don’t do that either. Later, though. For now, I want to soak up the heat of his skin and the weight of his attention. I want to peel back the corner on another of his layers and peek at what’s underneath, smooth another coating of relaxation over his sharp edges.

He doesn’t move, and his hands remain limp on the bed. I slide closer still, easing the distance my shorter arms have to reach and giving myself a better view. Sliding my hand down, I tease the waist of his sweatpants and look at his face. His mouth is soft, lips parted just slightly, and there’s no telling the iris from his pupils. I don’t think he’s stopped watching me once.

The skin just below his waistband is even warmer than what was above. There are minute reactions as I touch—small flinches and caught breaths. Warmer, yes, and more sensitive. I tease my fingertips down the inside of

his thigh, smiling when he widens his legs an inch, the fabric of his sweatpants making a soft swishing noise against the bedspread.

Syrupy heat spreads through my body like honey. I can feel myself relax, muscles unlocking and a held breath finally released. The bedroom is balmy, Dryden's skin warm, and for a few heavenly minutes, I forget what it means to be cold.

He's aroused when I wrap my fingers around his dick, but not fully hard. I stroke gently, keeping my grip loose, the motion of my wrist hindered slightly by the band of his sweatpants. Letting him go, I dance my fingers lower and am rewarded with the softest of groans from Dryden. Another inch of space is given as he opens his legs.

This time, he's hard when I grip him, a little bit firmer, a little bit more purposeful. I can feel moisture when I circle my thumb over the head of his cock, pressing and teasing until I get another little hitch in his breathing. I stop watching the motion of my hand beneath his pants and turn to look at his face—the soft mouth and the beautiful eyes and the peace that has finally succeeded in pushing aside the guardedness.

He arches his back off the bed when he eventually comes, eyelashes fluttering down to obscure the black for just a moment, gasping softly. I try to look back at where my hand is still caught in his pants, his dick warm and pulsing against my palm, but his arm rises off the bed, and fingertips gently press against my chin, keeping my face tilted toward his.

We stay locked together, eyes held, both of us still. I can feel him softening in my hand, my fingers warm and sticky with cum, every inch of my body deliciously hot like I've been stretched out on the beach, being kissed by the sun. I want to stay here just a bit longer, basking in the intense bliss of giving someone else pleasure. I'm not ready to go back out into the cold just yet.

I let Dryden break the moment when he's ready, his fingertips leaving my jaw and falling back to the bed. Just as slowly, I pull my hand from his pants, trying to mitigate any mess. When I look away from him, he sighs.

"I think you might have the prettiest eyes I've ever seen," he says, voice even and low and slightly shocking in the words that he said. I smile at him, not making a big deal of the compliment, but carefully tucking it away inside where I can protect it from others. Nobody ever says things like that to me and means them.

“May I use your bathroom?” I ask him. I want to wash my hands. He nods, and I get up from the bed, legs heavy.

I’m pleasantly floaty as I wash up, uncaring about the scar on my hand as I twist my fingers together under the water. In the mirror, my cheeks are pink, and my eyes seem bigger, somehow. Brighter. Pretty, apparently, which burns with a pleasant ache in my chest. Dryden’s clothes don’t look too big on me, right now. They look just right.

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Chapter Sixteen



DRYDEN

Fear is such a strange emotion and one, like love, that I do not understand. There was no panic when the engine stalled and died on the *Maiden*, nor even dread. It wasn't fear I felt, but purpose. A problem had presented itself, and it was time to solve it.

Logically, I know that being scared serves a biological purpose. That fear often arrives before something is about to happen, tapping its knuckles on the window and whispering for you to pay attention. Perhaps I'm never afraid because I am always paying attention. Or perhaps you can only feel truly afraid when you have something to lose.

I wonder now if fear feels a little bit like being short of breath—fingers curled around your throat, not tightening just yet, but pressing hard enough to keep you aware. I wonder if it feels like the reckless abandon that follows someone down when they make a running leap from a cliff. Perhaps fear is nothing more than this—a lobster boat leaving dry land with Spencer Davis on board.

He's sitting inside the standing shelter, hands braced and a smile on his face as he jolts with the motion of the boat. He doesn't have sea legs. I don't think he even has lake legs. The *Maiden Seas* had been sitting calmly in her slip when we'd boarded, and he'd staggered like her nose was pointed into a hurricane. He's probably going to get sick today. He's going to regret ever coming along, and I'm surely going to regret bringing him. This is an insurance nightmare and very possibly a personal one. This is exactly why I've remained so adamant about keeping my crew small. I don't want to be responsible for people. I don't want to be emotionally

invested in the well-being of people. I want to take care of myself and only myself.

I look over at Spencer, who catches my eye and smiles. His little camera is clipped to the front of the coat I lent him and is probably getting a lot of footage that will make people seasick if they watch it. Partially seated, with one foot braced on the deck, he's pitching from side to side hard enough to make my neck hurt, watching it.

I hook the first buoy with the gaff, slipping the line into the hydraulic pot hauler and listening to the moan of the rope dragging through the machine.

"Welcome to lobstering one-oh-one," Cody yells, and I know without looking that Spencer has moved closer to watch.

I feel hyperaware of where every coil and line of rope is, the dangers of the pot hauler sitting heavy at the front of my mind. I know how cold the water is and exactly how long a person can be exposed to temperatures like that before there is no coming back.

The first trap comes up, and I pull it onto the rail. I flip open the door, and my eyes flick over the contents and judge them lacking even before my hands move to toss them all back. Too small. Sliding the trap down to Cody to replace the bait bag, I await the second trap on this line. I count to ten before I let myself look back and check on Spencer. He smiles again, hands holding on to the doorway of the standing shelter. Not green yet, thankfully, and still on his feet.

The bottom two traps on this line are fuller than the first three. Cody and I work in tandem, releasing most and putting the keepers in a bin to be banded. All emptied and lined up on the rail, Cody rocks the traps along their runners and sends them back into the sea with a splash as I steer us on to the next buoy marked on my GPS.

"Dryden and I eyeballed these as keepers," Cody tells Spencer, raising his voice to be heard over the wind and the engine. "But we'll measure them just to be sure."

I glance back, watching as Cody shows him how to use the tool.

"Keeper," Cody confirms. "So we band the claws and put him in the live well."

Spencer says something too quiet for me to hear, but it makes Cody laugh. I keep watch for the next buoy, neck prickling with awareness of

Spencer on the boat. I wish I'd made him wear a life vest. I don't care how good a swimmer he is.

"Why do you look under the tail?" he asks as Cody and I empty the next group of traps. Grabbing a cull from the cage, I step back to show him. Cody, grinning but thankfully silent, keeps working.

"It's illegal to keep a female carrying eggs. If we kept every lobster we pulled, the ocean would be overfished and the population devastated. Not keeping eggers or a catch outside of the size limitations allows for the ecosystem to thrive." Flipping the lobster over, I show Spencer the underside of the tail. "Females carry eggs along here. We notch their tails to let other fishermen know she's protected, and we toss her back."

"Not an egger, then," Spencer fills in, nodding down at the one in my hands.

"No. We call this a cull. Only one claw," I explain, pointing out the growth where a new one has already started to form. "It'll grow back as he molts."

Spencer grins and shakes his head like this is an unbelievable occurrence. "So...keep?"

I shake my head, grabbing the measuring tool to show him. As I suspected, too big.

"Lives to fight another day," I tell Spencer.

"And make more baby lobsters," he jokes along with me. I toss it back and push us onward to the next buoy.

I'd tried something new this year and left my traps out through the winter. Spencer had teased that I was lazy, and it's true. I love the offseason. I love the downtime awarded during the winter months and the freedom to service my traps and take care of my boat at the pace I choose. I enjoy sleeping in and eating an entire bag of chips in my bed while I watch a documentary on Chernobyl. I like pretending I don't also own a Land Rover and that the reason I have to stay home is because there is too much snow on the roads for my Porsche to handle. Winter allows me to be even more precise in how I spend my time and who I spend it with.

Why I ever thought lobstering the year round was a good idea, I will never know. I glance over at Spencer, once more seated inside the shelter, protected from the wind and icy sea spray, and wonder if perhaps this is simply my year for madness and rash decisions.

“Not a bad day, right, boss?” Cody asks, slapping a hand to my upper back as we work together, unloading the catch back at the wharf. To the side, Spencer is standing out of the way, filming us loading the conveyor belt. He’s steadier now, I notice, and, impressively, made it the entire day without emptying his stomach into the ocean.

“No,” I agree, thinking less about the price of lobster and more about the brown eyes that were incandescent with happiness all day. “Not bad at all.”

My hamstrings and upper back throb with a dull ache as we trudge toward our vehicles after we finish, but even so, I feel more secure than I had just a few days ago. The need to get back out there was coiled like a spring in my gut, tightly wound and growing by the day. The stress has unraveled a bit, now that most of the traps are hauled, and hopefully, by the end of tomorrow, it’ll be gone for good. This will be the last time I leave traps out all year.

“Swimming?” I ask Spencer once we’re in the car and heading home. He’s nearly bouncing in his seat, excitement rippling off him in waves.

“Maybe. I don’t know, though. I kind of just want to upload everything and start editing. I knew this would be great, but holy shit.” He shakes his head in wonder, taking the camera off his jacket and tucking it safely into the pocket of his borrowed coat. “I understand that lobster fishing is hard, the same way I understand performing surgery is hard. But now I feel like I *know*, if that makes sense.”

It’s just on the tip of my tongue, the offer to teach him and let him help. What better way to truly gain an understanding than by doing it yourself? But I bite the words back, unwilling to put him that close to the pot hauler, or the ropes, or the gunwale. I let him come along and watch from the safety of the standing shelter, and that will just have to be good enough for him.

“Hungry?” I ask, and he nods.

“Yeah. Starving, actually. Like I’m the one who did all the work.” He laughs, rubbing his hands together and reaching forward to turn the heat up a little bit.

Today was a blessedly calm day, and I almost hadn’t believed it when I woke up early to check the weather. Winds at five miles per hour, and not even a hint of a nor’easter on the horizon. Regardless of how little I’d wanted to leave the warmth of my bed or the coziness of my pajamas, the

ability to go haul had felt like a gift just then. Apparently, all it took was not being able to do so to make me realize I actually like this job. Difficult and dangerous and wearying as it is, at the end of the day, I feel far more accomplished than I ever did walking out of the office building.

I take Spencer to the Temptress to order carryout for dinner. Snacks and frozen meals I can handle, but anything more involved than throwing things in a pot or a blender in the kitchen leaves me irritable. I'd rather go hungry than have to cook. And although I'll die before I ever admit it to him, stopping at restaurants allows me to feed my stubborn boarder, who flat-out refuses to let me buy or gift him groceries.

Ryan, a fixture of the bar as sure as Shiloh is to the wharf, delivers our order to the kitchen before coming back for a chat. Despite the handful of times he and I have slept together, I don't know him very well and have no interest in learning more. Ryan, I know, feels the same about me, and so our arrangement was often a perfect and certainly convenient one. Now, he barely pays attention to me as we wait for our food, instead trying to chat with Spencer, who, interestingly, closes himself off.

I watch his face and the shoulders that incrementally hunch inward, the shuttering of his eyes and the careful responses he gives Ryan. It's the same slightly feral, mistrustful look I received when we first met. I remember how he acted around Oliver—smiling and laughing and relaxed inside a home he'd never been to before—and can't help but compare how different this response to a stranger is. Even Cody wasn't treated to this chilly suspicion, and I know firsthand how obnoxious he can be until you are used to him. Even then.

When we get back to the car, Spencer holds the food on his lap and thaws by degrees. As though it had only been hiding, the delight he'd been basking in as we left the wharf returns along with the smile. When we get back to my house, he's once more making noise about wanting to grab his computer and start uploading the footage. By some mutual understanding that neither of us has to speak aloud, we eat across from one another at the kitchen island. Both of us know the couch is too uncomfortable to subject ourselves to after a day on the boat.

"I don't trust people like that," Spencer says eventually, when the conversation naturally flows to the Temptress, frowning over the hamburger in his hands. "That guy at the bar."

Running my tongue along my teeth, I regard him. "Ryan?"

“Yeah. He was flirting with me.”

He says this with the same level of disgust my mother does when she talks about the price of high jewelry. Wiping my fingers off on a napkin, I lean a hip against the counter and cross my arms, watching Spencer eat a fry.

“He’s a bartender,” I remind him. Ryan once told me his job was to make people feel special. Of course, he’d been giving me a blow job at the time, so perhaps it had been a bit tongue-in-cheek.

“I know. But people only do that when they want something. Flirting isn’t a personality trait; it’s a tool.”

I can’t argue with that, even though I think Ryan flirting with customers to earn a higher tip and a better Yelp review is harmless. But Spencer looks at the world through a lens hazy with lived experiences of people who think he deserves less autonomy than everyone else, a world where he has to choose between saying no and eating dinner. To him, flirtations are a threat. For myself, Ryan’s flirtations were less exciting than the insider information he provided on a decent Black barber in the area.

“Besides, flirting with me when you’re standing right there is insane,” Spencer adds, widening his eyes at me and taking a bite of burger. I tip the takeout bag toward myself, pulling out the second one I’d ordered him and pushing it across the counter.

“You’re new. The townies are curious.” I don’t know why I’m bothering to put any effort at all into defending Ryan, who can more than stick up for himself. I suppose I merely want to keep this vein of conversation going for as long as I can, see what else I might be able to learn about Spencer along the way.

“True. He has to know I’m homeless, though. Everyone else does. So, again, I ask: why flirt with me?”

“Do I not flirt with you?”

“Nope,” he replies happily, grinning around the three french fries in his mouth. “And you have a pool. The perfect man, really.”

“It always comes back to being rich.” I sigh. “More money, more problems, as they say.”

“I weep for you,” Spencer says seriously. I fight a smile, reaching for the last bite of my burger and popping it into my mouth.

I send Spencer off to his cottage to shower and fetch his laptop after dinner, sweeping the trash back into the bag and stuffing it all into the

garbage before I head upstairs for my own wash. As much as I'd like to just fall into bed, I'm fastidious enough to not want a working day smeared all over my sheets. Lobstering leaves me sweaty and smelly, and I'd like my bed to be neither unless they come as a product of getting laid.

Because I know he'll be quicker than me and won't let himself inside, I walk barefoot back down the stairs the moment I'm dry and in clean clothes. As I suspected, Spencer is standing outside, laptop clutched protectively to his chest and half of his face tucked into the scarf I gave him, protecting it from the cold. Sighing, I push open the door, once more locking eyes with the snowmen.

"Just let yourself inside, Spencer," I snap.

"Are you irritated by my good manners?" he asks, glancing up at me as he bends over to untie his boots.

"No, I'm irritated by your idiocy."

"Stop trying to flirt with me, Dry. I already told you I don't like it."

He breaks through with that one, making me laugh softly. Insufferable man. Leaving him to the task of de-winterizing himself, I walk upstairs and click the fireplace on. Colorado plays tonight, and I'll be able to catch some of it live. Standing next to the bed, I bring up the streaming service and wait for it to load. Spencer pads silently through the doorway a few moments later, hair mussed from the quick dry after his shower and the beanie he pulled on afterward. He glances between me and the television as he slides into bed opposite. I almost make a sarcastic comment about him not wanting to come inside without an invitation each time but apparently being comfortable doing so in my bed. I don't, though, because there's always the possibility that if I bite too hard, he'll back off.

"Who are we watching?" he asks, shifting his hips back and forth like he's nestling deeper into the mattress.

"Colorado."

"Oh, our favorite! Nice."

I dim the lights a bit before joining him on the bed. Pulling his laptop onto the pillow in his lap, he opens it and waits for the screen to come to life. There's a chip in the corner where the screen is black and dead. He brings up the editing software he uses and looks over at me, apparently feeling my eyes on him.

"I can mute the game if the noise will disturb you," I offer. He laughs.

“I’ve slept under interstate overpasses,” he reminds me, shifting a little bit as he wiggles himself into a comfortable position.

I watch the game, aware of his weight beside me and the soft click of his fingers on the keyboard. He doesn’t talk to himself, and I don’t bother him, content with the silent shared space. When the teams leave the ice for intermission, I yawn and sit up, putting my feet on the floor and stretching as I stand. I need to pee.

When I come back from the bathroom, Spencer is watching the door and smiles to see me. As I slide back onto the bed beside him, he closes his laptop cover, setting it and the pillow off to the side. Rolling to face me like he did the other night, he props his chin on one hand and regards me. I raise an eyebrow.

“May I help you?” I ask.

“How long were you married?”

“Six years,” I answer, shocking myself. Every inch of me thrums to life, like energy being introduced to a live wire. I don’t want to talk to Spencer about my marriage. I don’t want him to walk away so soon.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out.”

“Me too,” I admit quietly.

I enjoyed being married. Right up until the day it ended, in fact, and my doctor knocked over the first in a long line of dominos that sent everything crashing down. I enjoyed having a ring on my finger and the comfort of being free of dating. I liked knowing what brand of coffee bean was Dylan’s favorite and being able to pick him out in a crowd by the smell of his cologne. I liked having regular sex, even when that sex wasn’t always enjoyable for me, and I really liked the six years of nights I never once slept alone. Dylan often came home late, but there was never a night where he didn’t come home at all.

“What happened?” Spencer asks, and it’s the direct way he asks it that spurs me to answer.

“Turns out one person wasn’t enough for Dylan.”

“Ah. Do you hate him?”

I almost laugh. Sure, I hate him. But it’s nothing close to how much I hate myself. My hatred of Dylan is less about what he did and more about what he revealed. The way he chipped away at my paint, bit by bit, and uncovered things I hadn’t realized were there. *You see?* he seemed to say. *Of course this happened. You were never going to be enough.*

And I wasn't. Dylan wanted grand gestures. He wanted flowers sent to his work and for me to hold his hand in public when we went to a restaurant opening. He wanted to introduce me to thirty of his closest friends and for me to get jealous when he danced with another man at the club. I could never manage it, and when I look back on those years, I'm confronted with the fact that I didn't really try. I thought I could love him quietly—run my hands through his hair to help him fall asleep, and have his coffee sitting by the machine every morning; kiss that spot on his elbow that was ticklish just to hear him laugh, and never, ever forget a single thing he told me. Dylan wanted a love others could see, and, in the end, I couldn't even manage to make it visible to him.

"I don't think you even love me at all," he'd said once, leaning toward me across the table, our lawyers seated by our sides like bodyguards. I had hated that more than anything—the audience with their ears pressed to the glass, listening as I learned all the ways I had failed.

And there is a part of me, now, that thinks he was right. Heartbreak is supposed to hurt, and mine didn't. It wasn't pain and suffering; it was resignation and defeat. It was a world tilted a hundred and eighty degrees on its axis to show the rot that had spread unnoticed underneath. And I, with an echo chamber where a heart is meant to be, couldn't even find it in me to care. I never felt sad about the divorce. Never cried or drank myself into oblivion. I packed up my things and rented an apartment, went to work, and spent time at the gym. I consulted a lawyer and asked for nothing but the title for the *Maiden Seas* and my own trust fund. I went to every divorce meeting and stared across the table at Dylan, thinking about all the things I'd interpreted as love and wondering how the hell I could have gotten it so wrong.

"Yes," I tell Spencer now. People understand hate, and it's the simplest answer to a difficult question. "But I think Dylan hates me more."

In fact, I know he does. My ex-husband, with his emotions he could never control, his love of being the victim, and his ability to twist every scenario to fit that narrative. *Why does everything have to happen to me*, he'd complain, as though hardship were an experience singular to him alone. I can see the loathing simmering in his eyes when we meet these days—two ships passing in a world glittering with riches. A world he chose to stay in and one I left to him without a fight. Even that wasn't right.

“You seriously don’t even care, do you?” Dylan hissed at me last Christmas, champagne flute clenched in his hand.

“No, I don’t,” I’d replied and walked away. It was time, in my opinion, for him to stop caring so much, in fact.

“A little hard for him to take the high road since he’s the one who cheated,” Spencer notes. I shrug as much as I’m able, lying prone against the pillows.

“It’s over.” And, I add silently, I deserved it. I wasn’t enough. I hadn’t paid close enough attention. I hadn’t changed when I was supposed to.

“Mm.” He watches me, the light from the television illuminating his features in flashes of color. Intermission is ending, and the teams are back on their benches. I look at Spencer, finding more to interest me in the shades of brown in his eyes than anything on the TV.

Instead of pulling his computer back onto his lap and working more, he sets it on the bedside table and scoots closer to me. Close enough for his hip to press against mine and for me to slide into him as he adjusts the pillows to his liking. When he settles, we’re lying nearly flat beside one another, my hands on my stomach and Spencer’s on the bed. He tucks his fingers into the pocket of my sweatpants as the second period starts and Colorado wins the face-off. We watch the game in silence, and I wonder what would happen if I didn’t send him home to sleep in his own bed tonight.

Chapter Seventeen



SPENCER

The tiny black kitten mewls pitifully as Rudy folds back her ears to look inside. Shaking her head when he lets go of her ear, she cries again, the noise reverberating off the stainless steel table. Keeping her in place with a palm cupped over her back, Rudy jots down a few notes on a paper chart.

“Lungs are fine,” he comments. I chuckle, reaching out a finger to the kitten. She sniffs me and cries again, big eyes pleading as they look at me.

“Four weeks old?” I guess, looking at the tiny body curled in the center of the table. Rudy, glancing up at me, smiles and scoops up the kitten, holding her out to me. I take her, cradling her gently against my chest.

“Thereabouts,” he agrees. “Second time already this year I’ve had little ones left in a box at the door.”

The kitten cries again, claws sticking into the fabric of my scrubs as she tries to climb her way up to the warmth of my neck. Obliging, I lift her there and am rewarded with another loud cry, this one directly into my eardrum. Rudy chuckles.

“What do you do with them?” I ask him. Most vet clinics have a procedure in place for these types of situations. Small as this clinic is, I don’t doubt that Rudy is probably the one who ends up with the strays more often than not.

“Well, I have a pretty good track record of finding them homes. This one’s too small to stay here overnight, so I suppose she’ll have to come home with me.” He sighs, fingers tapping on the table as he watches me stroke careful fingers down the kitten’s back. She’s trembling.

“You have room?” I ask, noting his slightly resigned tone. He doesn’t sound excited about the prospect of bringing her home.

“Plenty,” Rudy confirms. “However, I also have four dogs who think cats are for chasing. I’ll just have to crate her and keep her separated. It’s no big deal. Happens all the time.”

He smiles at me, wrinkles fanning out from the corners of his eyes. I like Rudy. He’s kind and talks in a slow, calm voice that soothes the people as well as the animals. He doesn’t ask me prying questions and is concerned about adequate breaks and whether or not I had enough food for lunch. He’s a good boss, and if I were sticking around, I’d be happy working here.

“I could take her for a few nights,” I offer. She’s so small, and four dogs is a lot. “Until you find a home.”

“Probably won’t take long,” Rudy allows, and I nod in agreement. Kittens are fuzzy and adorable, and this one is all black except for the tip of her tail and a little bit of white on her face that looks like a mustache. Someone will likely adopt her by tomorrow.

“I’ll take her,” I repeat, thinking about Dryden’s big glass house. There’s nothing in there that a kitten could destroy, and if he wanted to keep her contained to a single room, he’s certainly got plenty to choose from. Rudy, who knows damn well where I’m staying, pinches his mouth together, eyes dancing with mirth.

“It’s your funeral,” he acquiesces.

Rudy packs me up a kitten care package with samples he keeps in the back for times like these. I leave with a bag packed full of cat accoutrements in one hand and a boxed-up kitten in the other. The Porsche isn’t idling at the curb when I walk out the front door, so I turn right back around to find Rudy. As much as I’d like to walk, it’s way too far to do in a reasonable amount of time, even without a baby animal with me. I could text Dryden and see if he’ll be around soon and then wait, but I hate bothering him. Accepting so much help bothers *me*.

Besides, riding with Rudy will give me plenty of time to come up with a plan for what to say to Dryden. It’s possible that bringing home a pet is taking liberties with his immense hospitality. It’s possible he’s allergic or hates animals. But it’s also possible that maybe the reason he was so open to inviting me to live in the guest cottage is that he’s lonely.

If there is one thing I’ve learned about Dryden since I’ve been here, it’s that he internalizes things. He keeps his emotions inward-facing. And

although I can understand that it's a safer way to live altogether, I also know it's an isolating one. I do think he's happy alone and was probably perfectly content before I showed up. But he's also the person who will sit silently next to the pool while I swim and invite me inside with him while he watches a hockey game. He's the person who patiently shows me over and over and over again how to tie a hitch knot and gently maneuvers my fingers when I stumble through the steps. He frowns and makes sarcastic remarks, but participates in making snowmen for hours out in the cold.

Maybe I'm completely off base, and this will be a terrible idea. Or maybe I'm right in suspecting that Dryden is a little bit starved for love, and the easiest and most efficient way to give him some is a kitten. Nothing in this world provides the kind of selfless adoration that comes from animals, and I won't always be here to pick up the slack.

Dryden's car isn't in the driveway when I make it home. I wave a goodbye to Rudy, watch him pull away down the driveway, and lock the cottage door behind me. My furry companion has been silent for the ride home, and when I open the lid to check on her, I smile when I see the little black body curled into the blanket, dead asleep.

Leaving her to rest after what was probably an exciting day for a baby so young, I shed my clothes and take a hot shower. It was a busy day at the clinic, and I stink of antiseptic and bleach. It feels good to wash it all away. I linger under the hot water, head tipped forward and eyes closed, letting the warmth seep into my sore muscles.

I put on the sweats Dryden loaned me when I get out of the shower, running my fingers through my hair as I check out the front window to see if he's home yet. Grinning, I let the curtain fall and reach for my jacket. The lights are on at the big house.

"Dry?" I call, peeking my head through the unlocked back door. I pause, listening for an answer, and become aware of the sound of running water. He's in the shower.

Glancing down at the box and thinking about the kitten inside, I let myself in. A dozen times, Dryden has told me to do this, told me that I don't have to knock or wait for a specific invitation each time. I can't allow myself that level of comfort, usually, knowing exactly how badly it will hurt on the day it's taken away. Today, with a kitten that shouldn't be out in the cold, I have no choice.

I sit down on the couch to wait for Dryden, the kitten starting to make plaintive little mewling sounds as she scratches at the side of the box. My stomach flips with nervous energy when I finally hear steps coming down the stairs. *Here we go*, I think with a furtive glance toward the cat carrier. I'm standing up just as Dryden reaches the bottom of the stairs, his mouth softening into something that teases a smile.

"Spencer," he says in greeting, walking barefoot toward the kitchen.

"Hey, Dry. Busy day?"

"Yes." He sounds exhausted. I'd suspected, when he wasn't there to pick me up after work, that it meant hauling had been rough today, and it sounds like I might have been correct in that assumption.

"I brought you a present," I tell him. He looks over his shoulder at me, freezer door open in front of him, expression incredulous.

"A what?"

"A present. I brought you one," I repeat, picking up the cat box and lifting it to show him. Frowning, he abandons his search for dinner and approaches me.

Arms underneath the box, keeping it steady, I hold my breath as Dryden opens the top flaps. He scowls into the box, fingertips resting along the upper edge. The kitten cries.

"Spencer."

"Surprise!" I say, smiling when he looks up at me, scowl firmly in place.

"What is that," he replies, so toneless that it couldn't possibly be a question.

"A kitten."

He stares at me. "If I wanted a kitten, I would have bought one."

"I mean...would you, though?" Raising my eyebrows, I look around the room, taking in the hideous furniture he never replaced after the previous owners and the weird art on the wall that I know he doesn't like. He narrows his eyes and looks back down into the box, reaching in to pluck out the kitten.

"Spencer," he says again, holding the little black kitten by the scruff of the neck. She dangles from his fingers, legs curled upward. They look at each other for a moment, and the kitten meows. It sounds suitably pitiful, and I have to bite my lip to keep from laughing.

"She was abandoned," I tell him. "A poor little helpless baby."

Another meow, this one a little softer. Dryden narrows his eyes again.

"It will ruin the furniture," he says. I nod seriously.

"Only if we are lucky."

Humor flashes across his face, warming his dark eyes and softening his mouth. He cups a palm under the kitten's bottom but still keeps hold of her scruff. She blinks innocently, licking his thumb.

"Just for tonight?" he clarifies, and I force back a smile. I've won.

"We'll find her a new home as soon as possible," I promise.

"Mm."

He raises a single, wry eyebrow in my direction, and I make sure to keep my expression clear. I'm counting on the kitten staying here, and he fucking knows it.

Dryden puts a frozen pizza in the oven and joins me upstairs, setting up the kitten's room. She's little enough that it's best to keep her somewhat contained for now, and Dryden's master bathroom is more than big enough to accommodate. I set up a litter pan and a couple of puppy pads, snorting when Dryden hands me a pair of fine china bowls to use for food and water. I give her a little soft food, sitting cross-legged on the floor with my back to the vanity as she eats. Dryden returns from downstairs, two plates of pizza in his hands, while she's scarfing down her dinner. Instead of asking me to join him in the bedroom, he gracefully takes a seat next to me, legs stretched straight in front of him and crossed at the ankle, socks now covering his feet.

"Dinner in the bathroom?" I ask, grinning as I accept my plate.

"That smells like shit," he says, watching the kitten devour a watery pile of soft food. I snort, taking a bite of pizza and leaning my shoulder into him. He turns his face into my head a little bit, not quite giving me a kiss on the temple, but close enough that the gesture feels affectionate. I swallow a bite of pizza and pretend it's the reason why my belly feels so warm.

The kitten finishes her dinner before we do, tips over the water bowl when she tries to take a drink, and then runs off to track wet footprints across the tiles. I huff a laugh at Dryden's beleaguered sigh. There isn't much in the bathroom for her to cause trouble with, so it's not until we finish dinner and retreat to the master bedroom that the fun begins.

Feeling braver, the kitten scales Dryden's bed, claws sticking to the comforter as she uses it to climb up. There, she scoots around playfully, back arched and tail kinked, as she bounces. I laugh, and not even Dryden

can pretend he doesn't find the whole thing cute as he scoops her up in one hand and deposits her back onto the floor. She takes off running, claws sticking into the carpet and making little *pfut* noises as she streaks underneath the bed.

Pulling one of the cat toys out of the bag, I lie down flat on the mattress and dangle my arms over the side. Bouncing the string along the floor, I laugh when a little black shadow zips out and leaps on the feather. She rolls onto her side and catches it between her paws, biting at it.

"Very fierce," I congratulate her.

Dryden joins me on the bed with the rest of the toys. He chucks one of the little crinkly balls across the room and snorts when the kitten bounces after it, pouncing and then streaking off in the opposite direction, tail held straight in the air. She vacillates between scampering around on the carpet and scaling the bed. At one point, she flattens herself to the comforter, wiggles her butt a couple of times, and leaps onto Dryden's foot, teeth catching on his sock as she bites him. He smiles—a beautiful, unguarded smile that somehow makes me feel incandescently happy and unbearably sad all at once.

She tires eventually, the excitement of the day catching up with her tiny, four-week-old body. She passes out against her food dish after I've fed her again, stretched out on the puppy pad, little belly round and full. Leaving the bathroom, I close the door to keep her contained for the night, not wanting her to wake up Dryden if she gets the zoomies at one in the morning.

Dryden lifts the sheets on the bed when I approach. I slide underneath and right up against him, feeling happier than I can remember feeling in years. Rolling onto my side, I put a hand flat on Dryden's stomach and my cheek on his shoulder, sick with longing for him and needing contact. He freezes—body still like a held breath. And then, with an exhalation I can feel in my soul, he puts an arm around my shoulders.

"The kitten can stay," he says softly. I smile, glad for a little bit of levity to pull me away from the sudden ache in my chest.

"Thanks."

"And so can you, tonight. If you'd like."

I can't see his face, nor hear anything telling in his tone. The hand cupping my shoulder is still. There's only the calm rise and fall of his chest and my own heart pounding against my ribs, making it hard to breathe.

Staying is a terrible idea. It's a foot firmly planted across the line we've been walking and a step in a direction I won't be able to retreat from. It's the first explicit request he's made of our relationship.

"Okay," I agree and then scoot a little closer. His free hand touches the one I've got resting on his belly, fingertips cold when they brush the skin underneath the cuff. I wait for him to pull away—to feel the smooth alienness of the scar and retreat.

Instead, his fingers stroke higher, gentle and featherlight. Soothing. I close my eyes, not wanting to do something embarrassing like start to cry. Other than myself, only doctors have ever touched me there, and it didn't feel anything like this. It didn't feel like recognition of the pain and a balm to soothe old hurts. It didn't feel like warmth or comfort or tenderness.

In fact, nothing ever feels like this. So many days and weeks and months have gone by that I've stopped noticing them individually and instead find myself jolting into recognition of years gone past. Nobody treats me with gentleness or care. Nobody looks at me and sees a person deserving of such things, and it's been a long, long time since I've felt safe enough to ask for it. Or safe enough to give it.

Turning my face into Dryden's shoulder, I press a kiss through the fabric of his sweater and push up onto an elbow. As is his preference, the lights are dim, but the room isn't dark. His irises are nearly black in the low light and intent on mine. I remember what he said about liking the color of my eyes and feel a shiver of pleasure at the thought. There is so little to like about me.

I trace the neckline of Dryden's hoodie with my fingers, barely grazing skin. I give the strings a little tug.

"Can you take this off?" I ask him. The hand on my shoulder firms, gently nudging me off to the side so he can sit up. I watch as he reaches back and pulls the hoodie over his head, hands buzzing with the desire to touch. He drops it over the side of the bed, and I coast my eyes from his face to his stomach. "And the rest of it?"

The sheets are pushed down as he silently complies with the request, long fingers hooking into the waist of his sweats and drawing them down his legs. The socks are the last to go, and I'm the one to remove them—hands gentle on the backs of his calves and making him jump when I slide my fingers over the sole of his foot. I drop them over the side of the bed

with everything else and take a moment to appreciate all the beautiful brown skin in front of me as Dryden stretches out on his back.

I touch his knee, sliding my hand up to feel the catch of black hair against my palm. He's not shy at all, lying there naked while I'm kneeling here fully dressed. The air of expectation between us is thick, but it also feels secure. Trusting. He's letting himself be safe in my hands, and I'm relaxed in the belief that he won't push for more than I can give.

"Do you want me to undress, or will that be too misleading?" I ask him quietly, running my knuckles up the outside of his thigh before once more flattening my palm on his abdomen and leaving it there. Not pressing down, just resting—a point of connection in a moment that is often absent of them. Some of the loneliest times of my life were when I was in bed with another person. I don't want Dryden to feel that with me.

He doesn't answer right away but thoughtfully employs that aggressive eye contact he's so adept at. I return it, letting the ease between us wrap around me like a hug. Beneath my palm, his skin feels burning hot.

"Undressed," he says eventually, and I nod, having thought that would be the case. Slipping down to sit on the end of the bed, I turn my back to him and untie the laces on my borrowed sweats.

"I don't look like you," I feel the need to remind him. I'm scarred and ugly, sickly thin and visibly uncared for.

Goose bumps break out on my thighs the moment I slip the fabric down my legs. My skin looks frightfully pale in the dim room. Glowing, but not with health and virility like Dryden. Leaving my boxers on for now, I take a deep breath and tell myself he's seen me in my swim trunks, and, really, is that any different? I tug off my sweatshirt and leave it on the floor with the rest of our clothes, keeping my eyes down as I turn and retake my place beside Dryden on the mattress.

I can feel the weight of his eyes on my chest, on my thin arms and concave belly, on the press of my ribs, visible beneath my skin. I don't want him to say something about how good I look or how desirable. I don't want him to lie. And he doesn't. He's quiet and contemplative, and my discomfort burns away as the calm settles over us like a blanket of snow once more.

Taking time where I've rarely been allowed it before, I touch him. He's sensitive in places I wouldn't expect, shivering and letting out little exhalations from his nose when my fingers brush up his forearm or the soft

curve where his arm meets his chest. I like learning these things and tuck each one away to remember and utilize later. Sensitive lovers are my favorite. There are so many ways to make them feel good.

Swinging a leg over his waist, I lean down and kiss the side of his jaw, close to his ear. I smile to discover yet another sensitive patch of skin and kiss him again, trailing my lips slowly over his cheek. Fingertips graze my leg—there and gone in a second, like he's fighting his body's natural reaction in this situation to touch.

"Thank you," I whisper when he doesn't grab or reach for parts of me I want left alone.

I kiss him on the mouth this time. He sighs a little bit, body relaxing as though I'd excited him with my gentle touches and teasing, and the built-up pressure is being released. I enjoy kissing when it feels like this—intimate and not a sexual act in itself. Dryden struggles with words, and I want to say something to him that I can't quite manage with just my fingertips alone.

I let the affection spin out around us, kissing him soft and sedate. He reciprocates in kind, understanding without me having to say it that kissing, for me, can never and will never be sexual. He doesn't try to simulate fucking with his tongue; doesn't try to take the lead. I melt into him, warm and safe and close.

"Do you have lube?" I ask him sometime later, hand planted above his shoulder as I look down at him.

"Linen closet." I raise an eyebrow, surprised. He shrugs and says in explanation, "I don't bring people here often."

Retreating to the bathroom, I glance at the kitten, now curled up on her blanket, and search for what I need. When I return to the bedroom, Dryden is unmoved on the mattress, sheets in a tumble at his feet, stretched out like a young god awaiting worship.

I join him, tapping a finger against the box as I set it next to us. He looks at it.

"Everything in here a yes?" I ask him.

"Everything," he confirms, lips pressing into a smirk.

"If you want to stop, just tell me to stop," I add. He doesn't answer, just watches me with eyes liquid enough to be pools of ink, plump lips parted slightly.

I settle between his legs this time, nudging them out until he's spread wide enough for me to have access to things I hadn't before. My pulse thrums when I put my hand on his dick, still teasing, even now. I stroke him lightly and let go immediately when his hips roll upward, seeking more. I slide my fingers downward and smile when he again tries to nudge my hand where he wants it, pelvis straining. If he thinks I'll be hurried along, he's in for a very long night.

He lets out a soft sigh that sounds like relief when I finally open the lube. The gel is cold on my fingers when I tease the delicate skin of his perineum, making his toes curl into the bedspread. I watch him for every caught breath and flicker of his eyelids as I stroke and fondle and circle his hole without ever pressing inside. It's minutes before he lets out a low "Spencer" in warning.

"Stop?" I ask.

"Start," is his reply, but I only smile and keep doing what I'm doing. I get to take care of him tonight. I get to strike the matches and put them out, controlling the burn. I'm going to make him feel better than he's ever felt in his life.

"Trust me," I request, one finger circling his hole before slowly pushing inside. He relaxes into a sigh, hands flat on the bed, fingers spread. When he closes his eyes, I take that as an answer. *I do.*

Every inch of Dryden is hot to the touch, and inside is no different. I stroke him, fingers slowly driving in and out, and feel an almost physical high when he pushes against my hand, back arched off the bed. So, so sensitive.

I alternate my rhythm, never giving him time to adjust to a pattern. With my free hand, I touch him. Not his dick, hard and straining against his belly, but everywhere else. I scratch my nails lightly up the back of his thigh at the same time as I add a third finger inside him, increasing the pressure. I run my fingers up his chest and across his nipples, circling the sensitive skin until he squirms. I stop thrusting my fingers—stilling inside him—and gently stroke my thumb across his taint. Eventually, he loses the hold he has on his silence and gasps quietly at every change. He fights a battle with his eyes, unable to keep them closed or open, and moves his pelvis in small aborted thrusts at each change in pace. I haven't touched his dick again, but there's a small line of precum stretching from the tip to his belly.

Dryden meets my eyes when I slowly pull out of him before tracking the movement of my hand as I reach for the cock ring. He doesn't say anything—lips pressed into a firm line as he watches me slip it on him. Every twitch of his hip sends tremors of pleasure through me, like a violin string plucked and vibrating. When I reach for the dildo and begin coating it in lube, he closes his eyes. Turning the vibration on the lowest setting, I rest the tip against his hole and then drag it up his perineum when his hips begin to thrust.

He jolts when I tease it across one of his nipples, opening his eyes and looking down at me in surprise.

"Sensitive," I tell him, letting the pleasure bleed into my tone and form the word into something carnal. In my mind, I add *perfect*. Perfect for me.

There's no resistance at all when I push the dildo inside him, pulling it out slowly before pressing back in once more, mimicking a placid, thorough fucking. It's a big toy, and I make use of every inch, working it slowly and making sure to drag over the most sensitive parts of him. When I seat it fully inside and leave it there, base pressed to his skin, I turn on the vibrations once more. I go slow, toggling upward through the settings, giving him just enough time to adjust before I move to the next. When it's vibrating at the highest level, Dryden's thighs are tense, and his fingers are twisted into the bedsheet. I leave it there.

He gasps when I kiss his stomach, just below his belly button, and again when I do the same to his nipples. His skin feels feverish against my mouth as I press my lips to different parts of him, one hand down between his legs, making sure the vibrator stays in place, and the other against the mattress, holding my body off his.

When I feel the muscles in his legs start to tremble, I sit back so I can watch his face as he comes. The internal orgasm rolls through him like a wave, curling his toes, tensing his thighs, flexing his fingers, arching his neck. He barely makes a noise that can be heard over the buzzing of the vibrator as it happens, but there's a haze to his eyes that wasn't there before when he opens them. I lower the vibrations on the dildo and pull it out, almost to the tip, before sliding it slowly back in. Underneath the palm of my free hand, Dryden's thigh is still quivering.

I keep the toy moving through a second internal orgasm, adjusting the vibration pattern but maintaining a rhythm with the thrusting. There's a shine of sweat across his chest by now, and his abdomen flexes as he

mindlessly moves his hips. His still-erect dick is leaking and untouched, the white cock ring bright against the dark flush of his skin.

Dryden can't control his breathing any longer, panting as he tries to come down from the internal orgasm. I don't let him. Seating the dildo all the way inside, I press it back up to the highest vibration and leave it there once more, stimulating his prostate and pushing him back to the edge he only just stepped away from. I want one more, and I get my wish as he moans low in his throat, neck arched and eyes squeezed closed as a third crests.

His limbs are actively shaking when I lower the vibrations and reach for the cock ring, removing it. It takes only two thrusts of the dildo and a gentle squeeze of my hand on his dick before he's coming. This time, he groans, cum painting his stomach as his hips jerk. I stroke him through it, watching closely for the moment when the overstimulation begins to cause hurt instead of pleasure. Dryden's eyes are closed, and his breathing is choppy when I turn off the vibrator and slowly pull it out. He shudders.

I'm simultaneously heavy and lightheaded as I slide carefully off the bed, slightly woozy as I retreat to the bathroom. I feel high off the pleasure of making Dryden feel good, hands shaking as I quickly clean the toy off in the sink and wet a couple of towels. I'm dizzy as I approach the bed, vision tunneled on Dryden, lying unmoved but for an arm resting above his head on the pillow.

I feel like I'm on fire, hands shaking as I clean him off. I love this part. I love making someone feel good and having the right to take care of them afterward. I stroke the wet cloth gently over his hole, cleaning up the lube, before lowering his legs down to the bed. I clean off his stomach, too, and then, chest aching with so much want I can't do anything but let it out, stroke gentle hands over his muscles, urging them to relax.

Dryden slowly falls asleep while I touch him. I nearly faint with pleasure, so much joy and desire in my chest it feels like I can't breathe around it. Tugging the blankets over us, I curl into his side and borrow some of his heat. I close my eyes and fight sleep, not wanting to trade this moment for the next just yet. I'm still awake when Dryden rolls over in his sleep, turning onto his belly and sighing. He scoops me closer, head turned my way and lips parted as he softly breathes. I fall asleep with the weight of his arm across my stomach and a heaviness in my body that feels like hope.

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Chapter Eighteen



DRYDEN

Spencer wakes up the moment I do, both of us stiffening and jolting back to consciousness. I'm groggy, limbs lethargic like I'm coming out of anesthesia and not sleep. I turn my face against the pillow, groaning slightly, trying to organize my thoughts into something coherent. Spencer shifts, body close enough to mine that I can feel the tickle of his hair against my arm. When I try to force myself to pull away from him, I can't manage it.

"Is it morning?" Spencer whispers. I turn my face back toward him, resting my cheek on the pillow. It's too dark to see him, but he's there—slim body curled beneath my arm, skin hot against mine. I should move away. I'm awake enough to know that, conscious enough to understand that letting him spend the night and waking up like this is a mistake. He doesn't have to leave the bed, but he can't be this *close*.

Spencer slides a little nearer, fingertips tentative when they find my shoulder in the dark. Using the touch to orient himself, he slides his hand up, tracing across my jaw and over my ear. He strokes a line down my back, mapping out muscle and bone. I want to tell him to stop. That this doesn't have to be like that, that I don't require affection or tenderness, and that he shouldn't waste any of it on me.

It's hard to move, though. The blankets are warm, and my limbs are heavy. I feel like I'm caught in quicksand, not stretched out on my mattress. My arm rises and falls with Spencer's steady breathing. I don't remember how it got there.

"Do you have to get up?" he asks, fingers stroking up and down my back. I wish he'd never started and that he'll never stop.

“No.” I have to clear my throat to make the word come out. I should get up. Use any excuse to rise and put space between us. I can’t think clearly when we’re like this.

With me lying on my stomach, Spencer doesn’t have to strain to trail his fingers along the curve of my back and down over the slope of my ass. He does it a couple of times, touch as gentle as butterfly wings. I’m grateful for the dark, hiding his face and mine. It doesn’t feel like the kind of gesture meant as a precursor to something. If anything, it feels like he’s trying to put me back to sleep. I close my eyes, willing to let him. Maybe he’ll be gone when I wake up again.

I drift a little bit, not falling fully unconscious, but just enough to relax my thoughts. I stop worrying about all the things that can, and will, go wrong with Spencer. I doze, listening to him breathe. He stops touching my back, tucking his hand back between our bodies like he got cold. I adjust my arm and, in doing so, bring him closer into my side.

Neither of us fully goes back to sleep, both too aware of the other, albeit for different reasons. I find myself wishing the sun wouldn’t rise. It’s easy, like this—silent in the dark, with no expectations and so little space between our bodies.

Spencer is the one to leave. Carefully, as though he’s unsure whether I’ve gone back to sleep or not, he slides slowly out from underneath my arm. I want to grab him and pull him back. I want to tell him I need more time and I’m not ready for him to go yet.

Opening my eyes, I watch him tiptoe quietly across the room to the bathroom, arms crossed over his chest like he’s cold. The bed feels cold, too, despite my still being in it, as though Spencer was the source of all the warmth. I roll onto my back, rotating my foot until my ankle pops and stretching an arm above my head. My body feels as loose as a wet towel wrung out and spread to dry in the sun. I don’t remember a time I’ve ever felt this good, this relaxed.

Spencer murmurs softly behind the closed bathroom door, the kitten answering him at a slightly higher volume. I close my eyes, listening. When he creeps back into the room, I turn my head to look at him. He smiles as he slips back into the bed, sliding over until his skin is pressed against mine. Cold, now. Without meaning to, I drop my arm, putting it around his shoulders. I close my eyes again, trying to ignore the numb sense of dread

that threatens to engulf me. I've never made so many mistakes in my life as I have with Spencer Davis.

"The kitten shredded your toilet paper," he says softly. I huff a sigh, and even without looking at him, I know he's smiling. I can feel it.

"She's going to be a menace." *Like you*, I want to add, but don't. Spencer turns on his side, adjusting so he can rest his chin against my pec and torture me with his doe eyes.

"You're welcome," he says.



The cat makes a growling noise and parkours herself off the end of the couch before scampering into the kitchen and scaling my leg, claws sticking to my pants. I grab her and try to pull her away, but she clings tighter. For every paw I remove, the other three remain attached.

"You are a demon," I tell her, giving up the hope of saving my clothes from further holes and continuing to make coffee. She's still stuck to me when Spencer wanders down the stairs, wearing a new set of my clothes, fresh from a shower in my bathroom. He sees the kitten attached to my ass and laughs, coming around the counter to help.

He holds her with a hand across the belly, the other cupping her back feet, and her front legs hooked over his hand. I scowl at her, and she begins to purr as Spencer uses his thumb to stroke her.

"Have you thought of a name yet?" Spencer asks, no longer even bothering to pretend that I'm not keeping the damn thing.

"Demon," I reply. Fitting for the little black monstrosity who puked up a pile of food this morning, unraveled yet another roll of toilet paper, and thinks I'm a scratching post. Spencer holds her up so their faces are next to one another.

"But a cute demon," he says, pouting his lips and widening his eyes.

"Yes," I allow, thinking, as I do, that the kitten isn't nearly as cute as him.

I continue making coffee, listening as Spencer puts her down and steps up behind me. He's not quite tall enough to see over my shoulder, so he just rests his cheek there instead, hands cupping my hips. He has started doing things like this the past couple of days, sharing new bits of affection after he

spent the night here a few days ago. I can't say I mind it, although it's certainly strange.

If Dylan had embraced me like this, I'd have resigned myself to the eventuality that soon we'd be in the bedroom and I'd be fucking him. Tenderness wasn't casual; it was pointed. I never allowed affection of this sort to manifest with Shiloh, and Ryan knows better than to even try. Spencer, though...

I frown down at the coffee, watching it drip into the mug, feeling the warmth of Spencer's chest against my back. I should push him away. Sex I can blame on a biological imperative. Even my attraction to him could be argued away. So what if I like the color of his eyes? I can find someone else. Brown eyes are as common as dirt.

Step away, I urge myself, trying to force my hands to remove his. *This is dangerous*.

Instead, I lean back. I give a little bit of my weight to Spencer, who responds in kind, wrapping his arms fully around me and splaying a hand on my stomach. I close my eyes. If I'm not going to get rid of him, then I need to enjoy this while it's here. There will come a day he isn't, and memories, stale and brittle as they are, are better than nothing at all.

"Coffee is ready," I tell Spencer, hoping he'll let go and save me from myself.

"Okay," he says and continues holding on.

"What are you doing today?" he asks after a couple of minutes of what should be an awkward silence but only feels like comfort to me.

"I hired a removal company. They'll be here this afternoon for some of my furniture."

Spencer gasps theatrically, and I can't help but roll my eyes. Finally, he slides his arms away, and I take a breath that should be relief but only hurts my chest. Turning, I hand him his mug of coffee.

"You're getting rid of the couch?" he asks. We both look over at it. Demon is lying in one of the grooves between the cushions, licking her butt.

"Yes," I admit. The house has begun feeling...off, to me. It's never been a home, but it also hadn't felt like a cage the way it does now. Although the previous owners aren't dead, it feels almost as though I'm living in their tomb anyway.

"Huh." Spencer looks around the room, contemplating the wall of glass and the sun glinting off the floors. I realize I'm going to have to replace

more than just the furniture to ever make this feel less like a fun house at a carnival.

“Perhaps I’ll demolish the whole thing,” I muse, liking the idea more the moment I give it voice.

“You could live in the guesthouse,” Spencer agrees, smiling at me. I think about that tiny house, decorated in dark, muted colors, the furniture soft and the lighting intimate. I haven’t been in there since the day I gave Spencer a key.

“Perhaps,” I agree, while privately feeling as though it’s not my guest cottage at all. It’s his. Clearing my throat, I take a sip of coffee and watch Demon yawn, stretching all her limbs out in front of herself before collapsing and falling immediately asleep. “I wish I could do the demolishing.”

Spencer laughs. “What do you mean? Like, buy a bulldozer and go to town?”

“Mm.” That would be satisfying, sure, but not quite hands-on enough. I take another sip of coffee. There’s so much *glass* in this house. “Or a sledgehammer.”

Spencer’s pretty eyes light up, bright in the early morning sun. It spills over him like gold, shining in his hair and framing him like a work of art. Perhaps the glass isn’t all bad.

“Well, if you’re going to demolish the whole thing anyway...why not?”

Why not seems to be the current theme of my life. Why not leave traps out all winter? Why not invite an unhoused man to live on my property? Why not invite him into the pool, and the house, and my damn bed? And now, why not go shopping at the hardware store for a pair of sledgehammers for the express purpose of destroying my own home? Why the fuck not?

“I’m not sure I can swing this very well,” Spencer says, hefting a sledgehammer and testing its weight. I lean against the cart, watching him. It does look a little big in his hands, but then, he’s not a particularly large individual. I look around, contemplating other options.

“Perhaps a crowbar?” I ask him. He brightens.

“Yeah. You can take this”—he rests the sledgehammer in the cart —“since you’ve got actual shoulder muscles. I’ll get something smaller.”

Dutifully, I push the cart and follow him down the aisle in search of a crowbar. In addition to the tools of destruction, we pick up safety glasses

and gloves. Because we're here, I grab a few bits I need for the boat as well, keeping an eye out for things Spencer might need but won't ask for.

"Anything else?" he asks, peering into our cart.

"We can always come back."

"What're you up to, there, Dryden?" Travis Beck asks, scanning everything Spencer puts onto the counter. It's a testament to the power of gossip in this town that he doesn't need to ask who Spencer is or why he's with me. He already knows.

"Well, Travis, we're going to destroy my house," I tell him, doing my best to inject a bit of fake cheer into my tone. The way Spencer pinches his lips together and Travis' eyes widen makes me think I was at least partly successful. I probably sounded deranged.

When we get back to the house, Spencer moves Demon over to the guest cottage, worried that even upstairs in the master bedroom, the noise will scare her. I leave him to it and wander the lower section of the house, looking for things I want to keep. There's nothing. Picking up a glass figurine of a whale, I turn it in my hands a few times, trying to feel something. I don't care about any of this. Numbly, I tilt my palm and let the figure fall. It shatters impressively, glass scattering across my shoes and the marble floor.

Walking back to the main living area, I get there just as Spencer is returning from the cottage. I toss him a pair of safety glasses and reach for my own.

"Are we really doing this?" he asks, sounding half nervous, half excited. Gloves in place, I grip the handle of the sledgehammer.

"We are."

Spencer hovers to the side, looking cute in his goggles, crowbar resting on his shoulder and somehow managing not to appear threatening at all. I glance around, zeroing in on the coffee table and deciding that will be a satisfying place to start. Without thinking about it, I swing the sledgehammer and bring it down on the center of the table. It shatters, the head of the hammer hitting the marble floor and jarring my shoulder with the impact. In the corner of my eye, I see Spencer jump. When I look at him, though, he smiles.

"Perhaps you should be filming," I tell him, never sure what is or isn't good content for a vlog. He shakes his head and adjusts his grip on the crowbar, eyeing the line of decorative vases sitting on the sideboard.

“Just for us,” he replies, the same way he did when I asked if he was going to film the snowmen.

I don’t mind when he films me or when he asks questions while doing so. I don’t mind showing him how to do things slowly enough for him to learn, and I don’t mind taking detours when I’m driving us home for him to film different areas of Siren’s Point. He’s a naturally curious individual, and that’s not something I believe should be repressed. I don’t even mind when he reads me the comments his viewers leave. He could film more of our time together, and I would not mind that either.

But he doesn’t. Mostly, he comes home from work at the clinic talking about the scintillating footage he got of Rudy checking a puppy’s rectal temperature. He talks about walking down to the wharf on his lunch breaks and filming the boats, chatting with the staff. He shows me images of the sun rising over my property and video he got of the winding roads he walked on the mornings I wasn’t home to drive him around.

Everything else—the evening swims and the hockey games and the ridiculous things I let him talk me into doing—are left off the vlog. He doesn’t pick up his phone or balance his tripod anywhere. He leaves the hundreds of viewers behind and spends the time with me alone. Weak and selfish as I am, I cannot pretend to be anything other than glad for it. The more time spent with Spencer’s eyes on me, the better.

I watch him, nodding when he looks my way with a question on his face. Biting his lip, he tees up like a major league baseball player and swings the crowbar. Spencer takes out all three vases in a satisfying explosion of porcelain, staggering a bit with the force of his swing. He lets out an incredulous, slightly hysterical laugh and turns to grin at me. I smile back, tallying up exactly how many things we’ll need to destroy in order to get him to look at me like that again and finding it worth the cost.

As though realizing there is no going back now, Spencer doesn’t hold back. He shatters the glass in the picture frames while I’m busy destroying the marble countertop of the kitchen island. He tips over the bookshelves in the office while I take measured, heavy swings at the desk. Spencer rips down the curtains and climbs on top of the bed in the spare bedroom to take a swing at the chandelier hanging from the ceiling. We flip the mattress off, and I revel in the burn in my shoulders as we completely demolish the wooden frame.

“How do we kill it?” Spencer asks, panting, glasses lifted up so he can rub sweat off his face. We look at the living room couch, the only piece of furniture still standing in the room.

“I have gasoline,” I say, wondering if the only way to exorcise this demon is by fire. Spencer laughs, tugging his glasses back into place and leaving his hair a spiky mess above.

“Nah,” he says. “We’ve got this.”

And we do. The cushions are tossed across the room, and swing by swing, we destroy the couch. Glass and pottery and wood crunches beneath our feet as we circle around, looking for any intact pieces that have yet to be annihilated. Neither of us is happy until the couch is little more than wood scraps and strips of leather. Showing off that chipped tooth as he smiles, Spencer sits down on one of the abandoned cushions, dropping the crowbar to the floor with a clang and resting his forearms on his raised knees.

“Holy shit,” he comments.

“Holy shit indeed,” I agree. Lifting my arm, biceps and shoulder protesting, I bring the sledgehammer to shoulder height and let it fall to the floor with a thump. Tugging off the glasses, I drop those, too. Spencer pats the cushion.

Sitting next to him, I stretch my legs out and sigh. My back twinges, thighs burning and shoulders a pincushion of pain. I feel, I realize, pretty damn good. Spencer leans into me. Without thinking, I lift my arm and let him tuck into my side. It doesn’t feel strange, the way casual affection like this so often does. It just feels like something that is. Something that’s meant to be.

We sit quietly on the couch cushion, surveying the wreckage that was once a serviceable living space. Through the glass, a truck rumbles up my drive, and Spencer hacks out a surprised laugh. I chuckle, too, unable to help myself. I feel out of control. Reckless in a way that’s different even than the kind of irresponsibility that spurred me to invite Spencer to live here that first day. I feel alive.

Tanner and Mia Reed leave their jaws on the front stoop when I open the door to let them inside. Spencer, still resting on his cushion, waves, and I barely refrain from laughing. I have a feeling I’m already close to being labeled the town crazy, if the Reeds’ expressions are any indication, and hysterical laughter from me, of all people, would only help that along.

“Well, as you can see, I’ve got some garbage that needs removing,” I tell them. Spencer chokes, apparently on air, coughing into his elbow.

He trails me as I walk upstairs to the bedroom, vague thoughts of taking a shower and spending the rest of the day prone formulating in my mind.

“Staying?” I ask Spencer, lifting my arms and stretching my back in an arch.

“Here?” He points to the floor.

“On Earth, yes,” I reply dryly. He snorts.

“No, I mean...you’re not going to stay *here*, right? Not after we just wrecked your house?”

I shrug, gazing around at the untouched master bedroom. “Why not?”

He contemplates me, eyes losing some of that childish joy they’d had downstairs while we were breaking glass and turning serious. The hand he reaches in my direction surprises me enough that I reach back, jolting when his fingers wrap around my wrist.

“Come stay at the cottage,” he requests and then ruins the offer by adding, “It’s yours.”

It is not, in fact, mine. It’s a space that was there when I bought the place. A space I decorated for my sister and has never once been used until Spencer stepped through the door. It’s his. His bathroom, his kitchen, and his bed. His four walls that are meant to be a safe space for him, and him alone. That cottage hasn’t been mine in nearly two months. And, foolishly, I had been hoping to be invited inside because I’d earned that trust, not because I engineered it by destroying the better option. Swallowing, I resist the urge to pull my arm from Spencer’s grasp.

It would be nearly impossible to maintain any sort of distance living in that cottage with him. A calculated risk, weighing the inevitability of emotional destruction the likes of what just happened downstairs against Spencer curled against me in bed, breathing softly; against those eyes being the first thing I see in the morning, and the last thing I think about when I go to sleep.

“I’ll pack up my things,” I tell him, leaning down and accepting the kiss this earns me, smothering the burn of want that ignites before it can breathe.

Spencer asks if I have any specific plan in place for renovating, and I do my best to give him polite answers. I’m suddenly not in the mood to talk, but I’m also reaching the point in this relationship where I feel as though I need to soften certain parts of myself to make them more palatable. I don’t

want to push him away, and being myself seems to be the most effective way of doing this. Perhaps he picks up on my desire for silence anyway, as he quiets down and simply helps me pack. Helps me pack and touches me, that is.

When he walks behind me, he puts an unnecessary hand on my back like he's letting me know he's there. When I hand him something to toss into the bag at his feet, he brushes his fingers against mine as he takes it. And when I find myself staring at him and he catches me, he crosses the room, puts a hand on my neck, and pulls me down to kiss my cheek. I hope he's not anticipating reciprocity. Casual intimacy has never been my natural tendency, and I'm not good at recognizing the moments it's expected of me. By the time I've caught up with the way I'm meant to act, the moment has passed, and my partner is disappointed.

But I wonder, as Spencer, smirking, grabs the box I keep my toys in from the bathroom, if perhaps I've gotten lucky and stumbled upon the one person actually happy to provide affection and receive so little in return. A couple of mornings after he'd spent the first night, I'd woken up feeling groggy and sore again like I'd been comatose and not just asleep. I couldn't ever recall being so relaxed that it required actual conscious effort to move my limbs, to open my eyes and check I hadn't been dreaming. I hadn't been. Nor had I dreamed the nights before.

Sex has always felt like a step-by-step program I needed to follow, and while I probably cannot claim to be a great lover, I know at least I'm an efficient one. I've never left anyone wanting or unsatisfied, and as I'd lain there with Spencer, his breathing synced with mine, I'd let myself worry. How could it be that someone could be satisfied giving so much and getting nothing in return?

"Sex together feels just as good for me as it does for you," Spencer told me when I asked him, the sun hitting his eyes just right to bring out the gold flecks in the brown. He'd wiggled closer, expression near glowing, and I hadn't been able to look away. I don't think I'd ever seen him look so happy or open or comfortable. "Maybe even better."

I could believe that he thought that, but I can't believe that it could be true. Even now, walking down the stairs behind him, there's a comfort in myself that I'm not used to experiencing. So often, I feel as though I'm just an actor in my own life, resigned to my fate and no longer trying to push the plot in a direction I prefer. I've stopped fighting against myself and stopped

caring about everyone else. I found a man with personality traits opposite of my ex-husband and forced myself to cultivate attraction. I settled into that relationship just in time for it to end, and then I went to the bar and found someone even less emotionally available, but a warm body nonetheless. And now, somehow, I've found myself pulled into the orbit of someone I actually like and who, so far, seems to like me back. It's as though I didn't look far enough ahead in the script, and now I'm just as surprised as everyone else by the plot twist.

Adjusting the strap of the bag over my shoulder, I reach for Spencer before he can head for the back door. He glances back, surprised, but smiles.

"Should we grab food?" I nod toward my kitchen, still somewhat intact.

Spencer nods and treads a route over the wreckage on the floor. The man has been incredibly stubborn about buying his own groceries since starting work with Rudy. I can appreciate the independence, but I'm also wondering if he's buying, and so eating, enough. He's told me multiple times how he's trying to save the money he earns, which means he's not spending it on groceries. He's still rangy and thin like a junkyard dog; as far as I can tell, he's put on five, maybe ten pounds since he got here. Watching him dump my stash of snacks into a garbage bag before going to the refrigerator to look in there, I wonder if maybe this will work out perfectly. If we're suddenly sharing such a small space, there won't be any way for him to separate what's mine and his. I'll be able to force-feed him by proximity alone.

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"We'd better check on your demon," Spencer says, hefting the trash bag of groceries over one shoulder and laughing softly when he steps over a broken leg from one of the barstools.

The snowmen are nearly melted, sitting crooked and grotesque on the lawn, eyes drooping and mouths curved into a grimace. As he always does,

Spencer fixes the bowler hat as he walks by, shooting a grin over his shoulder at me before traipsing on.

I keep behind him, walking a little slower. I'd decided early on that I didn't care if Spencer was in my house, didn't care if he destroyed or stole anything. His physical presence doesn't concern me nearly as much as his psychological one—there's very little he could do to me bodily that I feel I need to be worried about, and an unfortunately long list of damage he could do emotionally. More than I had planned on permitting, that is for certain, and more being added on each day I continue to take advantage of his presence here. People can only hurt you when you allow them to, and at this point, I might as well be prostrate on the ground in front of him, begging to be trampled.

But me inviting him into my house holds different meaning and repercussions than him offering the same favor to me. Spencer doesn't have a house. He has a backpack and, right now, a space to keep it in. A space to sleep in. A space he has, thus far, barred me from. I haven't pushed for entry, and I wouldn't have done so no matter how unlivable I've just managed to make my own house. The cottage belongs to Spencer.

Spencer, who told me the other morning that he still woke up frightened when he didn't sleep with his shoes on, immediately worried that they'd been stolen off his feet; who slid a heavy chest of drawers in front of the door for fear that I'd try to sneak in at night. Spencer, who, every time I see him in town, interacting with others, keeps his body angled toward them, never showing anyone his back if he can help it; who scans each and every room he enters, looking for possible exits.

That's the Spencer this cottage belongs to, and that's still the one, at least partially, standing in front of me unlocking the door. Perhaps I'm not the only one struggling with whatever this mess between us is. Perhaps I, who finds an incredible amount of solace in being alone, am not the only one wary of inviting people in, and unsure what to do once they're inside. And indeed, it's that exact reluctance I see reflected in his eyes when he gets the door unlocked and turns to look at me.

"I can stay up at my house, Spencer," I tell him firmly. I don't like feeling as though I'm only being invited in because he's got it in his head that I own it and so he has to. As much as I hate myself for the desire, I want to be asked in because *he* wants it. I want him to make a consenting decision that doesn't factor in money or power or ownership rights. I can lie

to everyone else, but I can't pretend to myself that I don't want to be chosen.

"No," he says immediately, frowning, expression picking up some of that stubbornness I'm so used to seeing from him. "Here is fine. I don't—I want you to. I mean, if you want."

This last is added on almost as an afterthought. Like it's just occurred to him that I'll be the one suffering if I'm crammed into a small space with him. I watch as he cracks the door slowly enough that the kitten won't slip through unnoticed if she tries to make a run for it. Apparently having located her, he straightens and lets the door fall wide, stepping through and beckoning me to follow.

"Sleeping," he tells me, pointing at the bed and the little black shadow curled up in the center.

I stop in the doorway, leaning against the frame, and try to fight down the wave of sorrow that rises as I look around the room. Spencer hasn't unpacked. In fact, other than the kitten sleeping on the comforter and the hiking backpack propped against the far wall, there is no indication that someone lives here at all.

Spencer, following my gaze to his pack, blushes. It's something I've never once seen him do and, for whatever reason, makes me feel a little worse.

"I'm just used to living out of the bag," he says quietly. "That's all. It's easier to keep everything in one place."

Frustrated—not with him so much as myself and the world and the whole fucking situation—I wait until he meets my eyes. I'd thought we were past the days when I could look at him and see any measure of fear in his gaze.

"I'm not going to kick you out, Spencer. If I want you to leave, I will give you time to do so."

"No, I know, it's just..." His jaw works as he thinks for a moment, apparently trying to put words together in a way that might adequately explain something I have no hope of understanding. Just as quickly as it came, my frustration evaporates. Closing my eyes, I sigh.

"You don't have to unpack or explain anything to me, Spencer. This is your house; you can live here as you please."

He holds eye contact, chewing on his lower lip. I don't step further inside, having every intention of turning right around and going back to my

house. If I move in here with him, it will ruin everything.

“Come in, Dry. Plenty of room for your stuff in the wardrobe. And I’m going to need help putting all this away.”

He waves a hand at the bag of food sitting at his feet before beckoning me inside. *No*, I think, unable to say the word out loud even though I should. *Turn around and leave*, I urge myself. And then, like every other lovesick idiot I abhor, I do the opposite of what is best for me.



The guest cottage is roughly eight hundred square feet of space—a single large room divided into a small living area, a kitchenette, and a queen-sized bed. The bathroom has both a shower and a tub taking up the majority of the space, and a small washer/dryer unit next to the linen closet. It’s a good size for one person.

It’s not the best size for two people and a cat. Two people, it has to be said, who are probably equally bad at sharing space. It’s been a long time for both of us since we’ve had to live in such close proximity with another person and, at least for me, a long time since I’ve shared a bed with anyone. Spencer himself, on the few nights he has slept over with me, was the first person I’ve done that with in years. It’s possible we won’t even last through the night before I’m back up at my half-wrecked house and crawling alone into my own bed.

I swing my foot idly where it’s propped up on my ankle, watching Spencer in the kitchen from my vantage point on the bed. I’d shoved my clothes into the wardrobe and helped him put away the food we’d taken from my house, gotten annoyed by how little food Spencer already had here, and am now lying on the bed resting at his urging. I don’t need rest, but I can see the appeal of being made to do so and having everything all in one room. I have a perfect view of Spencer making pasta in the kitchen and have an equally unhindered view of him when he goes to twitch back the curtain on the front window and peer out. When he does it for a third time, I clear my throat.

“Spencer, what are you doing?”

“Keeping an eye on the movers,” he says immediately and with not a single ounce of embarrassment. I very nearly smile. Even in Siren’s Point,

home to the nosiest bastards I've ever met, people wouldn't so boldly admit to spying on each other as he just did.

"Why?"

"Because they're in your house," he replies, pulling the curtain back into place and spearing me with an incredulous look, like I'm the one being ridiculous. "They're here, and we're here, so we have to keep an eye on them."

"The Reeds have been married for thirteen years. They have an unholy amount of children, who all have alphabetically consecutive names. Every time Tanner sees me in town, he asks me how the lobsters are behaving. Two Christmases ago, Mia made me a wreath for the front door."

"There's no way of knowing who people actually are, Dry. They could still be murderers, no matter how many holiday ornaments they make you."

I twitch my foot back and forth, the motion languid enough that Demon, chewing on her own foot in the opposite corner, isn't tempted to attack it.

"I suppose," I allow, while privately thinking that if the Reeds are secretly a crime duo, then I've really lost my touch on reality and cannot be trusted to make judgments of others.

"I know they're not actually criminals," Spencer says, eye roll clear in his voice as he turns off the boiling water and pulls a jar of pasta sauce from the cupboard. "I still want to check and make sure they're not up to anything nefarious, though."

Demon, yawning so widely she tips backward, scrambles to her feet and steps awkwardly across the mussed bedspread toward me. It's funny how she'll run around the room, chasing toys and zooming up anything she can stick her claws into, but then look so ungainly doing something as simple as walking. I hold a hand out to her to sniff once she's close. She ignores me with a meow and uses her claws to climb up onto my belly.

"Ouch," I tell her, but my suffering is ignored. Yawning again—which comes out with a squeak I refuse to find adorable—she turns in a tight spiral, spinning around and around before finally settling down in a ball. She sighs as though her life is nothing but problems. I watch her, amused when she appears to fall asleep the moment her eyes are closed.

"Aw," Spencer says, leaving the stove and the sauce heating up to come look down at the kitten sleeping on my stomach.

"I have to pee," I tell him.

“Too bad,” he replies, bending down and hovering his face barely an inch above mine. I tilt my chin, and he closes the distance, the kiss as soft and weightless as the kitten.

The kissing surprises me. Actually, nearly everything about Spencer surprises me. Had I been made to guess, I would have assumed kissing was firmly in the category of things not allowed. But, I suppose, as I’m learning, it’s going to depend on the person. I’ve never kissed Ryan, any of the times we’ve been together, and kissing Shiloh had always left me vaguely uncomfortable. It meant nothing to me, but I could feel it meaning something to him, and I hated it. Even Dylan, who so often weaponized affection as a way to coerce me or to win arguments, became someone I kissed out of duty and not desire.

Spencer offering it had been a surprise in that he’d offered it at all, but also in that I enjoyed it. And will continue to enjoy it, apparently, as Spencer kisses me again before retreating to the kitchen. He’d been adamant that he was to make dinner tonight, and when I’d told him we could just order food and pick it up, he’d repeated, more firmly, that he wanted to make it and that I could relax. From what I can see, all he’s doing is boiling pasta and pouring a red sauce on top, yet it’s far more effort than I usually put into cooking. Gently, I brush my fingers across the crown of Demon’s head and down her knobby spine.

“Why are you looking at me so seriously?” Spencer asks, carefully setting two plates of pasta on the mattress before scooting in next to me. He’s close enough that our arms will rub together and probably make it a little difficult to eat. I push into a less reclined position, Demon meowing in outrage as I jostle her, before tucking her nose back into her tail and lapsing once more into sleep.

“Thinking about kissing,” I admit, which makes Spencer laugh softly. He hands me my plate. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Weirded out that I kissed you, but I won’t let you touch my dick?”

“Curious,” I admit, twirling noodles around the tines of my fork. “And possibly misinterpreting. I’d rather understand than make a mistake.”

“Mm.” He hums around a bite of pasta, one eye squinted shut as he thinks. “Well, I don’t kiss everybody, I can tell you that much. It’s a situational thing, for me, I suppose. Someone kissed me really... enthusiastically, once, and I don’t think they meant it to be a bad thing.

They were just being...passionate. But it wasn't nice for me. To me, it felt like they were raping my mouth or something, I don't know."

I pause, fork held above my plate, and look over at Spencer, frowning down at his food as he thinks. He makes an aborted shrugging motion.

"I guess with kissing, it's hard to pinpoint exactly what I like or don't like. I kissed you because I wanted to be close to you; show you how I felt. I wanted to give you something."

I swallow down the flippant remark about how he gave me four orgasms. That's not what he's talking about, and I think, for Spencer, sex has deeper layers than it does for me.

"I understand," I tell him instead, because now I do. I don't like not knowing things, and I'm really starting to appreciate how little I like not knowing things about Spencer. If I could think of all the questions, I'd ask him everything for the simple pleasure of learning the answers. "And you give me plenty."

"Uh-huh," he mumbles around a bite of pasta, not sounding as if he believes me. Demon uncurls just enough to twitch her nose in the air, smelling the food.

"No," I tell her firmly, certain I can see her little food-driven brain kicking into action.

"No pasta for kitties," Spencer agrees, putting down his plate and scooping her off my belly when she stands up and takes a couple of uncertain steps toward my dinner.

He brings her over to the corner where we have her food and water dish set up. Spooning some of that disgusting wet food onto the plate, he leaves her to her own, far less appetizing meal. He settles against me on the bed once more, closer than before, leg pressed against mine and shoulder sharp against my bicep.

"I watched your video," I tell him. He snaps his face toward me so fast I can hear his neck pop.

"The new one? You did?" He sounds so eager, it makes me uncomfortable.

I, too, understand the desire for your partner to take an interest in your life. It had, actually, been the best part of my relationship with Shiloh. I'd loved having someone who not only asked about my fishing business, but understood it. I was so used to living with a man who asked cursory questions about my day at work but never bothered to listen to the answer

or ask follow-up questions. I was never sure that Dylan actually even knew what I did all day.

And so Shiloh, wrong for me in so many other ways, had stood perfect in this one thing. When I complained about the price of lobster, he'd agree with me. When he wanted to know how the day went and I told him about wind and fog wreaking havoc, I never had to wonder whether he'd lose interest or space out. It was the single thing we shared and the only thing I worked hard to cultivate.

"Yes," I tell Spencer, returning the smile and watching his grow in return. "I enjoyed it."

It also worried me. This morning was one of the few times Spencer went to sleep and woke up in the same bed as me, and already I can feel that old ease slipping through my ribs and into my chest. Although I'm beginning to doubt whether I'll ever be able to handle him leaving, I'm certainly not ready for it to happen tomorrow. I couldn't help but notice, though, that not everyone is in agreement with me.

I'd gone looking at the comments section after watching Spencer's video, curious to see what was there after hearing some of the ridiculous things that had been read aloud to me by Spencer himself. None of these comments were silly or flirtatious, though. They were supportive, a little bit strange, and, in more cases than I care to remember, desirous of new things. Two months, apparently, is a long time for Spencer to stand still.

Several commenters even went so far as to provide recommendations of where he could go from here. One intrepid individual offered to pay the fee for a passport if Spencer didn't have one, wanting him to walk his way across the border into Canada for a new kind of adventure. I scrolled down the comments as doubt curdled in my stomach, acidic enough that not even I was fully able to kill it. How foolish was I to forget for a night—for even a single second—that Spencer would leave. There's something particularly insane about pretending a certainty won't come to fruition, and madness has never been a trait I would assign to myself. I'm a logical, intelligent, and, yes, self-fucking-centered person, and letting myself fall into this trap of *what-ifs* and *maybes* is hurting nobody but myself. I know better.

I know how the world works, and, specifically, I know how the world works in regards to me. I am not destined for a great romance like Shiloh and Ewan, spanning across years and state lines. I am not destined to

experience love, nor incite it in another person. I will not get to keep Spencer. I will get memories and regrets and a kitten.

“That was nice of you to watch. Kind of makes me embarrassed, though,” he says now, sliding his fork across his plate to catch any stray sauce.

“Why?” I ask, not taking my eyes from his face and wondering if tonight will be both the first and last time he cooks dinner for me.

“Mm, I don’t know. Just thinking about all the stuff that’s in those videos, I guess. Especially the old ones.” He grimaces. “I was doing a live stream thing when the dog started chasing me. People thought it was hilarious, and I felt like I was running for my life.”

Taking Spencer’s empty plate and stacking it on top of mine, I set them off to the side. Spencer leans into me, weight resting comfortably along my right arm. I don’t push him away, but neither do I pull him closer the way I want to. I’d like to ask him how he feels about stopping running away altogether, but keep that to myself as well.

“Shall we watch one together?” I ask him, looking toward the flat screen mounted on the wall in the area meant to mimic a living room.

“Oh *hell* no,” Spencer replies. “You can watch them when I’m not in the room. I don’t think I could take that kind of humiliation.”

“You post videos on the internet, Spencer. How on earth do you have any shame left at all?”

“It’s not like I know the people watching them! SaraBear1972 is a stranger to me—I don’t care if she thinks I should let my hair grow out a bit. But SexyLobsterGuyDry would be *known* to me. It would feel like stripping naked in front of you and asking for constructive criticism.”

“How did you manage to find out about my secret internet identity,” I deadpan, making him snort hard enough to jostle my arm. His hand rests gently on my thigh, long sleeve pulled down. After a moment, I rest my hand down on his forearm.

Spencer doesn’t move, but I can tell he wants to by the careful stillness. Through the thin fabric of the shirtsleeve, I can feel the slightly raised scarring. It didn’t look terrible the other night when he had his clothes off and I caught glimpses. Certainly not as ghastly as he seems to fear it looks, as it obviously looks to him. I slide my hand down so I can rub my thumb along the scar on the back of his hand, waiting for Spencer to keep talking about the vlogs.

“Can I come hauling with you sometime this week?” is what he asks instead, voice slightly wary, and body still holding a bit of tension.

“Yes. Same rules as before.” I might even add a few new rules on. When Spencer was walking around on the boat, it looked like it was his first day walking, ever. I don’t care how competent a swimmer he is; this time, I’m forcing the life vest issue. Perhaps I’ll hook a carabiner to the back and tether him to the standing shelter for good measure. Thinking about Spencer and his baby giraffe legs falling overboard is going to give me an ulcer.

“Okay,” he agrees readily, and then, as though he’s unable to think around my hand placement, he adds, “You’re the only person who has done that.”

“Do you want me to stop?” I offer, thumb still tracing the line of scarring up to the cuff of his sleeve and back down again.

I don’t mean anything in particular by it, and I certainly don’t want him to be distressed. But I’ve never seen him roll up the sleeves on his clothes—not even when we were inside, demolishing my living room by hand. He tugs the cuffs down almost obsessively, and if that motion draws anyone’s attention to his hands, he tucks them into his pocket or behind his back. I don’t even think he’s doing it on purpose. I think he had a terrible day that ballooned into an ongoing horror, and because he carries such a stark reminder around on his body, he hasn’t had a chance to move on.

“No, you don’t have to stop. It just feels strange, is all. And the scar is gross.”

“It’s just a scar, Spencer. The only thing that bothers me about it is how much it bothers you.”

He breathes out hard, arm relaxing enough for it to fall heavier in my lap. Demon scratches her way up the side of the comforter, ambling over, food caught in her whiskers, and still licking her lips. When Spencer reaches out to pet her, she meows so loudly one would think he tossed her from the bed.

“Good lord,” I murmur.

“Is that right?” Spencer says to the kitten, as though he understood exactly what she said. Demon makes another aborted meow as she bends into a downward dog. “Oh, big stretch.”

She snuggles up to Spencer this time, purring like a little lawn mower as she kneads her toes into him. The white tip of her tail disappears as she curls tight into a ball and, like last time, immediately falls asleep.

“Imagine sleeping like a cat,” Spencer muses. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I can sleep anywhere. But it’s not *good* sleep.”

“Do you sleep well here?” I ask.

I don’t know why I keep doing this—fishing for approval like this one thing will be what makes him stay. The truth is, I don’t know what, if anything, could make Spencer stay. I hardly know anything about him, and what I do know is rather damning for wishing he’ll remain. He likes to walk. He likes to visit new places. He told me, during one of his evening swims, that he dreamed of being able to save up enough money for a plane ticket overseas and a backpacking trip across Europe. I can’t remember the last time I even had a dream.

“Really great. This is the best place I’ve been in years,” Spencer confirms. The words feel like one of his kisses, warm and sweet.

“Good,” I say, staring up at the ceiling. “Good.”

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Chapter Nineteen



SPENCER

Dryden starts pulling away. It happens slowly enough that I can see it in real time, while also moving just quickly enough for me to be unable to stop it. It's small things—micro-expressions and silence and stretches of time that didn't use to be empty. He steps carefully through conversations, speaking words but not really saying anything. He lets me come out lobstering with him and Cody and then spends the entire day rigid and frosty, never speaking to Cody in anything other than a clipped, sarcastic tone and barely speaking to me at all except to warn me away from the side of the boat. He stayed in the cottage one night instead of joining me when I went for a swim, which hurt so badly I ducked my head under the surface and held my breath as long as I could, thinking that there was probably no better place for a good cry than a pool full of water.

Now, he's standing on the lawn, talking with a man holding a clipboard. After a moment, they walk into the big house, and I watch their reflections move across the glass. Dryden lifts an arm as though to point things out. I watch for a few moments longer before letting the curtain fall over the window once more.

Sitting cross-legged on the couch, I put a pillow on my lap and grab my laptop. I've gotten behind in what I consider the "admin" side of my job—responding to comments, direct messages, and emails. As low on the food chain as I am compared to a lot of other creators, there are still a fair few people who regularly reach out. There have been several times in the past where I'd been hungry, cold, and exhausted, but the loneliness had seemed most unbearable of all. Those faceless internet commenters had seemed the closest thing to friends.

I smile at the comments asking for more Dryden. He was a quick fan favorite, and every vlog or short I've posted since that inaugural video has seen my inbox flooded with different variations of the same question: where the hell is that superhot lobster fisherman? That was, in fact, the exact wording on several.

But on top of the messages asking for Dryden—which, admittedly, I kind of enjoy—most of the remaining comments are concerning my plans. Stagnation isn't kind to content creators. And although I don't put a lot of effort into growing, I can see a definite nosedive in my stats. Fewer views, fewer comments, fewer likes, none of which would bother me except that a decline in all of that also means a drop in capital. If I don't produce—and produce things people want to watch—then I don't make money.

Biting my lip, I log in to my bank and check my savings account. I don't carry a debit or credit card with me, too worried about being robbed or losing it. Instead, I take out small bits of cash here and there and stretch it as thin as it can go. I try to leave as much as possible in my savings, padding it slowly to keep for a big emergency or, hopefully, something nice. I like to daydream about owning a house, having money to travel on adventures, and a home base to return to. It's a pipedream more than anything, though. Saving is *hard*. The nearly two thousand dollars that is in there right now is an incredible amount of money and ten times what I've had at once in years.

But due entirely to Dryden's generosity, I've been able to save nearly every penny of what Rudy has been paying me at the vet clinic. I spend thirty dollars on groceries every week—another extravagance that makes my heart pound every time I check out at the register—and other than my cell phone bill...nothing. I don't pay rent. I don't have a car I need to service or put gas in. I wear the same five clothing items every day, and when I noticed the shampoo and conditioner getting low in the bathroom, Dryden had replaced them before I could. Life has never been so sweet to me as it has here in Siren's Point.

Looking at my royalty statement for last month, I worry my lip with my teeth and wonder how long I'll be able to push this. Theoretically, I could offset the lost income from my videos with my wages from Caring Claws. I have a job—an actual one, and not one based entirely off the twenty-second lifespan of people's attention—and the most stable home I've had in years. There are still things to do in Siren's Point, and as winter slowly bleeds into

spring, everyone keeps telling me that things will really pick up with the start of the tourist season. I could ask Dryden for more time on the *Maiden Seas* and maybe even convince him to let me do some lobstering myself. The boat videos still garner the most attention; more of those means more views and more time in Siren's Point.

And, more importantly, more time with Dryden. Because that's the real reason I haven't moseyed on down the road yet, even if it's a reason I'm trying not to look directly at. I don't like the endless hunger of living on the road, nor the way I can never truly feel warm or safe or rested. I don't like dialing my senses up to red alert and having to consider every person I meet a threat. I don't like the fear I feel when a police cruiser coasts by the patch of sidewalk where I'm sleeping or the endless dread of never truly knowing what the next day will bring.

But all of that is bearable. Discomfort is like an old pal at this point—not my favorite friend, nor one I'd invite in if I had any say in the matter, but something familiar. And truthfully, I'm starting to really question what would be worse in the end: two weeks without food, or two weeks without Dryden?

I could stay. I could stop walking and start adding bricks to the small bit of foundation I've started here. I could take Rudy up on his offer to help me with a veterinary technician recertification. And maybe I could live here with Dryden, keeping hold of his hand no matter how hard he tries to pull it away. Or I could leave. As much as I enjoy Siren's Point, it's just a place like any other to me. I've visited big cities and small mountain towns. I've walked through deserts and slept on beaches. I've been so many places, and in nearly all of them, I could find something to love.

If there's one thing I've learned in the last few years, it's that I'm an adventurer at heart. I could have done without the shove in the back that sent me into motion, but now that I'm here...well, maybe rock bottom was exactly where I needed to be to make myself look up. The life I'd been living had felt like happiness at the time—a job, an apartment, and a good friend I'd see once a month when we'd catch up over drinks on all the things that stayed the same in our lives. And then everything had gone wrong, and I'd felt like no matter how low I got, there was still further to fall. Leaving had felt like a step away from the wall my back had been pressed against. It had felt like the first clean gulp of mountain air after reaching the summit of a fourteener.

It had also felt like socks crusty with blood from blisters that never seemed to heal and shoulders rubbed so raw that even the lightest touch of air would send fire through my skin. It was a throat so dry that drinking water physically hurt and a stomach so empty that I didn't even crave food. It was walking into the unknown hand in hand with fear and excitement and the absolute peace that comes from following a road that doesn't end. There is so much to like in my life, even when it's hard for me, or others, to see.

And right now, staring at the most money I've ever had in my bank account, sitting on the softest couch I've ever sat on, in a house owned by a man I think I could fall in love with, I weigh that life against this one. Adventure versus stability. Lonely miles to be walked or a heated seat in Dryden's Porsche. Sleeping in the woods with a full view of the night sky or sleeping curled up in bed with an arm across my middle, keeping me safe. Adventure versus stability.

And there is, of course, the possibility that the choice isn't mine at all. Dryden's no fool, and I've never pretended to be anything more or less than what I am. I walked into town on a snowy winter day, and I'll probably be walking out on a spring one. I think he must know it better than I do, in the ways he's been withdrawing from me. He's already decided I'm leaving and is making sure he's prepared when I do. I'm not sure what it says about me or what we've been doing that he's assumed one thing without even considering the other.

Which, as I bite my lip hard enough to hurt, perhaps says plenty about Dryden's side of things. He didn't sign up for a life caring for, as he puts it, a stray. He offered me a temporary place to live and went far beyond the call of duty where that was concerned. With any other person, in any other town, I would have moved on by now. I would have placed a kind note on the dressing table, expressing my gratitude, and left the room as clean and tidy as I found it. I wouldn't overstay a welcome he hadn't even needed to offer.

Feeling antsy, I shut my laptop and slide it onto the cushion. My thoughts buzz loud enough that I can feel the hum down to my toes. In a somewhat metaphorical way, my body feels like it's telling me to get out, to seek fresh air and natural light and the burn of muscles as I walk my way to clearer thoughts.

Slipping my jacket on, I make sure my gloves and hat are in the pockets. Unsure about leaving the door unlocked, but also unsure about

whether Dryden has his key, I take mine and decide to find him before I leave. Stepping outside, I immediately see him and smile. No finding will be needed.

I lock the door in hopes that maybe I'll get lucky and won't have to walk alone today. Tucking the key into my pocket, I wait for Dryden's face to turn in my direction before I lift a hand and wave. He meets me at the back door, giving me a slight sense of *déjà vu*, harking back to the first time I ever approached this door, tentative and slightly afraid of what reception I might receive but feeling a call to try anyway. Swallowing against a dry throat, I smile at Dryden.

"Going somewhere?" he asks in a way that makes my stomach cramp.

"Want to take a walk? I need to get out."

He stares at me, face a blank mask and eyes dark. I can't stop thinking about how he told me *my* eyes were pretty and wondering if he hasn't been looking in the mirror properly. He's so beautiful it's hard to pinpoint exactly what it is that draws you in, but looking at those lovely, inky-brown eyes, I think a case could be made for them being his best feature.

"Sure," he says after a moment, stepping back and gesturing me into the big house. "Are we taking the car?"

I smile, charmed that he thinks we need to drive somewhere to find a place to walk. I shake my head.

"No, I thought we'd just take the road a ways."

He raises an eyebrow at that but doesn't comment. The man with the clipboard, who had been noticeably absent until now, walks down the stairs with a heavy-booted tread.

"Well, Roy, I think we can plan on this being—oh, hello." He catches my eye and nods in a gesture similar to a way someone might tip their cap. Clearing his throat, he puts his attention back on Dryden, over by the front door and pulling his jacket from the hall closet, supremely unconcerned. "Based on what you told me and what I'm seeing here, I think your best bet is a teardown and rebuild. Not what you wanted to hear, I'm sure, but—"

"That's fine," Dryden says calmly, and I almost laugh at the expression on the other man's face. I wonder how many people respond with "that's fine" when told their best option is to demolish their house.

"It'll be a pretty penny."

"Send me over the estimates. I'll take a look and get back to you by the end of next week," Dryden replies, waving him toward the door. When I

approach as well, he puts his hand on the small of my back as though I need to be guided through the doorway. I try to lean into it a little bit, telling him I like the contact without actually saying it in front of the other man.

“Contractor?” I ask Dryden once he drives off and the pair of us follow him down the driveway on foot. Dryden’s hand is no longer on my back, and he’s not a hand-holding sort of guy. The narrow distance between our bodies ensures our sleeves and hands brush as we swing our arms, which is enough for now.

Dryden told me, in a tone of voice more suited to a funeral than the bed where we’d been at the time, that he didn’t enjoy providing overt demonstrations of affection and that he found public displays particularly difficult to manage. “I’m not good at it,” he’d added, as if showing someone love required the same sort of skills as tennis.

But this is also the man who draped a scarf over my neck when it was snowing and I didn’t have one. The one who simply takes off his sweater instead of complaining about how high I have the temperature set in the guest cottage. The man who will fall asleep on the other side of the mattress but somehow always manages to find me in the dark and pull me in. And he’s the man who will tip my chin up to kiss me hello and pause, looking into my eyes like he needs to remind himself of the color at the end of every day. If this is a person unskilled in providing affection, then I must be a person unable to recognize it.

“Yes. It’s time for something new,” Dryden agrees. I use my body to steer him gently toward the right when we reach the turn off his driveway. We’ll be walking away from town, and it’ll be less likely for anyone to pass us on the road or stop to chat.

“You can put all those home reno shows to good use,” I joke. On the nights Dryden has the remote, he’ll put on a hockey game. On my nights, I usually go with home improvement. On one occasion, Dryden put on a documentary. I fell asleep fifteen minutes in, and he hasn’t tried again.

“Indeed,” he agrees, boots crunching on the snowpack along the shoulder of the road. It’s not lost on me that he’s positioned me on the inside and himself nearest the road.

“Thinking you’ll just expand what you did with the cottage?”

“Actually, yes. I have a few designs mocked up and a few contacts whose strings I can pull for materials.”

He doesn't sound excited, per se, but there's definitely something there. A little less bitterness and a tad more harmony. I lean into him a little bit, waiting for his eyes to meet mine.

"But keeping the pool, right?" I ask him, breath fogging in the cold air between us. He smiles.

"Of course."

A couple of cars pass on the road, slowing down and moving over the center line to give us a little space and avoid splashing any slush. For the most part, it's just us. It's still, here, and silent but for the creaking of the trees in the breeze, and the soft snap and thump of branches as snow weighs them down until they break, the sounds of our shoes and our breathing, and the occasional swish of a jacket as we rub against one another. Every time we round one of the bends, Dryden puts his hand on my back as though fearing a car coming around the curve and preparing to shield me. I turn my head and look at the trees to hide my smile.

"Sometimes I take a drive through here," he says, breaking the comfortable silence with soft words. I glance at him, hands tucked into my pockets to protect them from the cold.

"Let her rip around the corners?" I ask, thinking of the Porsche and Dryden's commitment to driving it even in the winter, no matter that he has a more suitable vehicle sitting unused in the garage.

"A little bit," he admits. "Not in the winter, though."

I nod, glad for that, not wanting to envision him wrapped around a tree trunk after hitting a patch of black ice on a curve.

"My sister bought me that car," he adds. It's the most talkative he's been in days and the most personal information he's offered without prompting since I've met him.

"Your sister bought you a *Porsche*?"

"On her birthday," he adds. "She gives me extravagant gifts on her birthday to, in her words, remind me of the day the better child was born."

I laugh so hard a bunny startles in the woods and scampers off into the trees. Dryden, mouth twisted into a smirk, meets my eyes when I finally get them wiped free of tears. I chuckle, unable to completely get the laughter under control.

"Older sibling or younger?" I ask, picturing a massive red bow atop the Porsche and what Dryden's face probably looked like when he saw it. I

have to breathe deeply through my nose to keep from breaking out in fits of giggles again.

“Older. By two years. She transitioned eight years ago, which is the other anniversary where I can expect to be showered in gifts.”

“She sounds amazing.”

“Yes. She’s a state’s attorney prosecutor.” I whistle, long and low. “And the only member of my family I’m particularly close with.”

I nod. My own parents, who I always felt did a pretty fair job of raising me, firmly pushed me out of the nest when I was eighteen. For a few years afterward, we got together on major holidays. And then those started tapering off as trips elsewhere were planned or work was unable to be avoided. They moved to Arizona, and I got mauled by a dog. They came to see me in the hospital to verify I was still alive. Then they went home to enjoy the desert sun, while I went home to watch my life fall apart. It didn’t occur to me then to ask for help, and I wouldn’t do so now. To them, having their child reach adulthood freed them of parental responsibility. My problems are my own.

“I’m not close with my parents either,” I tell Dryden, who raises an eyebrow at me.

“I do think mine might bum me a couple dollars if I found myself living on the street, though,” he comments. I snort. Sometimes I wonder if he can read my mind.

“I never asked my parents for help. They probably don’t even know that I need dollars. Although, to be honest, they likely wouldn’t share if I did ask. They’re very ‘you’re an adult, figure it out yourself’ type of people. Which, I do,” I add, shrugging. “I’m perfectly capable on my own.”

The gravel crunches under our boots as we walk. I think about my parents and how long it’s been since we’ve talked. I think about whether I would even be able to get the words out if I called them up to ask for help. Probably not. I was an independent child who grew into a tough, independent teenager. When we went places together, my parents would brag that I was an easy kid, that they never had to worry about me. Sometimes I wonder if I missed out on love because of it. I never learned how to ask for help, and they never learned how to give it.

Dryden hums a noise of agreement and lapses once more into silence. I think about the little bits of information he shared and tuck them away like

nuggets of gold I panned from a still river. I feel like an anthropologist, compiling lore on a new species. I wonder if I can tease out a bit more.

“Do you see them often? Your family?” I ask him.

“Mm. No, not often. Holidays, usually. Which is also the one time of year I see my ex-husband.”

I wrinkle my nose. Dryden, catching the expression out of the corner of his eye, huffs, air fogging in the rainy mist in front of his lips.

“It’s a nauseatingly insular world I grew up in. My parents spoke about Dylan and I dating before I’d even met him.”

“Ew, what? Were you in an arranged marriage?”

“Good lord, Spencer, this isn’t the aristocracy. They merely knew his parents. We were the same age and gravitated toward the same end of the spectrum sexually.”

“Still kind of sounds arranged to me,” I grouse, trying, and failing, to imagine my parents inviting a boy over for dinner because he might be husband material. “Also, talk about a bumner way to spend the holidays. Who wants to see their ex on Christmas?”

“Not I,” Dryden deadpans. “And the feeling is mutual. We rarely speak and just content ourselves to aggressive eye contact across the ballroom.”

“It’s not the aristocracy, Spencer,” I mimic. “It’s just a normal family with a normal ballroom.”

His mouth pinches closed in the way he does when he finds me funny. As usually happens when I’m feeling anxious or trapped, walking has unraveled my knots enough that I’m calm once more. Grounded. The pull to run has abated, and in its place is Dryden.

“Thanks for walking with me,” I say quietly, using my body to steer us across the road and back the way we came. I want to go home now and show him how much I care for him.

He opens his mouth to reply, but pauses before simply saying, “You’re welcome.” Smiling, I wave at the car that slows down to pass us.



Dryden is beautifully pliable in bed. He lies where I push him and relaxes into the mattress by increments—a slow heat melting away the tension. He doesn’t go further than a press of the fingertips against my leg or arm, and

he likes to watch. His eyes are always on me when I look up to find them, black speckled with silver as they reflect the light from the lamp. The attention burns like the first touch of warmth against frostbitten skin. I could turn the light off and be little more than an anonymous pair of hands in the dark. If he asked me to, I would.

But my preference is exactly this. I want to see each flutter of his eyelashes when he fights against the urge to close them. I want to feel the burn of his skin against mine and watch the way it pebbles with lust. I can feel him relax and watch the way he tenses back up. But more than that, I want him to know it's me, to feel hands on his skin and fingers inside him, and to see me there. I want him to see how good this is—how good *he* is—for me, and never wonder what, if anything, I get from this. I told him that sex probably feels better for me than it does for him, and it's true. How else is he meant to know this is genuine if he can't see my eyes to tell him?

I leave Dryden's box of toys alone this time, enjoying the connection of a slow and steady rise with nothing but my hands and mouth. And, as I'm reminded by his soft gasp as I stroke my fingers inside him, he's so incredibly sensitive that nothing else is needed. I repeat the motion and shiver at the way he reacts, my entire body buzzing with his energy. It's such a stunning transformation, watching the steel in his spine bend to something so wonderfully malleable.

"So perfect," I say softly. Pulling my fingers out of him, I move up between his legs far enough that I can bend down and kiss him. I want him to know it's not his physical attractiveness alone that's beautiful, but the whole of him. Dryden doesn't trust words, but I can show him.

Settling back between his legs and watching, with satisfaction, the way his eyelids seem heavier and his mouth parted further as he struggles to keep his breathing even, I touch him. I consider, for a moment, moving this in a different direction and giving him a blow job, but it's not the time, and that's not what he needs. What he needs is this—unhurried adoration and purposeful worship. He needs someone to give him what he deserves and show him that it's okay to want.

"Spencer," he says, minutes, hours, perhaps days, later. I breathe out hard, shivering as he turns my name into a plea of yearning. I move my hand, fingers curling, and he groans. So reactive. So responsive. So perfect for me.

I like to bring him up to the ledge with teasing before letting him fall. When I wrap the fingers of my free hand around his dick, his hips jerk at the contact, and he moans like it hurts, no matter that I've left his cock untouched until now. I can feel him there, right on the cusp, and stroke him accordingly. Fast, but not punishing. Firm, but not painful. When he comes, he squeezes his eyes shut and continues moving his hips, grinding himself through the tunnel of my fingers. I want to kiss him again but caress him through completion and further, knowing the pleasure doesn't have to end so abruptly.

Gratification, for Dryden, is a wave that brings him right up to shore and deposits him into sleep. He drifts, eyes closing and lips parting. I wonder if the fall has always been this easy or if he's used to fighting it. Bending down to kiss the inside of his thigh, I slide one leg off the bed and stop when he grabs my wrist.

"Stay," he says, voice sated and sleepy. His eyes are barely open, and his grip is loose enough that it would require no strength to break it. The plea makes me feel woozy for a moment, and I almost capitulate, crawl back into bed, and tuck in beside him to bask in the glow of Dryden wanting me like a lizard sunning itself on a rock. But this part—the cleanup and caretaking and the trust Dryden has in me to allow himself to doze while I do it—is my favorite part. Pleasure doesn't end with orgasm, and neither does my purpose. I'm the one who gets to show him how it feels to be cherished.

"Just going to grab a washcloth," I tell him quietly. "I'll be right back."

He lets me go with a yawn, straightening his legs and pointing his toes as though stretching. His eyes are closed, but they open as I fully rise from the bed, watching me as I cross the room to the little bathroom. Turning on the tap and letting the water warm up, I rub my fingers together. I always feel so wonderfully settled and alive after being with Dryden. In the past, people's misunderstanding of my sexual preferences and their disbelief that anyone could want what I want made for some disappointing and, at times, frightening encounters.

I don't like to fall prey to the "perhaps it's better not to try at all" way of thinking, but sometimes it's difficult not to do so. Being alone has proven much easier for both my lifestyle as well as my sexuality. I haven't been with someone in a long, long time, and I've never once been with someone like Dryden. Testing the water with my fingers to make sure it's warm

enough, I wet a cloth. Perhaps Dryden and I are both unique species—one half of a whole that functions best when they're together. Soulmates, I suppose would be the term, although I've never given such a thing enough thought to even know if I believe in that.

Leaving the bathroom on legs still a touch shaky, I quietly approach Dryden. Miraculously, he's still awake, eyelashes parted to watch me as I sit next to him and lovingly wipe the mess from his stomach. He raises a hand to trail his knuckles down the side of my back, making me shiver. He largely keeps his hands to himself when we have sex, content with fingertips pressed to my arm or leg and letting his gaze do all the touching. It makes it all the better when we're done and he presses gentle regard into my skin through the pads of his fingers. I've never met a person so willing to stay on one side of a boundary I've erected instead of snapping and clawing at the fence.

I don't like sleeping undressed, too aware of how difficult—impossible, really—it is to defend or flee when you're at such a severe disadvantage. When shit hits the fan, you don't want to be stumbling around, trying to pull your pants up. But Dryden feels like a safety net. Even when he was sleeping up at the big house, and me here, my anxiety felt dampened. I imagined an invisible force field around the property, and Dryden himself the epicenter. It's not so difficult to slide into bed beside him, naked but for my underwear, and tuck the fear away for later. It'll be there to greet me on another day, an old friend never far behind, watching my back.

But tonight, like last night, and several before that, I don't have to survive. I get to create a nest of warmth under soft sheets, curled into a ball and facing Dryden, watching his face in the dark. I get to stay awake, not because I have to be alert for possible danger, but because I like to be present for the moment Dryden falls asleep and rolls over onto his stomach. I get to exist in that perfect pocket of time when he curls an arm over me and pulls me in the way someone might tuck a pillow into their chest. I get to close my eyes and fall asleep held in the security of knowing Dryden will be there in the morning.

Chapter Twenty



DRYDEN

In some wild turn of fate, the day my divorce was finalized by the judge three years ago was also the same day as our wedding anniversary. I wake up early on the day of, as I always do, opening my eyes to a dark room. There is a leaden, almost paralytic feel to my body, as though everything but my brain has decayed. Sitting up as carefully as I can, aware and trying to ignore Spencer's presence in the bed, I slip out from under the sheets. He twitches, face scrunched as he mumbles, but doesn't wake. I look away from him, wishing he weren't here.

Retreating to the bathroom, I rub my hand over my face and check the weather on my phone. Cold, but calm, as far as the wind goes. Texting Cody that we're hauling, I splash some water on my face and brush my teeth. I'm hungry and in no mood to eat, wishing I could crawl back into bed with Spencer and hating him for being here at all. Hating myself most of all for letting him in in the first place. I'm weary of waiting for him to tire of Siren's Point and leave. I want him gone. I want my bed back and my house to myself and the blessed relief of not giving a single fuck about anyone but myself.

"Dry?" he says when I leave the bathroom, voice rough with sleep but still sounding far more awake than I can ever manage just seconds after rising. He's a much better morning person than I am.

I make a noncommittal answering noise and start getting dressed. Spencer clicks on one of the bedside lamps, and I stiffen. I don't want to look at him or talk to him. I want to slip out the door into the dark, silent morning and come home to find him gone. I don't want to pretend this time

together has been anything more than a fun interlude for both of us. I don't want to wake up after six years together and find out it was all a lie.

"Going out on the water?" he asks, as though there would be any other reason for me to get up so early.

"Yes," I reply, wondering if he can hear the razor blades in the word or if they remained stuck in my throat.

"Okay. Be safe," he replies, and I barely manage not to flinch. I can see him out of the corner of my eye, sitting up in bed with the sheets pooled around his waist, skinny chest pale, and brown hair spiked up. I watched him cut it a few days ago and helped him get the back of his neck. He'd smiled at me like I'd presented him with the Hope Diamond.

The air outside feels freezing compared to the almost sauna-like heat of the cottage when I finally walk out the door. Spencer likes to be warm, and even in my currently foul mood, I can't begrudge him that. I've never slept outside in frigid temperatures, but I've spent enough days working in them to know how to appreciate a heated home. I look back at the cottage when I get to the Porsche, already knowing the light will be on inside, peeking around the curtains. He never goes back to sleep after I leave. Acid rolls in my stomach at the fact that I know him well enough to recognize his habits. Too long. I've let this go on far, far too long.

Cody is on the *Maiden* when I reach my slip, grunting a hello to me at the sound of my footsteps. I often dream of slapping duct tape over his mouth to get some peace and quiet during the day, but I rarely have to wish it in the mornings. He knows I don't like the early starts and leaves me be. I send up a quick prayer to anybody who might be listening that today is a day where he lets me hold on to the silence for the duration. Cody allows me to get away with a lot, but even the most agreeable of people will eventually grow weary of a dog that does nothing but bite.

It's a clear morning, the buoys easy to find and the water almost deceptively calm. It reminds me of the morning Cody and I went out, thinking we'd have success grappling, only to end the day calling for a rescue. The weather had cooperated then, too, right up until the moment it didn't.

"You all right, Dryden?" Cody asks, after hours have passed with little more than grunts and single words between us. I'm never chatty, but I suppose emotional dissonance is as easily felt as verbal.

"I'm fine," I reply, which isn't a lie, even though it tastes like one.

Hook the buoy, attach the line to the pot hauler, lift the trap to the rail, sort the catch, slide it down to Cody to re-bait. Pull the next, sort the catch, slide it down, and do it again. And again. And again. We eat between buoys, never breaking stride or stopping the boat for longer than necessary. Haul, sort the catch, bait and release. Over and over again.

I used to be a gym rat, less because I liked the actual fitness aspect and more because the results were expected of me. I enjoyed seeing a smooth, gym-toned body in the mirror just as much as Dylan appreciated it in his bed, and so the burn never felt like a burden. Now, with a job that requires enough physicality of me to constitute a workout in itself, I can recognize the other, less obvious benefit of fitness.

It calms me. It shaves down my frayed edges and helps me regulate emotions I'm not accustomed to dealing with. It allows my mind to stop fixating on logic and problems and things I don't understand and to focus instead on the burn of muscles and the ache in my joints. It's hard to care about a hurt in the chest when your back is screaming for the attention.

"Want to grab a drink, boss?" Cody asks as we unload our haul. It's the second time he's asked me in so many months and makes me wonder why he thinks now, after several years working together, is when I'll be persuaded.

"No," I answer, hoping that will be the end of it. I want to be left alone. I desire friendships as much as I do a relationship, which is to say, not at all. Give people the space to hurt you, and they will, every single time.

Cody says something cheerful in response, which I barely pay attention to. I actually do want a drink, but I want it alone. Or, better yet, in the company of Ryan, who doesn't care about me at all, nor ever pretends to.

But there's no avoiding home or the man waiting there for me. No work at the vet clinic today means he was off walking around, filming things and talking to people. It also means that he will be at the cottage when I arrive back, as there has never yet been a day where I've gotten home and he wasn't already there. If I let myself, I'd compare that to how it felt being married to a man who never once greeted me as I walked in the door and enjoy it a little. But I can't, because every good thing comes to an end, and the more I like it now, the harder it will be to live without it once it's gone.

There's a pressure behind my eyes as I turn the car onto my property, like the beginning of a sinus headache. If I were the sort of person who cried, I'd wonder if it was that. But because I am not, I sit in the Porsche as

the engine ticks down, head resting back against the seat as it throbs. The main house is dark and still, silent, the way it always greets me at the end of the day. The guest cottage, visible across the expanse of the yard, has a little square of yellow light reflecting through the window onto the grass.

Spencer meets me at the door with a frown when I finally leave the car and walk toward the cottage. He's dressed in the same sweats I let him borrow weeks ago, and his hair is wet. Swimming or fresh from a shower, but, if I had to speculate, I'd guess swimming. Another little sliver of pain wiggles beneath my skin. I know too much about him.

"What's wrong?" he asks, eyes bouncing between me and the car as he holds the door open for me to enter. "You sat out there a long time."

I almost laugh. Dylan, who is always near at hand on this day more than any other, was so oblivious it was almost charming. He never remembered anything I told him and could be counted on to let even the most obvious of changes in routine pass him by. I sprained my wrist at the gym once, and despite the ACE bandage I'd kept it wrapped up in and me taking two weeks off working out, he'd never said anything. He'd asked if I wanted to play doubles with him and was surprised to learn I probably couldn't play tennis without the use of my right wrist. He'd laughed and made a joke about how things just went over his head and then promptly forgot to ever ask me about the injury again.

Spencer—the polar opposite in so many ways—notices everything. If I sneeze in the morning, he'll ask me that evening if I'm feeling okay or if I think I'm coming down with a cold. If I favor any part of my body, he asks what happened and follows up for days afterward. "How's your shoulder doing today?" he'll ask, brown eyes serious and unwavering, as though muscle stiffness is something to be concerned about. And if I come home from a long day hauling and spend ten minutes sitting in the car on the driveway, he'll look at me with concern in those pretty eyes and demand to know what's wrong.

"Nothing," I tell him, watching the frown curl a little deeper into his cheeks before he turns his back and locks the door behind me. As though unable to resist, he twitches aside the curtain and peers out, reassuring himself that nobody is there and we're alone.

Exhausted and wishing this house were big enough to afford me places to hide, I take off my boots to leave at the door. Spencer's eyes remain on

me, a pressure on the back of my neck as insistent as the one throbbing in my temples. I feel like shit.

“Hauling go okay?” he asks, trying a different avenue to find out what might be the issue.

“It did. We’re pulling more in the traps, which is a good sign for the season.” I glance at him as I say this, watching the way his expression relaxes. If I’d given him a one-word answer, he wouldn’t have been deterred. He’d have tried harder.

“That’s good. Are you hungry? I was going to make a peanut butter sandwich. But if you want something else—”

“I think I’m going to shower,” I interrupt, wondering if tonight, for the first time in my life, the sorrows will consent to being drowned.

“Okay. I’ll make you something to eat. You’re probably starving.”

He stares at me after he says this, eye contact firm and posture somewhat stiff as though hunger isn’t the starvation he’s referring to. It doesn’t feel like it’s my hand that reaches for him, nor my lips that press against his. I meant to mollify him—to give him what he wants—with the gesture, but it’s clear from the hurt in his eyes that I wasn’t successful. The kiss felt as hollow to receive as it did to give it.

Disappearing into the bathroom feels oddly cowardly, and showering off the day doesn’t feel half as good as it usually does. Unchanneled frustration nips at me, and my body feels heavy with exhaustion despite the typical level of effort I put in. I feel as though I’m wearing a weighted vest as I pause with a hand on the bathroom door, stopping to give myself another moment before subjecting myself to Spencer’s presence once more.

I think it’s time to be done. This transient fling has twisted and molded itself into a relationship, and it’s time for it to stop. I’m a lot of things, but an idiot isn’t one of them, and only children and the foolhardy don’t learn from their lessons the first time around. I learned everything I needed to learn from Dylan.

I made sure to put barriers into place when I met Shiloh, made sure that history wasn’t going to come back around for a repeat, and I wouldn’t find myself at the mercy of another person again. He tried to bring me closer, and for two years, I pushed him away. I was proud of how fucking easy it was to let him go when it was time. I’d succeeded in precisely what I set out to do and found myself on the other side of a relationship with not a single scar to show.

It's madness to find more connection with a homeless stranger than a man I was with for two years. Even worse to let something as unmanageable as feelings become involved. Somehow, in the short time I've known Spencer, I've regressed years in reverse, back to the kind of person who lets someone spend an entire night in their bed and wakes up with them in their arms; the kind of person who thinks of another before themselves and will suffer for it in the end. I wish I could say I didn't know better.

Spencer isn't waiting on the other side of the door, but his discomfort is. As promised, there's a peanut butter sandwich on the nightstand on my side of the bed. He's sitting on the other, knees bent and arms wrapped around them, eyes on me the moment I step into the room. I work to keep every ounce of frustration off my face and out of my voice as I join him. He shouldn't be punished for the things that are wrong with me.

"Thank you."

"No problem," he replies quietly, eyes narrowed and brow low as he watches me. He's puzzled, not angry, and I give myself yet another thing to be annoyed about with the realization. I wish I didn't know him well enough to read the emotions straight off his face and hope, for both our sakes, that he's not as adept at reading mine.

It's the most uncomfortable we've been together since that first day, and the first time I've ignored the desire to ease it. Instead, I let it fester. I let Spencer stew in his worry. I turn up the sound on the television to a volume just loud enough to deter talking. And when it comes time to go to sleep, I meet the hurt in his stunning eyes with a cool wall of indifference and turn out the light.



Spencer is awake, so stiff and unrelaxed that he's somehow managing to make me uncomfortable, too. I lie still, feigning sleep but unable to produce it in actuality, and am stupidly grateful for my alarm once it goes off. As though he'd merely been waiting, Spencer sits up.

"Morning," he says, voice missing the rasp it usually has when he greets me first thing. I doubt he slept at all. I allow the guilt to grow just long enough for it to chafe. Just long enough to add another layer to the bad

mood that hadn't quite loosened its hold on me since yesterday. I swing my legs over the side of the bed and reach for my phone.

"Go back to sleep," I tell Spencer, pulling up the weather on my phone and grimacing. I consider, for longer than I should after the events of this winter, going out to haul anyway. Storm cells don't always amount to anything, and this one doesn't look to be coming close enough to be much of a bother. Cody and I could go out and push hard through the morning, make it in early, before the weather has a chance to turn.

But the me before Spencer would not push anything at all. The me of a few months ago would be happy for enough wind to keep us docked, happy with a few more hours of sleep and a day spent in clothes that could double as pajamas. If I call Cody in and take the *Maiden Seas* out, I won't be doing it out of necessity or want of anything other than avoiding Spencer. Throwing back the covers, I stand.

"Sounds kind of windy," Spencer notes. "You're not going to haul, right?"

I must have been clenching my jaw all night for how badly my ears are aching. Rubbing a finger against the joint, I walk toward the bathroom.

"Dryden." A familiar bite snaps at my name, his tone reminiscent of the way he'd spoken that day on the road. *Do not touch me*. Softening my mouth into a smirk, I look at him over my shoulder.

"You can go back to sleep," I repeat, happy with how indifferent I sound.

"What's wrong?" he asks, and if it weren't for the way his hands are clenched into the bedsheet, I'd probably believe he was calm. I stare at him, noting that the sweats he's wearing are mine and letting that hurt just a little bit.

What's wrong is I think I love him and that I feel almost exactly the way I felt when Dylan and I first got married. What's wrong is that I cannot trust myself to recognize my own emotions, nor another person to care for them. *Isn't it obvious?* I want to ask. *You're what's wrong. I shouldn't have let you in, and now I'm the one who has to make you leave.*

"Spencer, let's save time and assume that the answer to that question is always going to be nothing. I'm fine, besides being desirous of a little silence."

I close the door to the bathroom without looking at him. There's plenty of silence now, although it's the sick variety, twisted with words that would

be much better said. I pee, wash my face, and brush my teeth, imagining the ocean and letting the numbness roll over me like a wave. I can do this. If there is one thing I know how to do, it's look after myself.

This time, Spencer very nearly is waiting on the other side of the door when I open it. He's perched on the end of the mattress, facing me, back straight and body stiff as a board. He's an emotional aerial, tuned in to the vibrations of others and the world around him. Words are the least of what Spencer will need to pick up on discontent. I can imagine just how many warning bells are ringing in his head right now. My attitude is probably scaring him.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asks, the question as precise as a hammer striking a nail home. I look away from him and toward the backpack leaning against the wall. Poetic justice, I suppose, that his fear has kept him from taking the steps to stay, and mine will be what tells him he isn't welcome to.

"No," I reply with quiet honesty. No, I don't want him to leave. But nobody ever gets what they want, and he's going to go anyway.

Spencer frowns, shifting a bit on the end of the mattress. I'm not making sense to him, which is fitting, since I rarely make sense to myself either.

"Are you sure?" he asks eventually. An ache throbs in my ear, and I make an effort to unclench my jaw again.

I didn't really think I'd have to be the one to push him away. From the start, I've thought it would be him making that choice. From day one, Spencer has balanced with a foot out the door, poised to disappear the moment his welcome expires. He agonizes over the value of everything, seeing dollar signs and his inability to produce them. He lives in a world where power is never balanced on his side of the scale, and I can see it in his eyes now, the fear that I'm going to try and tug a little more my way.

"You haven't done anything wrong. I'm not upset with you." My voice sounds robotic even to my ears—blank and expressionless. I sound like a liar. "You don't have to leave, but I am."

A war of emotions flits across his face—consternation and stubbornness, confusion and hurt, worry. He doesn't know why I'm acting like this, and he's nervous about what it means. He wants to push me for something, but suddenly finds himself on ground too shaky to plant his feet.

"I'll be back soon," I tell him. "I'm just going to get out for a drive."

He lets me get all the way to the door, the dead bolt loud in the sick silence of the room. I want to apologize for my foul mood and tell him it's not his fault, see those pretty eyes happy again, kiss his cheek and crawl back into bed. I'd like to fall back asleep and wake up a different person.

"You have to tell me," Spencer pleads softly. I close my eyes, hating how miserable he sounds. "You can't expect me just to know what you want."

I straighten, smoothing my features until I can face him with a blank expression. I think about the six years I spent married and trying to be someone I wasn't, and the two after that learning every way I failed. I think about the night Shiloh and I played pinball for hours, and how he taught me to use a four-point bridle. I think about the shimmer of pool water on pale skin, a chipped tooth and gingerbread cookie eyes, how it felt to let go and trust tender hands and a soft mouth. I think about silence and solitude and how futile it is to care.

"I'm only tired, Spencer." I look at him then, no longer sitting on the end of the bed but standing near the corner. The words I should say stick in my throat. I should tell him he's overstayed his welcome, and that I'm tired of being forced into cohabitation with him. I should tell him he's a leech on my time and money, that it's been fun while it lasted, but every good thing must come to an end, and we've reached ours. I should tell any number of a hundred lies—hit him exactly where I know it'll hurt. It's what I would do if this were any other person.

"I just need a little space," is all I can force out when what I really want is to beg him to stay. I don't need space from anyone but myself.

"Have you ever been to the Aspen Bend nature preserve? Up north of here?"

I stare at him, the question nearly random enough to jar me out of the depths I've sunk to. Spencer takes a hesitant step toward me, eyes large on his pale, narrow face.

"No."

"I'd like to go," he says carefully. Softly. The way he speaks to Demon when he's trying not to startle her. I frown, the realization taking seconds longer than it should. He wants to go *now*.

Only years of experience masking keep me from reacting. If I were being honest, my hope has always been that he would leave without saying goodbye. I wanted to stop at the animal hospital to pick him up from work

and see the bench out front empty. I wanted to come home and find his backpack missing, all evidence of him gone from everywhere but my mind. I did not want to hear false promises and pretty lies about staying in touch or coming back.

“I see,” I say eventually, when the silence has become uncomfortable. And I do. This is what I expected would happen and precisely what I had been bracing for. It doesn’t feel good to be right.

“But...but once I explore for a bit, I’d like to come back,” he continues, voice just a bit firmer. The space between us feels impossibly wide—a distance far greater than what the size of the cottage allows.

I look at him, eyes the color of brown sugar, sweatshirt baggy, and hair flat on one side from the pillow. He’s got that look on his face he used to wear—the street-wary, slightly fearful, stubborn mask. He has no home, and has just voiced the possibility of leaving this one. He’s expecting the door to be shut and barred to him, were he to return.

“You can always come back,” I tell him, dragging the words painfully out through a raw throat. He can, but he won’t. I cannot help but add the closest I’ll get to a plea in my life. “And I hope that you do.”

I turn, knowing this is the end and I can retreat to safety. I wish I had never woken up this morning.

“Will that be enough space?” Spencer asks, voice closer, like he took a couple of steps in my direction. I think if he were to touch me, I’d beg him not to go. “If I spend a few weeks at the national park?”

Too much. Far, far too much space. If he goes, I’ll never see him again, and I’ll have ruined yet another of the good things I never deserved to have in the first place.

“Yes, that will be enough,” I agree tonelessly.

Opening the door, I step into a wall of cold, dark air. An excavator looms in the distance, sitting beside my house, waiting to tear it down. The wind pushes at my chest as I walk toward the Porsche, arcs of light spreading across the grass as I click the key fob. When I climb into the driver’s seat, I close my eyes and lean forward, forearms braced on the steering wheel. I’m exhausted. My bones ache, and my head throbs. I want to turn around and go back to the cottage. I want warmth and softness and Spencer. I want things I no longer have.

Having understood the silent subtext in the words he spoke, I wait. I wanted to go for a drive, after all, and there is no reason I can’t be the one

to drive him away. Poetic, I suppose, since I've been emotionally doing the same thing. His bag always packed and ready to go, I do not have to idle long before the cottage door opens and he emerges, dressed for the road. His backpack is hooked on one shoulder, and my scarf is curled around his neck. I stare out the windshield as he climbs in, not yet ready to take my final look at him.

I drive him until he asks me to stop, the time passing silently until his quietly spoken "Here is fine." Dutifully, I pull the car into the rest stop, feeling ill. When I rest my hand on the gear shift to put it in park, Spencer's fingers ghost across mine.

"A few weeks," he reminds me. I wonder if he can hear what I can—the lie and the false hope.

"Yes," I agree. Closing my eyes, I add, "Call me if you need anything. Please."

He won't. He and I are similar in that respect, the both of us stubborn and independent and so used to being alone that anything else feels wrong.

He doesn't linger, which is a relief. Now that we are here, I am eager to be done with this part. Spencer slips from the car, closing the door gently behind himself and situating his pack on his shoulders. I watch, hand resting on the gear shift, skin tingling from the press of his fingers, and keep my eyes on his back as he walks away until he's far enough down the road that I can no longer see him. I've lost my bad mood from this morning, I realize, looking at the empty stretch of asphalt in front of me. Now I feel nothing at all.

On the way home, I pass Shiloh's house and experience a strange, stabbing pain in my stomach as I catch movement in the downstairs window. How typical of me to be jealous of Shiloh and Ewan when just hours ago I told Spencer I wanted space. I should be happy. I have plenty of space now.

My heart pounds as I slowly approach my house, almost running into the garage door, unable to tear my eyes away from the guest cottage. Spencer left a light on inside, although the exterior is just as still as it usually is. It doesn't look empty, even though it feels that way.

I sit in the car, staring at the house, sick to my stomach. Part of me wants to turn around and keep driving. The other part is wishing self-sabotage had waited until another time, and today could have been spent in bed with Spencer, listening to the wind, arguing over hockey stats for

players he doesn't know, and eating my weight in junk food. Opening the door, I leave the Porsche and click the locks, putting my hands in the pockets of my sweats as I cross the lawn.

The breeze bites its way through the sleeves of my sweater as I unlock the door to the cottage. The inside is pristine—the kitchen counters clean and the bed made with military precision. The bathroom, through the open doorway, is dark and empty. Demon meows as she walks toward me, tail held straight in the air, tiny bell jingling on her collar. On the bed is a note, and Spencer's backpack is gone from its usual place against the wall. The cottage is empty, and I have all the space I thought I wanted.

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Chapter Twenty-One



SPENCER

I never used to wonder who might come through for me in an emergency. I'm young, and bad things happening to young people somehow always felt like something you might see on the news but was impossible. It wouldn't happen to me. I didn't need to plan for it.

And then I'd started sliding down that slippery slope. I'd reached the bottom only to find there was further to fall, and by then, it was too late to wonder if anyone would catch me; I just had to hope that someone would. In the end, it was my friend Grace who had a couch with my name on it, a hot-water bottle, and a face mask while we sat and talked about her hopes for receiving a proposal from her partner soon. She'd said it was like an extended sleepover—me living with her—fun and exciting. And for a while, it was. But the thing people don't understand is the toll charity takes on both sides—the giver and the receiver.

I started obsessing over how much money I was going to owe her once I found a job and got back on my feet. I'd felt trapped in that tiny one-bedroom apartment and ashamed for being so ungrateful about a space that she'd been selfless and kind enough to share. But mostly, I'd hated having to receive help at all. I'd wanted to be on my own, to get better and go back to work. I wanted one of these places I was "overqualified" for to actually hire me instead of using that as an excuse to turn me away. I wanted to sleep in a bed that was mine and not on a lumpy couch. I wanted to not feel like I had to vacate or hide whenever Grace brought Elizabeth home to spend the night.

And most of all, I wanted to leave. The hospital, that town, Grace's apartment, and my own fucking *head* had become a prison. My body didn't

feel like my own, and my life sure as hell wasn't. I spent hours watching a man vlog his adventures hiking fourteeners and would think, *if I were on top of that mountain, I'd jump off.*

It was Grace telling me that Liza was going to move in that gave me the final push. We sat up late that night, sipping hot chocolate at the kitchen table, laptop between us, making a plan for me as though I had any control over my world at all. Grace gifted me her old camera to use and a winter jacket that she'd bought for her brother but wanted me to have instead. I'd felt something close to hope as I loaded up a backpack I'd bought on a whim once and never actually used. *Think of it like an adventure*, I'd told Grace, who'd looked close to tears but smiled anyway. She wanted me to stay, and I couldn't find the words to explain my certainty that doing so would kill me.

I've never quite forgotten that feeling of leaning so hard on someone's love that I feared it would collapse. It felt like living with a guillotine poised over my neck, never knowing if, or when, it might fall; in the end, wishing it would, just to stop the misery of the anticipation. It was so much easier to be on my own, even when it felt impossible. There were good days when I felt invincible. And there were bad days when I remembered I didn't matter. I survived them all, and I would survive this one.

Rudy doesn't answer the first time I call. I wait fifteen minutes and try again, knowing I need to turn my phone off to conserve battery but not wanting to say what I need to say on a voicemail. He answers on the final ring, dogs barking in the background and a slightly harried note to his voice.

"Spencer," he greets me, sounding a touch weary. "How are you?"

"I—" Clenching my fingers around my phone, I stare at the road in front of me. It's so beautiful here, with the ocean close enough to smell and the woods hugging the road. Unconsciously, my steps slow. Rudy has been kind to me. He gave me a job and offered me options for a future, if I wanted it. I don't like leaving him on such short notice. I don't like leaving at all.

"Spencer?" he asks when I've been silent for too long. "You okay?"

"I—I wanted you to know that I have to leave. I know it's last-minute, but...I have to go. Not forever. Just for a few weeks." My eyes sting, and I blink away the burn. I could stay. I have enough money to try and rent a Libby cottage or even stay a few nights in a hotel. I could sleep in the

woods, now that the weather has begun slowly melting into spring, the moisture falling as rain, not snow.

And then what? Knock on Dryden's door in a couple of days, hoping that it was enough time for him to miss me, enough time for him to want me back? Or, perhaps more likely, enough time for him to realize he prefers it with me gone and I wasn't meant to return at all.

Rudy is silent for a beat, nothing but the slightly echoing sound of a dog barking in the background.

"That's okay," he says, clearing his throat. "You can take a few weeks and come see me when you return, all right?"

I scrunch up my face at the offer and the kind tone it was presented in, like a friendly arm wrapped around my shoulders and giving me a squeeze. I haven't stopped feeling like I might cry all morning, and this isn't helping.

I reply with a slightly inarticulate agreement and gratefully hang up the call. Rubbing a hand over my face, I catch a rock with the toe of my boot, sending it skipping across the pavement. It feels strange to be carrying my backpack. In fact, it feels heavier, somehow, like the time I've spent in Siren's Point has manifested into a cinder block I have to carry. I don't want to be on this lonely stretch of road. I want to be home with Dryden.

Dryden, who had been spending longer times away from home and treating me differently the past week, who woke up a completely changed person three days ago. Dryden, who I should have tried harder to talk to but let scare me into offering to leave. Because as much as I want to stay—as much as I want to stay with *him*—I don't have agency here. I was allowed into his life as an act of charity. He offered help, and I accepted it. Now it seems like he might be done, and it's time for me to go. Simple as that.

Except it doesn't *feel* simple. It feels like quitting. It feels like a fucking *lie*.

I feel sick, and there is a sharp pain in my chest that burns every time I breathe. It's quiet out here, nothing but the crunch of gravel beneath the soles of my boots and the beating of my heart in my ears. Usually, I like moments like this. Usually, I like the quiet. Right now, it's too much. It presses on my eardrums and makes me overly aware of the blood pounding through my veins.

The pavement shines with moisture as I walk, sun reflecting off the surface. My heart clenches with longing with every vehicle that passes.

Each time I hear a car approaching from behind, I turn to watch it go by, hoping one is a Porsche.



It doesn't take me long to slip back into the routine of living on the street. Days later and I've got blisters on my heels and sharp pain in the balls of my feet. My knees pop as I walk, and my hamstrings feel like they've been shredded with a cheese grater. My shoulders burn, my throat is dry, and my stomach feels like one big cramp. All of it is bearable, ignorable. All of it hurts less than the way my chest feels caved in—ribs poking splinters into my heart and preventing me from taking a full breath.

I'm four days out from Siren's Point, and this is the worst I've felt since I was attacked by a dog. I'd think I was coming down with something if the majority of my symptoms couldn't be attributed to walking all day, sleeping outside, and inadequate nutrition. The rest...well, the thing about walking and having nothing to occupy your mind is it gives you a lot of time alone with your thoughts. And my thoughts are a mess of Dryden, Dryden, Dryden.

Adjusting the camera clipped to my jacket, I squint into the sun, noting its position in the sky. According to the map I memorized this morning, and my best estimate as to how far I've traveled today, I should be reaching the hostel in another hour or so. Maybe less, if I can kick myself into a higher gear. More, if my sluggish mind and body revolt and keep me on the road. Two days from now, I should be at the national park.

I keep reminding myself that I enjoy walking. That if I have to choose between wheels or my own feet, I'm going to choose blisters and bruises and sweat each time. But my brain won't be convinced right now. All I can focus on is Dryden and the way his eyes had been dead and glassy like a corpse, his voice unfeeling and empty. He had never looked at me like that before. Not even on that first day when he found me sleeping behind his boat shed. Not once had there been anything like that between us.

My jaw clenches as I think about it, neck stiff. I roll my shoulders a little bit, toe catching in the gravel under my feet and making me stumble. Fuck, but I'm tired. Tired, annoyed, and, if I'm being honest, pissed off. It's not fair that I couldn't offer anything but this. Not fair that I hold so little

power in the relationship that I couldn't even fight for it. And he *knew* that. Slipping the glove off my right hand, I dig a knuckle into my eye, frustrated. He had to know that any possibility of him wanting me to leave would result in me going. What was I supposed to do? Stick around to be physically removed from the premises? Wait for the police to be called so I could be arrested for loitering or trespassing?

The injustice of the situation burns like a mouthful of acid. If we'd had a normal relationship where I brought as much to the table as he did, I'd have stayed. I'd have made him breakfast, taken care of the kitten, and then gone for a long walk so I wasn't home when he got back. I'd have given him a small amount of space before gently easing myself back in and talking to him about what was happening. I'd have allowed him silence but been available to listen when that changed. I wouldn't have let the cold way he treated me hurt my feelings. Leaving wouldn't have been the only thing I could safely offer.

"Goddamn it," I mutter, rock skipping away over the gravel as my boot catches it. A car whizzes past, honking. I'm far onto the shoulder and in no way impeding traffic. I'm not bothering anyone nor doing anything I deserve to be honked at for. Sometimes I really hate people.

The moment I see the hostel, my heart drops. Five-star hotels they never are, but most are better than people would expect. In fact, I've slept in hostels that were nicer than the majority of roadside motels I've visited. Safer, too, or at least I didn't feel like someone was spying on me through a hole in the wall the entire time. Warily, I slow my steps as I approach the front, looking at the group of men sitting near the door. I'm pretty sure that's not a cigarette they're passing around.

They watch me as I walk by, the hairs on the back of my neck prickling. I wrinkle my nose at the smell. Nope, it's definitely not a cigarette. And no, this is most certainly not a five-star—or any star—establishment. I do a quick survey of the interior as I step through the door. It doesn't smell any better in here than it did outside. A sickly sweet mixture of mildew, sweat, and the burned sugar scent of cocaine. The floors are filthy, walls a dark yellow paper that's meant to hide stains but only manages to look like a giant stain itself. As though this is the opening scene to a zombie movie, the lights flicker.

"Two beds are available, shared rooms. We don't do singles," a man snaps, coming out of a back hall carrying a pile of towels. I shake my head,

not fixing my eyes on him but continuing to gaze around the room. I can't stay here.

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"I'm good," I tell him. "Moving on."

"There's the door," he replies, and I waste no time utilizing it.

The guys sitting outside watch me as I leave. Someone whispers too low for me to hear, and a couple laugh. I can't get a read on any of their ages—dirt, sun exposure, and hard knocks add years where only days are meant to be—but they seem young to me. Too young to be living on the street, if indeed they are. I cross the road and walk away on the opposite side, watching them from the corner of my eye. Either they don't have belongings, or they've left them inside the hostel. I shake my head once they're out of sight. Idiots. Everything they own will be stolen the moment it's out of sight.

The neighborhood I'm in isn't great. The houses are in various stages of disrepair—porches sagging, boards rotted, and layers of paint flaking off in the sun. The sidewalks aren't cleared, and given the level of leftover snowpack in some of the shaded areas, I don't think they've been cleaned all winter. The two convenience storefronts I pass have bars on the windows and signs proclaiming surveillance. Rolling my shoulders, I wrap my hands firmly around the straps of my backpack and keep walking. Walking with purpose, now, not pain.

I straighten my spine and make sure my shoulders are back. I don't tuck my chin no matter how much I want to. I reach for every inch of my five-foot-six build, and I set my expression into practiced nonchalance. People who look frightened make easy victims, and the backpack has already marked me as a target. I look like I might have things that people want.

The nicest thing that can be said for neighborhoods like this is they usually don't care about unhoused people. Small, insular towns such as Siren's Point are hard to disappear in when everyone already knows

everybody. Places like this, where everyone is just trying to get by, can usually be counted on to have residents too busy with their own shit to worry about someone else's. Homeless people are just another part of the sidewalk.

For the first time in days—weeks, really—my thoughts don't orbit around Dryden. I've forgotten to care about how weary and in pain I am. My focus is all on the way my breathing feels light and my skin prickles. I note every house, every shop, and every dark alley as I walk. I see a small group of rough sleepers spread out on the concrete under an overpass. A woman watches me from under a fringe of stringy hair, eyes hard. I keep walking.

I take a random turn down a street when I see a police precinct up ahead. I haven't had many brushes with the law, but the two I did have didn't endear me toward the police. I'll never forget how badly my ear hurt when an officer hit me on the side of the head with his baton when I didn't go quickly enough after he told me to "move along." Ordinances around loitering and sleeping outside can be hard to navigate. Certain cities, or even just certain districts within those cities, might enforce rules more strictly than others. The issue is, I rarely know until I'm in a situation to find out. It's easiest to just avoid the police altogether. If they don't see me, I'm not a problem.

I hear the scuff of a shoe behind me and glance over my shoulder, watching as a man and woman stroll along the cross street. My anxiety is too high, and part of me wonders if my time in Siren's Point is to blame. The bliss of safety puts a film over the sickness of terror, making it hard to recall if it was *really* that bad. But it is. It is always that bad, and, in some cases, worse.

I take a deep breath through my nose and out through my mouth, trying to calm my heart rate. There's nothing overtly worrying about the area of town I'm in. Nobody has bothered me. It's actually been pretty quiet for a decent-sized city, with little in the way of road or foot traffic. I'm fine. I need to calm down.

I power up my cell phone at one point, recording a short video that I'll post to my socials later, smiling a fake smile and making a joke that feels hollow, before I do a quick search for motels. The hostel was a bust, but I'm also not feeling great about staying on the street. I can't shake the bad

energy that's followed me since I got here, and something tells me sleeping rough will be a mistake.

For the first time in hours, I think about Dryden. I miss him. Not his house, or his fancy car, or his endless supply of grocery money. Him. I miss the way he pulls his socks over the cuffs of his joggers and how I'd have to put my face right up close next to his to see the difference in color between his pupils and irises. I miss how snarky he was with Cody and how he'd swerve his cart around the grocery store at high speed like it was an obstacle course, avoiding the locals. I miss every single fucking thing, and right now, stopped in the middle of the sidewalk under the light of a single working streetlamp, I stare at my phone and wonder if I have to. I click on the little phone icon, hovering my thumb over Dryden's name in my recent calls, heart skittering with nerves.

"Hey."

I turn around quickly, locking the screen of my phone and shoving it into my pocket, out of sight. The man who spoke watches the movement, eyes on my pocket, and I stiffen. I don't know him, and he doesn't know me; there is no reason for either of us to speak to the other. My heart slams against my ribs as I look at him, the back of my neck tingling. *You can handle one person*, my brain reminds me. I stand up a little straighter. I can, if I have to.

"Sorry," I say, stepping off to the side as though the reason he stopped was that I was blocking the sidewalk. *Pass by*, I urge him silently. *Go. Please go.*

"Where you off to?" he asks, as though we're two buddies who just happened to pass by on the street. Every inch of me is rigid with tension.

"Meeting up with some friends," I lie smoothly, not speaking too quickly or placing any particular emphasis on the sentence. He smirks, and his eyes twitch away from mine, over my shoulder. I hear the scuff of footsteps.

Most people look. They put their back to the nearest hard surface and try to keep everyone in their line of sight. Which, against a single assailant, isn't a bad thing to do. But no matter how many people are behind me, I know for a fact there is one in front. It doesn't matter who else has arrived because I'm already at a disadvantage. I bolt.

The guy in front of me shouts in surprise. Most people look—he hadn't been expecting me to run. I'm sprinting back down the way I came before

any of them have time to react. Now I do look back, just a quick peek over my shoulder, before I'm redoubling my efforts to run. Four people, from what I could see.

Panicked, I slip on the wet pavement when I round the corner, falling hard onto one knee and becoming overbalanced from my backpack. Planting both hands on the ground, I push up like a sprinter from a starting block. I make it a handful of steps before I'm yanked backward, feet slipping on the melting snow, unable to gain traction. I fall hard on my hip, backpack thankfully providing a cushion for the rest of me against the ground. Almost immediately, hands are on my chest, tugging at the straps, trying to rip it off my shoulders.

Terror floods me, and I try desperately to get up while at the same time holding on to my bag. But it's dark, and there are too many of them. Someone grabs my forearm and twists so forcefully my elbow pops. I gasp and unthinkingly use my other hand to try and pry their fingers away. I'm flipped over onto my stomach so fast, I barely manage to turn my face to the side before my nose is smashed into the ground.

Rocks dig into my cheek as someone presses against my head with what feels like their full weight. No amount of wiggling dislodges him. I swear I can feel my heart all the way in my throat when I hear the soft click of a knife being flicked open.

"No." I gasp, having a hard time breathing against the body forcing my face and neck into the ground. Hands flat on the ground, I push up as hard as I can, shoulders straining. Someone stomps on my fingers, foot resting on my hand, and I barely feel the pain over the sound of the backpack straps being cut.

The nylon of my jacket is ripped as someone saws haphazardly with the knife. I'm almost hyperventilating, struggling against the hands on me and the knee pressed hard into my lower back. I'm not sure what's scaring me more right now—the thought of getting stabbed or the fact that they're robbing me.

"The phone," someone hisses as the backpack is finally pulled away. I try to use this to my advantage and throw off the guy who's leaning on my neck, but all I get is a kick in the ribs and a body kneeling on my back. I can't breathe. I'm no longer struggling to get away; I'm struggling for *air*.

If I had enough oxygen to cry, I would, as a hand goes digging through my pockets. The animal part of my brain hasn't yet realized the futility of

fighting, and so I keep at it, trying to squirm my way free. When the boot holding my hand down lets up just a tad, I yank my hand away, leaving my glove behind. Immediately, I reach back over my shoulder, trying to dig my thumb into an eye socket.

“Go, let’s go! Come on!” an urgent, young-sounding voice says above the patter of feet on asphalt. They’re running away. They’re running away with my life in their hands.

“No,” I gasp, to nobody and to everybody. To the universe. “No.”

The weight holding me down is gone so quickly, it takes me a moment to realize it. A moment too long. I barely manage to look up and then tilt my face away as the man who’d been on my back stomps his foot downward onto my head. The heel of his boot catches my cheekbone—a glancing blow compared to the one he’d been hoping for, but enough to force my chin hard into the ground, teeth clacking as my jaw is snapped closed. Pain explodes in my face and ears, my eyes immediately watering. Something wet is on my cheek, and for one insane moment, I wonder if he spit on me before I realize it’s mud from the bottom of his shoe.

Kneeling, I press my bare hand to my face, trying to blink away the moisture enough to see. My face is on fire, and I can’t see through the film of tears, and I have to follow them. I have to get my backpack. My laptop. My fucking *phone*.

Grabbing my glove, I stagger to my feet, leaning hard against the brick wall beside me. My throat feels bruised as I swallow, hand trembling as I look in the direction I think the group ran off in. There’s nobody there. Entire body shaking with adrenaline, I turn and squint down the opposite way. Nobody there either. I wipe my sleeve across my face, trying to clean off the moisture. When I lower my arm, blood is smeared across the fabric. Gently, I work my jaw, skin stinging as it pulls at the cut on my chin. Leaning against the wall, I force a few more swallows, breathing deeply through my nose and trying to calm down. Tugging my glove back on, I wipe gently underneath my eyes, unsure whether the moisture there is from lying on the ground, sweat, or tears.

Chapter Twenty-Two



DRYDEN

The fog is so thick we can't see the buoys until we're nearly on top of them. Even Cody is annoyed, tossing the eggars and shorts back into the water a little more forcefully than usual. Judging by my mental calculations, we're an hour and a half behind schedule. If we haul all the traps we wanted to do today, we'll be hours later back to the wharf than usual.

One at a time, Cody rocks the traps along their runners and sends them splashing back into the water. I throttle the boat forward, checking the coordinates of our next buoy. The engine feels loud, competing with the sound of the water and the seagulls. I wish it were louder. Or, rather, my thoughts quieter.

"My boy Jimmy said they started ripping your place up," Cody says later, standing next to me as we empty a trap. I barely refrain from sighing. I've never made that sound more than when I'm around him.

Cody, young and horny and cute enough to get away with bullshit, is always providing commentary on what "his girl" or "his boy" said or did. I truly don't know where he's finding these people and am wary of asking, lest I get an answer I don't want. It's exhausting, listening to the names change seemingly every day. I can hardly manage to spend time with myself. I can't fathom juggling a string of lovers as well.

"Yes," I agree, deciding to let the Jimmy name drop float away with the wind. I can't, and won't, concern myself with his dating life until it gets him into trouble and keeps him from working.

"Rad. Can I come by one night and watch it fall?"

“Nobody says rad anymore, Cody.” He laughs. I sigh. Again. I wonder if his boy Jimmy would miss him if I pushed him overboard. We’re far enough away from land and the water cold enough that I could almost guarantee he wouldn’t survive.

The *Drifter* is already in her slip when we make it back in, Shiloh and his crew moving aboard. Sans Oliver, from what I can tell from a distance. Hopefully.

I let thoughts of Oliver distract me while Cody and I unload the catch, wondering if I should be stopping by to visit him again or if the text messages will suffice. I’m not eager to put myself in anyone’s company for long these days, and I’d prefer to avoid Oliver specifically. He’s better than an interrogator at getting me to talk about things I’d rather not. He’d ask about Spencer; this I know for certain. I know that he’s aware of the fact that Spencer is gone, the same way the rest of the town knows about it.

The thought of speaking to people is exhausting enough. Knowing the conversation would revolve around Spencer adds a slimy layer of guilt, self-hatred, and nausea to the fatigue. I don’t want to think about him. I can’t *stop* thinking about him.

By the time Cody and I finish and I’m sliding into the driver’s seat of the Porsche, I’ve decided against stopping by to see Oliver. I’ll just text him again, and that’ll be fine. Nobody expects much of me in this town anyway. There is no need to rise above it. Rolling my head from side to side, I wait for Cody to pull out of the spot beside me. Both Shiloh’s and Nils’ vehicles are already gone. I sit quietly for a moment before lifting the hatch on the center console, arm as light as air, as though it’s not my arm at all and I have no control over it.

Spencer’s note is folded up inside, the paper already looking older than it was the day I picked it up off the bed in the cottage. I probably shouldn’t keep folding and unfolding it. I should throw it away.

But instead of doing the sensible thing, I’ve been carrying it around. I put it in my wallet, or the front pocket of my sweats, the center console of the Porsche, or on the nightstand. I recognize it’s a disgusting and embarrassing thing to be doing, yet I cannot seem to make myself stop. Each time I make the effort to toss the damn thing in the garbage, somehow, it always resists leaving my hand. Carefully, I unfold it, looking down at the scrawl of words across the paper. Spencer has terrible handwriting.

I’ll see you soon. Please be safe. Love, Spencer

Love, Spencer. I frown down at the messy letters. Is he left-handed? Perhaps that's why he writes his As boxy like that. I should have asked him. It's strange that I never saw him write anything, and I never thought to bring it up. It's also strange that he signed this with love. I'd like to ask about that, too, if I ever get a chance.

Wishing that the car could simply drive itself home—and, while I'm at it, that dinner would just magically appear, ready to eat—I sit in silence a little longer, staring down at the note. Love, Spencer.

Ridiculous. I'm being ridiculous. Folding the paper carefully back up, I angle my head from side to side, encouraging my neck muscles to relax. Tension has settled in and made a home in my body, and no matter how many minutes I spend stretching, massages I schedule, or hours I spend lying prone on my bed, it doesn't seem to abate. I turn on the radio to drive home, only to flick it back off after five minutes, wanting silence. A couple of minutes after that, I'm wishing for noise. And not just any noise, but the kind that comes in the form of chatter from the passenger seat.

I used to love driving home from the wharf—the tree-lined, curvy roads, the hum of the car, and the ability to decompress after hauling. I used to look forward to my quiet house, the privacy and the ability to do exactly what I wished, whenever I wanted to do it.

I work my jaw back and forth. I miss picking Spencer up from the animal clinic and giving him a hard time for the pet hair he was shedding all over my car. I miss hearing about his day and having a captive audience when I told him about mine, no matter that I did the same damn thing as usual. I miss watching him float around my pool, steam rising gently around him from the temperature of the water reacting with the cold air. And I miss how everything mundane that I usually did felt less so with him around. Lying around watching hockey and eating an entire bag of potato chips is boring and a bit sad of me to do alone. But with Spencer, it wasn't.

It was relaxing in a way I don't often experience, as if he was so content with how I am that I never felt like I needed to pretend and be something else. He'd lie right there next to me, pushing my hand out of the way when I started hogging the snacks, and wonder random and inane things out loud about the hockey players that just popped into his head. *How much protein do they eat in a day? Do you know how much the sticks cost? Do you think it comes out of their paycheck when they break one? How can that guy change the blade on the skate like that without cutting his hand?*

It should have been annoying. I put on the games to watch the actual play, not waste time looking up Remy Stone's birthday because Spencer was "picking up fire sign vibes," even though he had never met the man and had only watched him play hockey for fifteen minutes. It really should have bothered me. And if I'm being honest, had someone else been the one asking stupid questions during a game, I probably would have snapped at them. I certainly wouldn't have actually entertained the curiosity and willingly spent an entire period looking up the fucking astrological signs of NHL players.

What I wouldn't give to still be doing just that, I think, resting my head back against the seat as I put the car in park. The contractor had recommended I park as close to the tree line as possible, so I've got both vehicles wearing tread into the grass beside the guest cottage. This is more off-roading than the Porsche has ever been asked to do.

I sit in the car as it slowly loses the heat from the drive. I would probably sit out here until it became too cold to do so if a car I don't recognize didn't pull up the driveway. Frowning behind the blessedly tinted windows, I watch Hailey Johnson get out and hustle around to the passenger side to retrieve something. When she starts walking across the grass toward the guest cottage, I entertain the idea of hiding in the Porsche. I doubt she can see me through the tint.

When I open the door, she startles at my abrupt appearance, laughing at herself. "You scared me!" she says as though I hadn't just watched it occur in real time.

"They're done for the day," I tell her, waving a hand at the construction equipment, stationary next to the house. She steps up along my shoulder, joining me in the few yards to my front door. Which, I'm realizing now, I hadn't locked on my way out this morning. Hoping for Spencer to come back and let himself in, I suppose, although right now, with a hollowness in my gut like I haven't eaten in a week and a headache pounding at my skull, I'd settle for a text.

"Oh! No, actually, I'm here to see you! I brought you something for dinner!" Hailey, exuberant as always, grins at me over the dish. My facial muscles don't work like that, so I don't return it.

"Why?" I ask instead, glancing down at the dish in her hands and trying to recall if anyone I know has died.

“I just know you’re going through a tough time! I wanted to make sure you were eating properly!” Her smile loses some of its joy. I frown. Good lord, this is a pity casserole.

“I don’t need that,” I tell her, thinking about the toaster strudel I’m about to have for dinner. Gently, she pushes the pan into my stomach, waiting for me to take it.

“It’s only a little something. Go on, then!” Hailey smiles again, adjusting the strap of her bag on her shoulder. The dish weighs about five pounds, which, in my experience, isn’t *only a little something*. Perhaps misreading the sour expression on my face, she adds, “And don’t worry about returning the pan—you keep it!”

Of all the things I have to worry about, that had not even made the list. We stand there in front of my door—solace a bare two feet away from me, and yet so far out of reach—Hailey trying to make small talk and me trying hard to respond in a way that won’t have her husband coming around to punch me. After what I deem to be an appropriate amount of time, I urge her along back to her car by telling her I’ve got to go inside and feed my cat.

Demon cries plaintively the moment I get in the door, feet pattering on the floor as she scoots over to me and sticks her claws into my pants. Hands full, I can’t pull her off, so she comes along for the ride as I bring the dish to the kitchen. It does smell good, even though I’m considering throwing it away out of spite. The people in this town are ridiculous.

“Enough,” I tell the kitten, wrapping a hand around her stomach and unsticking her claws from my thigh. She stares up at me with big, liquid eyes. “Pretty soon, you’ll be too big to do this, you understand that, right?”

I put her down, and she streaks off under the bed. After a couple of seconds, I hear the scratching noise that lets me know she’s shredding the underside of the mattress. I’d like to work up enough emotion to be upset about it, but all I can manage is a vague, numb sort of disconnect. Spencer would have been laughing. He’d have told me that’s why baby animals were born so cute, so they could get away with mayhem. Sighing, I rub a hand into my forehead and go to the bathroom for a shower. I’m going to test whether or not I can drown myself in only a foot of water.

The small bathroom is filled with steam when I finally emerge and wrap a towel around my waist. The dressing gown Spencer was fond of loafing around in is hanging on the back of the door. I stare at it in the mirror. How

had something as simple as helping a stranger become this? I was such an idiot. The exact kind of fool I mock for doing something as dangerous as falling in love.

I dress in sweats, leaving Spencer's dressing gown hanging where it is, even though I know I should throw it out. He's not coming back, and the sooner I accept that, the better off I will be.

I feed Demon per the instructions Spencer gave me when he brought her home, gently sliding her away with my hand when she tries to eat before I've got it all situated. She cries, and I scowl at her. There's no need to act like she's starving. Hyenas have better manners than this creature.

She makes little purring noises as she eats, face shoved directly into the food. I watch her as I wash my hands, finding it impossible to remain annoyed at the kitten for long. Demon, she may be, but a cute one.

Grabbing the toaster pastries in defiance of the perfectly good lasagna sitting on the counter, I'm just about to drop them in the toaster when there's a light knock at the front door. Hope—painful, useless, disgusting hope—spreads through my chest like wildfire. Pressing my hands down onto the cool marble of the counter, I stay where I am. It could be Spencer, but it's not. I hope it is, but I know it's not. It's been days when he said he'd be gone weeks. If he even comes back at all, which I cannot let myself consider. A second knock, and I push back from the counter to answer it. Even though I knew it wasn't him, I'm disappointed anyway when Spencer isn't on the other side.

"I'm perfectly capable of making my own dinner," I tell Shiloh, surprised and frustrated to see him.

"Glad to hear it," he replies, hands in the pockets of his jacket. I look him up and down, noting the clean clothes and the damp hair. He doesn't seem to have any food with him.

"What do you want, then?" I ask, leaning against the doorframe and crossing my arms. I peek over my shoulder to check that Demon is still occupied.

"I just wanted to talk with you, if you've got a minute."

I stare at him. The most talking we've done since we broke up is a conversation on the pier about tide patterns. I open my mouth to tell him to leave, before I reconsider. It could be about Oliver. Stepping back, I flippantly gesture him inside. I don't care if the king of England himself comes knocking; this is the last person I'm talking to for the rest of the day.

Shiloh toes off his shoes, one hand on the wall to stabilize himself. He's smiling and looking over at Demon, who has roused herself from her feast long enough to notice we've got company. He crouches down, knees spread wide, as she ambles over to sniff at his socks.

"You have a kitten," Shiloh says wonderingly. I roll my eyes.

"She ruins all my clothes."

"She has a mustache," he replies, rubbing a finger under her chin. "What's her name?"

"Demon."

He snorts, tilting his head to grin up at me. I don't have any smiles in me, so I merely turn away and put the toaster pastries away.

"Hailey Johnson come by?" Shiloh asks. I arch an eyebrow at him over my shoulder, and he shrugs. Scooping up the kitten, he stands. She's purring against his chest when he comes to stand next to me, the little traitor.

"Yes. It would appear I'm in mourning," I tell him dryly, gesturing toward the dish.

"She's a good cook."

Sighing, I resign myself to the eventuality of eating a real meal for dinner and not snack food. It's still a little warm as I scoop out serving sizes suitable for a family of four for both Shiloh and me. My stomach grumbles.

"I hope you cracked a window for your boyfriend," I tell Shiloh, gesturing vaguely toward where his truck is parked out front. He chuckles.

"Ewan's out of town for work."

"And you thought you'd spend that time visiting your *old* boyfriend?" I clarify, slightly incredulously. Shiloh isn't the type to cheat at cards, let alone on a person, but I have very little grace to spare in that department. Every face I see is shaped like a liar, to me.

"His idea, actually. This is nice." He looks around the small room. "I can't believe I've never been back here."

I shrug. There was never a reason for me to show him the cottage. Shiloh rarely spent time at my house, and when he was here, we generally spent the time in the master bedroom. We settle on the couch, as it's the only place to sit other than the bed, the pair of us on opposite ends and leaning against the armrests. Shiloh puts Demon down, and she walks softly over the cushions, climbing into my lap and spinning around in circles. She huffs as she settles down, curled into a little black donut. Shiloh watches the whole thing with a disturbingly sappy expression on his face.

“Enough. Wipe that look off your face,” I tell him. Plate in one hand, I stroke a finger down the kitten’s back.

“Heard from Spencer?” Shiloh asks.

“I’m not doing this with you,” I warn him, voice low and biting. In fact, I’m not doing it with anyone. Spencer is off-limits.

“Ewan likes to watch his videos,” Shiloh continues in a calm, unwavering tone. It was always hard to shake him when we were together, and he seems to have only become steadier in the meantime. I’ve never met a man so firmly planted as Shiloh Lepage. “He says he hasn’t posted an update lately, which is unusual.”

I stare at him, unable to maintain the cool, slightly condescending smirk I like to wear in the hopes of dissuading people from talking to me. I haven’t gone looking at Spencer’s social media. Not yet. Not when he hasn’t been gone a week, and the wound hasn’t stitched itself closed yet. Weak though it makes me, I didn’t think I could stand seeing him smiling as he filmed himself walking out of town.

“How does Ewan know what’s unusual and what isn’t?”

“Apparently, there’s an update posted every morning and every evening like clockwork. Ewan follows his stuff, like I said, and according to him, two days of silence isn’t the norm.”

Demon rumbles softly as she sleeps, a low-grade purr I can feel through my fingertips when I touch her. Two days could mean anything and nothing at all. He could be conserving battery life or taking a break from vlogging altogether. He could be in trouble.

“We haven’t spoken, nor are we likely to in the future. He’s gone,” I tell Shiloh. And myself, because of the two of us, I fear I’m the one who needs the reminder.

“For now,” he agrees softly. Kind in a way that makes me feel defensive. I’d like for him to eat his damn food and go. But because he didn’t come knocking on my door for nothing, he settles back and ignores the food altogether. “I think things will work out.”

“Things never work out,” I tell him. Not even his own shiny new relationship will keep. Everything, including love, has a shelf life.

He sits with that for a second, not snapping back at me the way both of us know I want him to. I’m usually so good at keeping myself aligned, at controlling my emotions. I feel as though these past few months have

scraped me raw, rubbed off the protective armor and reminded me of the person I was before I learned better.

“You know, if you push people away, eventually they *will* go,” Shiloh says, and I almost laugh. I certainly can’t argue. He has firsthand experience. And he’s right, even though he may not be privy to precisely what happened. Spencer is gone, I’m still here, and it doesn’t take a betting man to put money on the person who did the pushing.

“I don’t need this, Loh,” I tell him. “I’m fine.”

“I know. But you don’t have to be *fine*, Roy. You could be happy. You could let Hailey bring you dinner every now and again, and grab a drink with Oliver at the pub, and you could pick up the phone and call Spencer. You could tell him how you feel instead of pretending you don’t feel anything at all. You could ask him to come back instead of forcing him away. You could have more, instead of just enough.”

“I can’t,” I reply quietly, leaning forward to carefully deposit my plate on the coffee table. Demon lifts her head and meows in protest before settling into a ball once more. After a few seconds of silence, the purring starts back up. Spencer told me it’s supposedly healing. Perhaps she’ll fix me.

I don’t believe there is any way I can explain myself in a way he’ll understand. Shiloh loves in a way so unfamiliar to me, it’s alien. He puts his whole being into it—a lifelong commitment that doesn’t have anything to do with rings or vows. If he loves you, he’ll do it until the day he dies. My inability to even imagine that depth of feeling makes me wonder if I’m capable of love at all. And it hardly matters. When I try, I fail.

Shiloh clears his throat, resting his own plate down on his leg. I look at him and wonder where that tiny spark of attraction I once felt came from. He doesn’t even have brown eyes.

“Listen, I know your life isn’t any of my business. But you and I were together for two years, and you spent that entire time waiting for it to fail. Neither one of us was in it fully, I know that—I’m not blaming you. But I know you better than anyone else in this town, and if they noticed how different you were around Spencer, then you can bet I did, too. Hell, you let him go out on the *Maiden* with you. It took me *months* to convince you to hire Cody. You wouldn’t let anyone near that damn boat.”

“I let you,” I remind him, making him snort.

“Yeah, because you needed me to show you how to run it.”

I look down at the sleeping kitten in my lap and breathe out slowly. Yes, that is exactly why I invited him in. I needed his expertise, and I needed someone to touch me after years of going without. I'd made do with what I had close at hand, which just so happened to be the only other man in Siren's Point as broken and unloved as me.

"Sorry," I apologize and manage a semi-genuine smile when he snorts again. It probably sounded as disingenuous as it felt to say.

"Call him, Roy. You don't lose anything by doing it, but you're losing a lot if you don't even try."

"It won't work out. It can't."

Even if he did come back and agreed to stay, eventually things would deteriorate. Eventually, Spencer would tire of my taciturn nature, sarcasm, and dry humor. He'd lose interest in having sex with the same person and grow bored of standing still. Spencer is open roads and miles of sky overhead. He's an adventurer, always looking for maiden seas.

"Maybe it won't," Shiloh agrees. "But as ready as you are for things to fail, I think you need to be open to the possibility that it will work out. Because what if things get better? Nothing will change if you don't give it a chance."

I shake my head but don't reply, ignoring him in favor of staring at the kitten. I can't live with that level of trust, of conviction in things just working out. It's infinitely easier to expect everything to fail than to hope for the best and have to live with the disappointment of being wrong.

Having said what he came here to say, Shiloh allows me to move the conversation to less sensitive topics. He asks me about Demon and the construction on the house, tells me about Ewan—where he is and why he's there. I ask after Oliver, and Shiloh can't hide the pleased smile this elicits behind his short beard. I struggle through finishing my dinner, and he goes back for more. The sun is long down by the time he makes a move toward the door. I hadn't asked him to leave, which is likely surprising for both of us.

Leaning against the doorframe, one socked foot crossed over the other, I watch his truck reverse and make a U-turn over the grass. He waves a goodbye at me through the windshield as though we didn't just have a verbal one. I shake my head and retreat back inside, locking the door behind me and scooping up the kitten, who'd been on her way over to try and escape.

We settle into bed, me staring at the hockey game I have playing on the television but not really paying attention, and her chasing shadows only she can see over the comforter. I fiddle with my cell phone in one hand, flipping it over and over and over. Calling Spencer feels pushy. Clingy in a way I never am. It feels bothersome and unlikely to yield any results when his phone is probably powered down to conserve battery. But he hasn't been heard from in days, apparently. Out of character for me though it is, reaching out will hopefully mean I'll be able to ascertain that he's okay, at the very least. Shiloh's warning about him not posting for nearly two days feels louder than all the doubts screaming into my ear.

Taking a deep breath like I'm jumping out of an airplane and not making a phone call, I lift the phone and click until I reach Spencer's name. I stare at it, feeling as though the wisest thing to do might be to delete it. Demon walks over to sniff my ear, tickling my face with her whiskers. I click his contact.

"The number you have dialed has been disconnected. If you feel as though you've received this message in error, please check the number and try again."

Chapter Twenty-Three



SPENCER

I close my eyes and tilt my face away from the light. Holding a hand up to block the worst of the glare, I squint at the shape of the man shining a flashlight in my face. My muscles are stiff, joints locked into place after sitting in the same position all night. The air around my mouth fogs in the cold air, my lips painfully dry and cracked. I lick them, trying to generate a little moisture.

I snuck into the construction zone last night, hoping for a little shelter and respite from the wind. I wasn't the only one who'd had the idea, but I managed to find a back corner far away from the others. I must also have managed to fall asleep, somehow, and was able to stay that way despite the early morning light filtering through the holes in the wall where a window will sit eventually.

"You gotta vacate," a gruff male voice tells me, waving the flashlight toward the door and sparing my retinas a moment of blindness. "You can't be here."

He's absolutely right. I cannot be here. Sleeping on construction sites is common, but it's not legal, and it's definitely not advisable to be caught doing so. I nod as he backs up, giving me space to push awkwardly to my feet. My head pounds, jaw throbbing and eyes aching in a way that makes moisture gather at the corners; my body is sore enough to protest even the slightest movement. I desperately want to curl up and go back to sleep.

"Sorry," I apologize to the man and get my first real look at him as I do. He's wearing standard workman's gear, a reflective vest over his Carhartt jacket and hard hat already in place atop his head.

“Go on,” he cajoles, arcing the flashlight beam in the direction of the door once more. I half expect him to add a “get” after the go on, like I’m a feral raccoon he’s shooing away. I nod and, making sure to keep myself angled enough to always have an eye on him, move quickly toward the exit. He could have called the police; it’s best not to test whatever patience he might possess this early in the morning.

The chilly spring air feels like a slap in the face as I exit the building and walk a ways down the sidewalk. It’s not that cold, I know, technically speaking. Certainly not as bad as it was just a month ago. But ice has a way of layering itself on you if you never get a chance to thaw. With nothing but the clothes on my back, last night was brutal. Stopping, I flex my toes inside my boots, feeling the slide of my wool socks over the sandwich bag I use as a wallet. Cold and miserable as I am, I make myself consider how much worse off I’d be if the guys who robbed me had possessed any street sense at all. Nobody but an idiot keeps their money in a bag where anyone can take it.

Taking a deep breath, I push through the gloom. Things aren’t as bad as they could be. Hands in my pockets, fingers curling and uncurling in an effort to generate warmth, I hunch my shoulders and walk in the direction of the police station I’d been so hoping I could avoid.

In an alleyway four blocks from where I was robbed, I’d found some of my belongings. Not the monetarily valuable things, but the bits that have worth to me alone. My favorite book—a luxury in paperback form that I allowed myself to own as a treat and that I’d read hundreds, possibly thousands of times, the pages worn and curled with love—was tossed carelessly to the ground. By the time I found it, the book was ruined, soggy with water. The scarf Dryden had given me was also on the ground, caked with mud and wet. There was a boot print smeared across the middle like someone had stepped on it while they rifled through my backpack, looking for valuables.

Not even the pain in my head had prevented me from crying and making it worse. I had nothing to clean it off with, but I tried anyway, telling myself all the while that I should be happy they hadn’t recognized a designer piece of clothing and kept it. I should be grateful to have recovered it all, I’d told myself, tears staining tracks down my dirty face. It was lucky I had.

But, of course, that was the extent of the belongings that were abandoned. The more useful clothing items and food had been kept, as well as the laptop, camera, and my cell phone. They either hadn't noticed or hadn't cared about the GoPro clipped to my jacket, or perhaps they'd simply expected it to be broken with the way they'd had me on the ground. And it is—the lens covered in spiderweb cracks and probably not fixable. I've got it in my pocket anyway, unable to just throw away such a valuable piece of equipment, and desperately trying to hold on to the hope that it's salvageable.

Fiddling with Dryden's scarf wrapped around my neck, still filthy but at least dry, I look around as I walk, noting a man up ahead, sitting on the sidewalk next to a shopping cart loaded with stuff. His scraggly beard is long enough to reach his belly button and surprisingly clean. I nod as I pass him, wondering how he's able to keep that much hair from getting infested with lice.

"You new here, boy?" he asks, just aggressively enough to let me know he's not as weak as his age might portray him to be. If I had to guess, I'd say he's well beyond his sixties.

"Just passing through," I reply, stopping a good distance away. He frowns at me.

"You get pinched?"

"Robbed. On my way to check for progress on the police report now."

He laughs, the sound so much like a cackle I almost smile. "They won't find shit. Wasting your time."

I shrug. Right now, I have nothing at all but time to waste. He's right—they likely won't recover any of my stuff. Whoever stole it all probably wiped all the electronics and pawned them, kept the clothes and ate the food. But I have to at least try. I'm going to have to make a couple of big decisions if the police don't recover anything, and I'd really prefer I didn't have to.

"You hungry?" the old man asks. I raise my eyebrows, shocked. Our world is every man for himself—we don't share food; we eat it.

"Yeah," I agree. Starving, actually, and thirsty enough that my head feels stuffed with cotton fluff. I feel half as sharp as I need to be, thoughts sluggish and body in so much pain nobody would have to try very hard to find an area of weakness.

“Hang around. Black Subaru drives through here every Sunday morning, and they hand out breakfast.”

Curious and with nothing to lose but apparently a lot to gain, I move to the side of the footpath so I’m not blocking it. The old man watches me, making sure I don’t come any closer to his shopping cart. Crouching down, I lean against the chain-link fence at my back. The hand that was stomped on throbs. I’m not sure if it’s actually more painful or if that’s just my brain making me think it is since it’s the arm with the scar, but it’s killing me either way. When I move my fingers, sharp pain lances up my forearm. Not moving aches just as much, the pressure and constant throbbing nearly as uncomfortable. I’m trying to ignore it, telling myself that my mind is playing tricks on me the way it always does with that arm. It’s fine. Everything is fine.

As promised, a black Subaru, scratched and dented and missing a hubcap, drives slowly down the road a little while later. I stand, watching as the old man pushes his shopping cart toward the car. The passenger window is rolled down, showing a woman wearing a bonnet and under-eye masks. I don’t hear what she says to the old man, but she passes him something wrapped in tinfoil, her hands covered in latex food gloves.

“You hungry, baby?” she calls to me, raising her voice to be heard over the squeaking of the shopping cart as the man pushes it away down the road. I approach the open window slowly, making sure my hands are visible. When I’m a little closer, she asks again. “Breakfast?”

“Yes, please.” I breathe out hard when she holds out two wrapped sandwiches stacked on top of each other. I hadn’t expected to actually get food. I take them from her, unable to believe my luck. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Here you go, baby, take some water. You be safe now, okay?”

“Thank you,” I repeat, water and sandwiches clutched protectively to my chest. I can’t think of anything else to say. “Thank you.”

The car drives slowly down the street, homeless people approaching the windows and retreating in what is apparently a practiced dance. Sitting down and crossing my legs, I bend over my treasures and slip off my gloves. I hope that woman never knows a single day of unhappiness and lives her life in abundance. She deserves sainthood.

The tinfoil is blessedly hot on my hands as I unwrap one of the sandwiches. My mouth is sticky with saliva, throat working as I try to

swallow. I wish I had time to go slow and savor, but I don't want to run the risk of someone trying to take this from me. Chewing hurts, my jaw still smarting from where it had been jammed into the concrete, but I ignore it. Nothing, not the shooting pain in my fingers or the ache in my teeth, will stop me from enjoying this.

I shouldn't eat both, but I do. I definitely shouldn't drink all the water, but I do that as well. I don't wish for ibuprofen because wishing is a waste of time. Climbing to my feet, I slip my gloves back on and consider the tinfoil. If I had my backpack, I'd keep it. You never know what might come in handy. Balling it up, I decide to think about it on my way to the police station. If anything, I'll just throw it away in there.

The garbage can ends up being the only useful thing inside the precinct. The man working the desk wrinkles his nose when I come close enough to talk to him. I probably do smell, but I could have done without the reminder. I could also have done without the belligerent way he looks me up in the system and the sneer as he reads the report.

"A MacBook?" he asks, tone dripping in so much disbelief it's a wonder he doesn't choke on it.

Being told they haven't found anything isn't a surprise, even though it's a letdown. Hope is a sneaky bastard. No matter how much you try to fight it, some always manages to slip in anyway. Now, on my way to the second pawn shop of the morning, I can feel that tiny bit of hope wither away and die. I need to assume I won't get my things back, which means I need to replace as much as possible.

I have two thousand dollars in my bank account and two hundred in cash tucked into my boot. I'm not in dire straits yet, even if I can see them looming in the distance. Replacing everything I lost, even with refurbished or used pieces, will eat up every penny of my savings. That sweet little nest egg I built in Siren's Point will be gone, and a hell of a lot quicker than I'd anticipated. I don't want to spend that money.

And there is, of course, another option. The best option, possibly. I could call Dryden for help. I could leave town, head back in the direction of Siren's Point, and walk my way back to safety and security. I could find out whether either of them is truly still available to me the way Dryden promised they would be.

"Check eBay if you want something cheaper," the third pawnbroker tells me when I try to haggle him down from five hundred on a smartphone.

I'm not sure whether I want to growl or cry in frustration. If I had a device capable of internet shopping—or a fucking address for things to be shipped to—then I wouldn't be in here.

I leave disappointed and fast forgetting the temporary high of this morning when I ate breakfast. Something wet drips down my neck, tickling. I hold my glove against my chin, knowing without looking that the cut there has broken open again and started bleeding. Too much talking and not enough medical attention.

"Fuck," I mutter, crouching down beside a low brick wall and leaning back to rest for a second.

I'm tired. So unbelievably tired. Tears prick the corners of my eyes, and I tip my head back to prevent them from falling. I don't have water to spare. I'm sick of crying, anyway, since that seems to be one of the only things I've been capable of the past twenty-four hours. Things aren't really as bad as they seem, and crying about it will only make everything feel that much worse. Feeling sorry for myself doesn't do me any good at all. Problems don't fix themselves, and sulking isn't going to help.

With that thought, and reminding myself that I was lucky enough to have a warm meal this morning, I push up off the wall, cradling my aching hand against my stomach as I start to walk. There was an old-fashioned pay phone a couple of streets back. Grace and I don't talk often, and when we do, it's more of a quick update. She's my only solid tether to a stable life, though, and needs to know there isn't a way to contact me right now.

Nestling the receiver on the pay phone between my shoulder and ear, I put in my quarters and dial her number. My memory, which has always been good and only gotten sharper while living on the street, is something I consider my best asset in times like this. I only have to read through a phone number three times to memorize it. Same with addresses, maps, and landmarks. Grace's number is far from the only one I've got committed to memory, and it's one of those others I'm thinking of as I listen to it ring.

"Hello?" she answers skeptically. When I first left, she and I made a pact to always answer unknown callers. She knows it's probably a solicitor, but also knows there's a small chance it's me.

"Hey, Grace." She gasps, the sound somehow managing to come across as happy and surprised.

"Spence! Oh my gosh, how are you? I didn't recognize the number. Did you get a new phone? Where are you? What's going on? Tell me

everything!”

If my face weren't bruised and swollen, I might smile. Grace is the type of friend I can go months without speaking to, but the moment I do, we snap right back into place, edges aligned. *Together for life*, she'd said about us once, and I've never had reason to doubt it.

“I'm on a pay phone, so I don't have long to talk. My phone actually got—it broke,” I correct swiftly. She doesn't need to know I was robbed. There's nothing she can do about it, and it'll only scare her. “I just wanted to call quick and let you know not to use that number until I can get something new.”

“Oh, no.” She sighs. “I'm sorry. Where are you, anyway? Liza and I have been so busy, I haven't been able to catch up on your videos.”

“Northeast. I, uh, spent a little time in Siren's Point. It's a cute little fishing village. You'd love it.”

“I've never heard of it. Maybe tonight, Liza and I can watch a couple episodes of *Day in the Life of Spence*,” she jokes, purposely changing the title of my channel. I give a halfhearted chuckle. Day in the life of me sounds depressing as hell right now. The automated voice in the receiver lets me know I've got less than a minute left of time.

“My quarters are running out, Grace. Just wanted to let you know not to worry. I'll call you soon for a longer catch-up, okay?”

“Do you need money? I get quarterly bonuses at work now. I can deposit a few hundred into your account.”

“No, really, I'm fine. Please don't.” I squeeze my good hand on the receiver. Sometimes she'll do it anyway, no matter if I told her no or not. “Love you.”

“I love you, too, Spence. Thanks for calling. Can you start walking this way soon? It's time for an in-person visit.”

Replacing the receiver in the cradle, I pinch my lips together. Somehow, I feel worse. More tired, more sore, and more than ready to give up. I want to go home. Not the one I left, but the one I found.

It's not Grace's apartment I think of, smelling of warm bread and coconut candles, walls covered in an eclectic array of art found at antique and charity shops, blooming with color. It's Dryden's cottage. It's a dark green corduroy love seat and Egyptian cotton sheets, lobster and unlimited hot water, the smell of pine trees and ocean and chlorine, and the kiss of

water against my skin. Home is a single room and a bed I don't sleep in alone. It's Dryden.

I stare at the pay phone. I had to use all my quarters to reach Grace, the call more expensive having been a non-local area code. It wouldn't take much work to break another dollar, though. To buy a bottle of water at a convenience store and ask for my change in quarters. I could call him. I think, even if I didn't like the words he was saying, just hearing his voice would make me feel better. Even if he said nothing at all and I just stood there and listened to him breathe, the knowledge that Dryden Roy was out there and doing okay would remind me that life isn't so bad as it sometimes seems.

The cashier at the nearest gas station watches me with suspicion as I pull a bottle of water from one of the coolers and scowls when I ask for some of my change to be given in quarters.

"May I use the restroom?" I ask, glancing at the sign behind the register that says the bathroom is for paying customers only. I'd noticed it as I walked up—the exterior door that would be locked unless the cashier provided the key.

"No," they reply. I nod, tucking my water into the crook of my elbow. Paying customer or not, there's a fifty-fifty chance in any situation where I'm treated as less than human. Not being allowed access to the bathroom is on the tamer side of how I've been treated in the past.

"Okay. Thank you."

There's someone else using the pay phone when I walk back, giving me just enough time to wait that I start to second-guess myself. The headache throbbing in my temples is insistent enough to make thinking difficult; I'm struggling as though I'm working a particularly difficult arithmetic problem and not deciding whether to call Dryden. Forgetting the cut on my chin for a moment, I rub a gloved hand across my face and wince at the sharp stab of pain. Great. And now I'm probably bleeding again.

"Stop it," I mutter to myself, stepping up to the phone. Either he answers or he doesn't. Either I can go back or I can't. I'm being stupid. Even more stupid if I start crying again, so I swallow a couple of times before I push the quarters into the slot.

It rings a dozen times. It rings for minutes. It feels like I stand there in the cold for an hour, listening as the hand I tentatively reached out for help

is ignored. I gasp when the call connects, the inhale violent and painful in my chest.

“Hello?” Dryden’s voice isn’t quite right over the scratchy line, but it’s him. He sounds annoyed. I smile, uncaring of how this stretches the bruises on my skin, and don’t wipe away the tear that trickles down my cheek.

“Hey,” I reply, unable to make my voice come out louder than a whisper. “It’s me. Spencer.”

It feels like the connection sharpens at the same moment his voice does, a snap to attention that reminds me of the way he’d aggressively hold eye contact.

“What’s happened?” he asks.

“Nothing. I just...I just missed you.” I close my eyes. That sounded as pitiful as it felt to say, and I doubt even the shitty pay phone connection will disguise the way misery sat heavy with the words. Dryden pauses only a second.

“Whose phone is this?”

“A pay phone. I—”

“Tell me what’s happened, Spencer.” There’s a hint of anger in his tone now, although none of it feels aimed at me. Not when he still says my name in a soft caress, the sharper letters softened into something tender.

“I lost my phone, and I...” I what? I want a hug? I want to come back and put on a sweatshirt that smells like you and watch men with razor blades on their feet try to score goals on one another? I want to ask if it’s okay if I come back early. Please let me come back. Please, please, *please*. “I just wanted to say hi and ask if—” The artificial voice tells me I’m running out of time. “I’ve got to go,” I whisper.

“Put another quarter in,” he demands. I shake my head. I don’t have another quarter. His voice is less anger and more panic now. “Spencer, do not hang up this phone.”

“How are you? Is Demon okay?” I’m feeling a touch of panic myself as I think about all the things I’d like to know and how little time I have left to hear them.

“Come see for yourself.” Resting a forearm across the top of the phone box, I put my forehead down. Is it really so easy as that? Dryden, in a voice that sounds deceptively calm, like he’s purposely trying to tone down the frustration, adds, “Tell me where you’re calling from. I’ll come meet you. You shouldn’t be without a phone, Spencer.”

I don't like asking too much of people. When someone inquires how I am, they don't want to be burdened with the truth. They don't want me to get my pain on them. They want an answer that makes them feel good for asking and doesn't leave them carrying an emotional load in addition to their own. *Do you need anything* and *how are you* aren't questions that can be answered honestly. Because everyone needs something, and I suspect everyone is probably not fine. Nobody wants me to be a drain on them less than I do. I usually stay silent. I usually lie.

But the words won't come. They stay stuck in my throat, sore and bruised and unused to asking for help. He's already done so much for me. I shouldn't ask for this.

"Spencer," he repeats.

"The pay phone near the Lincolnshire apartment building in Fensborough," I whisper.

"Stay the—" The line clicks off, dial tone vibrating in my ear as the call is cut short.

Chapter Twenty-Four



DRYDEN

Demon mewls when I pick her up from where she was stretched out on my stomach and deposit her onto the bed. Sliding off, I stare down at my phone on my way to the bathroom, urging it to ring again. Leaving it on the counter, I pee and wash my hands, splashing cool water onto my face. Fensborough. I've never been there before, but, as most people from this area are, I'm familiar with the relative distances from here to anywhere considered a "big city." It's not a short drive.

My heartbeat flutters rapidly as I yank open the wardrobe and pull out a jacket. I should change out of the sweats I'm wearing. I should stop and consider for a moment instead of carelessly acting. I should hurry because the sun is going down, Fensborough is hours away, and Spencer sounded like he'd been walking along a very fine ledge and was uncertain of his footing.

I leave Demon kneading her little paws into my pillow. The Porsche rumbles to life, and I check the gas gauge as I click my seat belt into place, cursing under my breath when it's low. I'll have to stop. We're too far away from anything to make it far on a third of a tank, and I don't want to be searching for a gas station in the dark on unfamiliar streets when I get there.

Davy waves at me through the window of the convenience store as I stand impatiently next to the gas pump, watching the numbers tick steadily upward. I nod back and then ignore him, conscious of his eyes on me as I stand there. I probably look strange, as a person who is usually put together, in my Colorado sweatshirt and gray joggers tucked into the tops of my work boots. And sure enough, the pump has barely clicked off before his curiosity gets the better of him.

“Everything okay?” he shouts at me across the parking lot, artificial light spilling around him through the open doorway, lottery numbers displayed in neon beside him.

I don’t answer. He’s probably wondering if I’m having some sort of mental crisis, and I’m wondering why I can’t just go through it in peace. Slamming the door of the Porsche, I turn the ignition and watch the gas gauge flip over to full before pulling out from under the shelter. I glance up in the rearview, watching as Davy disappears back into the store, probably on his way to call his closest relatives and let them know what my pajamas look like.

I wait until I’m leaving Siren’s Point before I push it. The engine growls as the speedometer rises steadily from forty to sixty, the sound of the tires spraying up water on the wet asphalt accompanied by the slide of the windshield wipers as it starts to rain. I can’t stop looking at the dashboard clock. I can’t stop watching the estimated time until arrival in the map application I have pulled up on my phone, propped in the cup holder. I push my foot down a little harder, bringing the car up to sixty-five. I told him to stay, but at what point will he no longer be able to wait and leave? I glance down at the screen of my phone, fingers clenched hard enough around the steering wheel for the leather stitching to bite into my skin. Three hours.

I make it thirty minutes driving twenty over the speed limit before I hit traffic. Easing the Porsche to a smooth stop behind a minivan, I wonder if I’m about to enter cardiac arrest. There’s something abnormal in the way it’s hurting to breathe and how erratically my pulse is jumping. The rain pings off the hood of my car, droplets scattering over the windshield as it begins to fall harder, drumming rhythmically on the roof. I allow the Porsche to coast, no gas needed to drive five miles per hour. When I check the map app, the time until arrival has changed. Four hours.

Red and blue lights flash, illuminating the inside of the vehicle as they rotate. I barely pay attention to the accident as I pass, too concerned with keeping the contents of my stomach inside my body. The moment I can, I accelerate, swerving around the car in front of me to take advantage of an open left lane. Several cars have their hazards on as they drive ten under the speed limit, either unused to or unskilled at driving in the dark in the rain. It’s possible I’m going to get pulled over, and even more possible that I don’t give a fuck. I put more gas on, pushing the speed up to eighty. The Porsche hums, built for this and rarely allowed to run.

Four hours might as well be an eternity. Too long to count on Spencer standing in place to wait for me and far, far too long to be alone with myself as I try desperately to get there. Shiloh was right. I lost nothing in calling Spencer, although I gained a sleepless night, sick with worry over that disconnected phone and his absence from all social media. And I'd looked. I'd looked at them all, noting dates and time stamps and staring at the little thumbnails of his handsome face, frozen with a stretch of open road behind him. I am good at a lot of things, but none so much as handling things. I'm not the type to panic. I don't get stressed or blow little things out of proportion. I just fix the problem and move on.

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Spencer's sudden absence hadn't felt like a problem I could fix. It had felt like an end-of-world catastrophe—a meteor on its way to Earth and nothing to do but stand and wait for the impact. I'd lain awake, agonizing over the possible reasons he'd gone dark and unable to come up with a workable solution. I knew where I'd left him and also knew just how many possible routes to the national park there were from that spot. I'd wanted to drive around to look for him and recognized the horrible futility of such an endeavor. It felt like there was nothing to do but give up. Spencer was gone, and for the meantime, there wasn't a thing I could do to find him.

But now I know. I know exactly where he is and how to get there. I know his voice sounded like tears and weariness and that he lied when he said he lost his cell phone. I know it's raining and cold, and he's too stubborn to find a hotel for a night. I know that maybe he doesn't need help, or me, and hope that he doesn't turn away from either.

Fensborough is, in my humble opinion, a shithole. Trash litters the gutters as I drive slowly through the residential streets when I get there, following the directions of the map application. Despite the weather, there are a lot of people around. A lot of people standing together, smoke pluming out from their mouths as they exhale, watching me as I drive by. Every

building I pass seems to be in a state of disrepair. One house has a pride flag displayed on the porch and a slur spray-painted across the front door.

I frown as I watch the map bring me closer and closer to the Lincolnshire apartments. It's a nicer part of town than the one where I entered, but the bar feels as though it was set fairly low. I don't spend a lot of time being thankful for the town I live in, but perhaps this is my sign to start practicing that gratitude.

I coast to a stop in front of the apartment building, squinting through the dark, stomach cramping at the sight of the pay phone and the empty sidewalk around it. Bringing the Porsche slowly to the curb, I idle and consider my options. Parking and walking the nearby streets on foot seems the most worthwhile option, while also being the one most likely to end in being stranded. Something tells me a Porsche sitting on the side of the road here is as good as painting a bullseye on the back window and asking for it to be stolen.

Fingers tapping the wheel, eyes still on the pay phone, I think. Perhaps he hasn't gone far. Perhaps he's merely gone in search of a place to get out of the rain, a place to feel more secure than standing on an open sidewalk. Easing the Porsche forward, I pull slowly away from the curb. I'll drive down the streets I can reach by car and park to walk on foot the places I can't.

It's not easy to see through the sluice of rain down the windows, vision further impaired by how dark it is and how damnably bad the streets are lit. Only one in every handful of streetlamps is illuminated, making the shadows deeper and my job that much harder. Twenty minutes pass, and I begin to feel like I've got a steady electrical current running under my skin. I didn't come this far to fail.

I'm at the point where searching on foot has become less of a possibility and more of a certainty when my headlights flash on a spot of blue. I brake hard, barely glancing up in the rearview before I'm reversing just enough to put the arc of my headlights where I can see. He's there, huddled under the striped awning of a barbershop—blue coat, yellow beanie, and a tan scarf wrapped around his throat. I put the car in park and open the door, squinting through the rain at the figure rising and walking toward me.

"Dry?" he asks, and I have to close my eyes for a moment against the raw relief. "I'm sorry—there were tons of people going in and out of the

apartment building, and I didn't want anyone to call the cops on me, and then it started raining, and I was thinking I'd sit somewhere dry and—”

I reach for him, hands untethered from my body and acting of their own accord. My pulse thunders in my ears when he's close enough for me to see the black eyes, the bruise on his cheek, and the absence of red straps over his shoulders. The beanie is damp beneath my fingers as I gently cup the back of his head and pull him in that last little distance. He makes a soft noise that sounds like heartbreak and wraps his arms around my waist. Rain trickles down my face, and I barely notice.

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Chapter Twenty-Five



SPENCER

Dryden's sweater is soft against my forehead as I press my face into him. He's got one hand holding the back of my head and the other wrapped around my shoulders, and I'm so aware of this being the first time he's held me that I don't even care about the rain. A fine tremble runs through me, from the top of my head, down my spine, and all the way to my toes. He smells so clean.

Behind him, the Porsche makes a soft pinging noise to remind Dryden of the open door. He sighs, and I become aware of the cold rain trickling down the back of my neck. I'd like to stay here for the moment, just like this, suspended in time. No talking, no discussions of the past and planning for the future. Just this—Dryden's hand cupping the back of my head, pulling me in instead of pushing me away, and the clean, spicy scent of him. He slides his hand down the nape of my neck, and I lift my head, resigned. Time is up.

"Go around to the other side," he tells me, voice soft and beautiful and so much better hearing it in person than it had been over the scratchy pay phone line. I comply, sliding in and immediately reaching for the heated seat like no time at all has passed and this is still the same thing I do every day when he picks me up from work.

Dryden waits silently while I click the seat belt into place, wincing slightly as the strap tightens over my sore chest. My hand and face are aching fiercely, but it seems like such a small problem. Who cares about physical pain when the far more serious hurt has been soothed? Even if Dryden is angry at me, he's *here*, and that's not nothing.

“Thank you.” I glance across the dark car at him, but he’s looking out the windshield and not at me. “I’m sorry you had to come all this way.”

“I didn’t have to do anything,” he replies, a hint of a bite in his tone. “Tell me what happened to your face.”

He glances at me, dark eyes glinting before he looks down at his cell phone and types something in. I watch his fingers move over the screen, letting the weight of the past few days melt away by degrees. I had been telling myself things weren’t as bad as they seemed, and now I believe it. Aches and pains are nothing. Blowing out a deep breath, I relax, feeling the heat of the seat seep through my clothes.

“A group of guys robbed me,” I tell him. It should probably be an embarrassing thing to admit—that I not only lost the fight, but I tried to run from it. Survival instincts aren’t anything I’ve ever thought to be ashamed of, though. I watch Dryden’s knuckles clench around the steering wheel as he coasts the car forward.

“Are you okay?” he asks, voice deceptively calm. I watch him, free in my perusal since he’s not looking at me.

“Yeah.”

“We need to file a police report.”

I smile. We. “I already did. Although it won’t do any good.”

He looks over at me, expression inscrutable. I wonder if he’d be offended if I slept on the ride home. I’m so tired, and the car is so warm.

“Perhaps a hospital first and then hotel,” he says, which is confusing enough for my sluggish brain that it takes me a second to work out what he’s saying.

“I don’t need a hospital. I’m okay.”

“You look like you need a head CT.”

“Thank you.”

His lips tighten, and I smile again. I bet people think he never finds things funny, since he doesn’t show amusement with boisterous laughter but with micro-expressions. I love knowing I’ve figured out that piece of his puzzle.

“What do you mean, hotel?” I ask him carefully, worried, suddenly, that I’m about to be dropped off. I don’t want to stay anywhere but with him. I’ll sleep in the car or on one of the loungers beside his pool. I don’t care, as long as I can go back. Dryden stops at an intersection, the red light painting the interior of the car crimson. He looks over at me again, frowning.

“You need to sleep, and I need better lighting to see your face.” He pauses, eyes dropping below my neck before reaching mine once more. “And the rest of you.”

“I’d rather just go home.” My voice is barely above a whisper, and there is no hiding the plea in my voice. Please, let me come back. Please don’t push me away. *Please.*

The idea of home has always been hard for me. At one point, it was an actual four-walls-and-a-roof home. Then it was a car. And then it was... nothing. Home was a good pair of shoes and a backpack, grass and pine trees and stars overhead. Home was motels and hostels and a camper van. It was many things and nothing—as transient as I was and equally as hard to hold on to. Home was just another thing to think about while I walked. It was a pipe dream as likely as hitting a winning lottery number. Fun to imagine, but nothing to get my hopes up about.

But perhaps home is less of a place and more of a feeling. It’s warmth and safety and the security of knowing there will be something to return to after you run. It’s the person who treats you like an equal, who takes care of you and allows you the honor of taking care of them. It’s the person who answers when you call for help.

“It’s a long drive,” Dryden says, easing the car through the green light. The rain drums lightly on the roof, a low staccato rhythm to accompany the blast of hot air blowing through the vents. When we hit another red light, he leans forward in his seat to slip off his jacket. I watch as he tosses it to the back and rolls up his sleeves. He’s probably burning up but, like usual, won’t adjust the temperature. Yet another revelation: home is a person who doesn’t fight you for the thermostat.

“And we probably have a lot to talk about,” I counter, smiling when his mouth twists into a small grimace. Yeah, I’m not particularly looking forward to it either.

“I’ll drive. You sleep. Talking can wait for tomorrow.”



Dryden doesn’t say much as we drive toward Siren’s Point. I drift, waking up when headlights swoop through the windows from passing cars before dozing back off once more. I jolt awake once when the car hits a pothole,

sitting straight up in my seat, heart pounding as I look out the window into the dark.

“Almost there,” Dryden murmurs, so I sit back and watch the dark shapes of trees flash by. I don’t remember closing my eyes again, but I must fall back asleep. The next thing I know, I’m being gently coaxed awake by a hand on my shoulder.

“Where are we?” I ask, before remembering. Taking a deep inhale, I let it out slowly. Dryden’s glass monstrosity of a house looms ahead, headlights glinting off the reflective surfaces. Instead of parking out front like he usually does, he veers off over the yard, driving slowly over the lumpy grass. I chuckle when I see the Land Rover parked by the guest cottage. The actual winter vehicle, despite what Dryden might wish.

He looks tired as he turns the ignition off on the Porsche and runs a hand over his face. Neither of us moves to leave the vehicle, *what now* hovering in the warm air between us.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, and this time, it’s less because he had to drive so far to get me and more because I’m just generally apologetic. I’m sorry for leaving, and I’m sorry that I made him think there weren’t any other options. He sighs.

“Actually, I’m the one who’s sorry. Tomorrow, though. Come on, I want to get a look at you.”

I close the passenger door carefully, the headlights flashing as Dryden locks the doors. The interior of the cottage is dark when he presses a palm into the center of the door and holds it wide for me to enter. Nerves multiply in my stomach. Not fear, like the first time I walked through this door, but trepidation, a bit of nervous excitement. The first step down an unmapped road.

I feel the press of Dryden’s palm against my lower back as I walk in—firm for a moment and then gone, like it was a gesture he hadn’t meant to do. Light floods the cottage as he flicks the switch, and I blink rapidly, pretending to myself that it’s the sudden brightness that’s causing moisture to prick at my eyes.

“Hey, little one,” I whisper as the kitten wakes up and meows, blinking sleepily at us from where she’s lying on the rug. I crouch down to say hello, and she stretches her legs out as straight as she can, toes separating. I rub a hand down her side. “Oh, big stretch!”

I look up as Dryden passes me, watching as he flicks on the bathroom light and bends to retrieve something from the cabinet. He's so beautiful. Even fully clothed, there's no hiding the strong curve of his shoulders or the flex of muscle in his legs. It strikes me, sometimes, how healthy he looks. Like the kind of person who doesn't ever have to question whether their body is capable of anything.

I stand up when he approaches me. It's the first time in days we've stood face-to-face and looked one another in the eye, and I can tell by Dryden's expression that I'm not looking nearly as lovely as he is. He breathes strangely through his nose—a sharp inhale followed by an aborted clearing of his throat. When he speaks, his voice is so calm it sounds fake.

“Have a seat, Spencer. Please,” he adds, waiting for me to sit on the end of the bed before approaching. Demon winds her way between my boots, arching her back and rubbing against me. Dryden surprises me by scooping her up and depositing her on my lap. She purrs, kneading her paws directly into my crotch.

“Healing,” he explains, which burns like a mouthful of fire. I told him that.

“It looks worse than it is,” I tell him about my face. I'd probed gently with my fingers, pressing against my cheekbone and working my jaw, touching my nose and palpating my throat. It hurt, but it wasn't agonizing. Nothing is broken. Bruises and cuts always look worse than they actually are.

The moment Dryden's fingers touch my face, I remember how grimy I am. It's been five days since I've had access to clean water. I wince, thinking about my dirty pants and my butt firmly planted on the clean bed.

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“Sorry,” Dryden says, and I shake my head.

“It wasn't you. I probably shouldn't be on the bed, though, Dry. I'm filthy.”

“Sit still,” he replies, frowning, thumbs gently testing the structural soundness of the bones in my face. “I think I need to go up to the house and get the full first aid kit. This one is just a small one.”

I close my eyes and do as he asked, sitting as still as I can while Demon digs her claws into my leg, purring loudly. He doesn’t end up going to fetch anything from the house, cleaning the cut on my chin with something that burns enough to have tears springing to my eyes. He’s gentle, but he’s also not messing around. When I flinch and pull away, he tells me that if I stop fidgeting, this will go quicker.

“What is that, acid?” I mutter, blinking at him and scowling.

“Is it just your face?” he asks, ignoring me. I shrug.

“Yeah, pretty much.” Dryden stares at me, hand under my chin so I can’t look away, black eyes locked on mine. He frowns.

“Show me.”

So I do. I slip out of my coat, wincing when Dryden picks it up and immediately fingers the tear in the shoulder where the knife ripped through the fabric. I strip until I’m in nothing but boxers, dirty clothes piled on the floor in front of me. Dryden reaches for the thermostat, increasing the heat, and I flush with pleasure. He’s so sure of himself in so many ways, yet woefully unaware in others. I can’t imagine how he’s convinced himself that affection isn’t something he’s able to give when he does things like that.

“Thank you,” I murmur, nodding toward the thermostat when his eyes flick upward to mine from where he’d been staring at the bruise on my ribs.

I suck in a sharp breath, hissing through my teeth when he touches my hand after I’ve sat back down on the bed. I don’t think it actually hurts that bad, but I’ve never quite learned to treat that arm as just another part of my body. It’s an alien appendage, prone to periods of numbness and flashes of pain, half of which I’m certain are fragments of my imagination.

“Your hand might be broken,” Dryden tells me, looking down at my spread fingers, held in place by his palm against mine. I shake my head.

“I have full range of motion. I think it’s just badly bruised. Someone stomped on it.”

Dryden does another one of those angry inhales but doesn’t say anything. It makes me want to hug him again. Overt displays of emotion can sometimes be frightening, particularly if that emotion is anger. Self-control isn’t a skill most possess.

“Tell me what happened, please,” he requests.

“I did.”

His eyes flick upward to mine. “In full.”

I sigh. I don’t think there is any point in breaking down a play-by-play for him. It’s not going to make either of us feel better. In fact, I imagine it’ll just add another layer of pain to the bruises between us. Dryden has the same look in his eyes that he had when we visited Oliver to bring him dinner.

“Please, can we not,” I plead quietly.

“Okay,” he agrees, the way I knew he would. Boundaries never require much enforcing with him. One of his fingers strokes gently against my palm. “I’m concerned about this.”

“Nothing is broken. It’s fine,” I promise.

“Mm.” He makes an agreeable noise but continues probing gently. I watch his long fingers, skin dark against the pale redness of mine, and wait to feel revulsion at the sight of my mangled arm and Dryden’s pretty hands touching it. It doesn’t come. Smothered, perhaps, by the warmth of the cottage and the kitten purring once more in my lap, the steady hands and clinical touch of the man in front of me. *It’s just a scar*, I think, reminding myself of the words Dryden said.

Eventually, he decides nothing is immediately life-threatening and directs me to the shower. I’m handed a matching set of Dryden’s lounge clothes and left alone in the bathroom with a soft “You know where everything is.” The face in the mirror is just as horrifying as I’d feared it was—bruising underneath both eyes, a bad scrape across my cheekbone, and that damn cut on my chin that has finally started to scab. I badly want to shave.

Time catches up with me as I stand in the shower, hot water sluicing down my back and wetting my hair. Washing feels like a herculean task. It takes minutes of me watching the dirty water swirl around my feet before I reach for the soap. I think about what awaits me when I finish, and suddenly, my arms aren’t quite so heavy that they can’t function.

My clothes are in a basket next to the bathroom door when I emerge, steam curling around me through the open doorway and Dryden’s sweats blessing my skin with their softness. I reach for the basket, understanding that the intention is obviously to wash them, but Dryden stops me, catching me with an arm looped over my chest.

“I’ll do it,” he tells me. “I made you soup.”

He snags the basket and disappears into the bathroom to shove it all in the wash. There’s a bowl of soup on the kitchen counter, steam curling from the top. It smells like chicken noodle. I’m not successful in blinking back the tears this time and swipe my cheek as one trickles its way down. Soup requires no chewing and will be easy on my sore jaw. It will be gentle on my empty stomach. It will provide additional warmth.

“All right. If you’d like, I can—what’s wrong?” Dryden frowns, closing the bathroom door and muffling the sound of the washing machine.

“Nothing, I just...you had to touch my dirty clothes to put them in the wash and you made me soup and I just feel really fucking bad about leaving. I wanted to come back right away, but I wasn’t sure, and then the past couple days have been shit and I’m tired. I’m just tired and overwhelmed. And these clothes are *really* soft.”

I put a palm on my stomach, feeling the soft fleece interior against my skin. Dryden stares at me, hands at his side, probably wondering which part of that he’s meant to respond to.

“What were you saying, though?” I ask, clearing the gravel from my throat and sniffing. I need to get it together.

“I was going to offer to sleep on the couch.” My eyes widen as he gestures toward the green love seat. It’s not really big enough for me to sleep on, let alone him. Nor do I want him to try.

“No, please, I...can we just pretend everything is how it was before? Please?”

“And that I wasn’t an asshole?” he adds. I smile carefully.

“I don’t think my imagination is quite that good.” I get a small smile in exchange for the joke and accept the bowl of soup he holds out to me. It’s hot against my palms.

Dryden tells me to slow down when I drink the soup too fast, like he’s scolding a toddler. Demon gets her own share of scoldings when she decides it’s playtime and attacks his hand every time he moves, growling and wrapping her paws around his wrist as she bites him. It’s adorable. More adorable when paired with a scowling Dryden, who pretends not to find it so as well.

I get nervous when it’s time for bed. Dryden is much better at acting like nothing has changed than I am—sliding into bed on his side of the mattress, turning off the alarm he keeps on a schedule, and clicking off the

bedside lamp. I feel like I'm in danger of being evicted when I join him, heart hammering as I push my pant legs down with my feet from where they'd ridden up my calves.

We're still and silent in the dark. I try to breathe my pulse to a lower rhythm, fingers clenched in the bedsheet. Dryden's fingers touching the side of my face makes me jump. He slides them through my damp hair, pushing it back from my forehead. It's gentle like a massage and sweet enough that I can feel the ache of want in my entire body. It shouldn't be frightening, being touched by a person I love, like this. But it is. It's terrifying and raw like an open wound given a chance to breathe.

"Relax, Spencer. Everything is fine," Dryden murmurs, voice low and so much different than the way he sounded the day I left. "This is your home."

"I want to stay," I tell him, whispering it to the dark room. It's the closest I can come to asking for it and harder than it should be to say. I don't usually get to want things, but I want this. If I can have nothing else in life, I'll never complain, as long as I can have this.

"I won't ask you to go," he replies, and it sounds like he's making me a promise.

Chapter Twenty-Six



DRYDEN

I'm not sure who sleeps worse, me or Spencer. I'd dozed off at one point, only to be awoken by Spencer sliding out of bed and checking that the front door was locked. A little while after that, he'd sat straight up, perfectly still. Then, I'd thought he'd finally fallen asleep, only to feel tentative fingers on my arm in the early morning hours.

"Spencer?" He'd snatched his hand away, and even though I couldn't see his face in the dark, I could feel a sense of embarrassment emanating from him.

"Sorry. I was just...just checking," he'd mumbled. I'd lain there with that for a moment, unsure of how to categorize the feeling that elicited in me. Joy, perhaps. Or maybe merely contentment. Either way, I liked being on the receiving end of the worry that he'd wake up and find I wasn't there.

"Come here," I'd finally said back.

I'm not a fan of cuddling. It never feels natural, and most of the time, it's too damn hot. Sleep is meant to be an individual undertaking, with plenty of space between bodies. Of course, the multiple mornings I woke up with an arm across Spencer's stomach and my nose pressed against his shoulder prove my subconscious isn't nearly as averse as my awake mind.

It felt good, though, when Spencer rolled into me last night and I could rest my chin on the top of his head. I liked being able to feel his breathing as well as hear it, and I really liked it when he said my name in his sleep. It was probably just the late hour and the excitement of the past few days catching up with him, but it had felt like I was directly responsible for finally coaxing him asleep—my fingers slipping through his hair, my body keeping him warm and protected.

I feel as though I can't move, lest I wake him. He's a light sleeper, prone to jolting awake at the slightest movement or sound and bringing me back to consciousness with him. He would definitely wake up if I moved now, with his face smushed so hard into my chest I can feel his breath through my shirt and his arm a dead weight across my side. I close my eyes and try to go back to sleep, ignoring the ache in my hip that's begging for me to straighten my leg and the pins and needles letting me know my arm is still asleep, even if I'm not.

It's Demon, the little recalcitrant, who wakes him up. Yowling at the foot of the bed, she makes enough noise to raise the dead and Spencer, who jolts and inhales a sharp breath. He stiffens for just a second before relaxing and staying right where he is. I straighten my leg.

"Someone's hungry," Spencer says, voice thick with sleep, eyes squinted, and hair spiked up like a milk chocolate sea urchin.

"A byproduct of me starving her, I suppose."

He snorts. Sighing, and far more regretful than I'd ever admit, I slide out of the pocket of warmth Spencer and I created. Demon trots up to me, little tail pointed at the ceiling, and files one more complaint.

"Yes, I hear you," I tell her. "We all hear you."

Another soft laugh comes from the bed as I dish a bit of food out for her. I stroke her from the crown of her head, down her back, and up her tail, smiling when she arches up into my hand. I do it twice more before I leave her to her breakfast.

"Coffee?" I ask Spencer, approaching the machine and keeping my eyes averted from the bed. Pretending might have worked last night, but it won't keep through the morning. I hate the necessity of having to discuss anything at all. But since I also hate myself more days than not, I suppose maybe it's time to try something new.

"Sure, thank you. Did you sleep okay?"

"Mm," I reply noncommittally. I did not sleep at all, and it was entirely his fault. Not a bad trade to have him back, all things considered. "And yourself?"

"I slept good," he replies, which makes my lips twitch into a small smile. He did not sleep good, unless the comparison he's basing it off is me.

I make his coffee first. He's sitting up in bed when I finally turn around and look at him. It was a wise decision to give myself a moment to prepare, but even so, I'm not quite ready enough for the sight of him, rumpled and

bruised and wearing my clothes. I think I really must love him, because right now, I'd die for him if he asked it of me.

"The creamer is high fat, high protein," I tell him softly, waiting as he wraps his hands around the mug to borrow some of its warmth.

"Thanks. Smells good. Are you going to sit?"

There is a faint note of nervousness to the question that calms my own. I'm so rarely uncomfortable that I can sometimes forget how difficult it can make things. It's nice to know I'm not the only one feeling the strain right now.

"Yes," I tell him and retreat back to the espresso machine to buy myself a few more precious minutes of time.

When I'm back in bed beside him, both of us sitting propped up on pillows, neither of us breaks the silence. I take a sip of coffee, Spencer raising his mug at the same time, and both of us slurp softly. He laughs.

"I don't think I'm going to be good at this," I warn him. "I fear my nature is private and secretive, not open and sharing."

"What happened the day you went for a drive and I left? Actually, what was going on that entire week, because there was something...off."

"Anniversary," I admit, drumming my fingers on the bedspread to try and tempt Demon into joining us. Instead, she sits down and puts a leg into the air, licking at it. "Wedding and divorce."

"Oh." He breathes the word out on the saddest exhale I've ever heard. "I can see how that would be upsetting."

I sigh. It's the wedding I find more upsetting than the divorce, the waste of time and the years spent living with a liar. It's the way I learned not to trust myself at the same time I realized I couldn't trust anyone else, and it's the fact that so much of our marriage was revealed to be a problem, but I was the biggest one. Most years, the anniversary doesn't bother me all that much. I stay to myself, put my head down, and work. The days pass, as they always do, and another year gets added to the distance between now and then.

It was the addition of Spencer that threw me off this time around. And not only that, but the fear of making the same mistake again; the distress around never being able to quite understand my own feelings, and the anxiety around the ramifications of that. Love isn't simple, for me. It's hard to recognize and understand and sometimes feels impossible to share.

“It’s not, really,” I tell Spencer. “I don’t sit around wishing things were different or that I were still married. I’ve moved on from that. Sometimes, though, I find it hard to move on from myself, if you will.”

“I understand that just fine,” Spencer mutters. I glance at him and the scarred hand resting on the mattress between us. Yes, I imagine he does.

“Love baffles me, if I’m being honest. I don’t think I experience it the same way others do, and it makes me question myself and—”

“Me,” Spencer fills in.

“Others,” I correct. “Everyone. But yes, you. I wasn’t expecting you.”

“But you were expecting me to leave,” he points out, brow furrowed as he looks down into his mug. “I didn’t want to.”

“No,” I agree, “I’m the one who wanted you to. And then I wanted you to come back.”

He thinks for a moment, sitting quietly with that information before he murmurs a soft, careful question. “But why did you want me to go?”

I close my eyes, trying to ignore the sound of Spencer breathing and the weight of him on the mattress beside me. I didn’t want him to go. Not even a little bit. And that is exactly why I needed him to.

“I didn’t, really,” I reply, voice low and calm despite the slightly elevated beating of my heart. I hate being exposed like this. Soft parts are meant to stay hidden. “But I knew it would be better in the long run if you did.”

Everything that was wrong with my marriage is really only known only to me and the lawyers. Nobody saw the way I tried, but they all saw how I’d failed. And even they weren’t privy to it all—the emotional roller coaster of living with a man who might be in a towering rage one moment and tears the next, the subtle ways he forced me to conform to the shape he desired. I have always been sure of myself—comfortable in my mind and body—and am still astounded to this day by how easily Dylan was able to destroy that. I could try to explain this to Spencer. He’d sympathize, probably. He’s a far more empathetic individual than I am, and much better at understanding emotions. But if I tell this story now, if I uncover all the rot that stays hidden inside me, it would only serve as an excuse for causing Spencer pain. He shouldn’t ever have to suffer for what happened between Dylan and me.

The silence stretches further this time. I let it, feeling a mild sort of discomfort grow into something bigger. I’m unsure which part of me is

stronger—the relief or the distress that he’s here, that he didn’t go far and consented to return. For the first time in my life, self-preservation is losing my private, internal battle. I take a deep breath.

“I’m sorry. I don’t have any excuses. I’m just sorry,” I tell him. “You didn’t deserve to be punished for the things that are wrong with me, and had you not been, this wouldn’t have happened. Apologies are useless, but I am sorry.”

“It’s not your fault I was robbed. And I offered to go, remember?”

“Spencer, don’t,” I warn. Putting a hand on my face, I rub at the tension above my eyes. “Lord, what the hell was I thinking, letting you go. In no way were you safe, and that’s on me.”

“It didn’t feel like I had much of a choice,” he admits softly. I shake my head, repulsed by myself. He didn’t have much of a choice, because I didn’t leave him room for one. I wish the words *I’m sorry* carried any meaning at all.

“What are you afraid of?” Spencer asks eventually. I sigh. History coming around for a repeat. Years of wasted time and money. Myself.

“That you’ll see me. That I’ll let you in, and you won’t like what you find. That one day, you’ll realize you’d have been better off walking away and staying gone. You,” I summarize. He is every worry and fear and question.

“Kind of wild, the things our brains can convince us of,” he whispers, quoting back something he said to me weeks ago. Turning my head, I glance over and find him already watching me.

He smiles sadly, leaning back against the pillows and stretching his legs out, toes pointed. I look at his face and away, hoping to see the morning light brightening those eyes but getting a clearer view of the bruising on his face instead.

“I meant it when I said there is a home for you here, if you want it. This is your house,” I tell him, lifting a hand to gesture toward the room. Demon makes a leap for my arm, paws scratching down the side of the comforter as her claws fail to make purchase. “I want you to stay. I want us to continue on as we are. I want you to have the freedom and comfort to make that choice for yourself.”

“Rudy offered to help me get a recertification if I wanted to continue working as a vet tech. He said I could keep working for him,” Spencer tells me. Or tells his coffee mug, rather, as that is where his gaze is fixed.

I'm not surprised. Rudy is one of the few people I've met who seems to love animals *and* people, and is happy to provide aid to both. He also stays to himself, mostly, which is my personal favorite of his character traits. It makes sense he'd want to keep Spencer around. Hard workers who don't mind the dirty aspects of the job are hard to come by, and the entry-level job pool around here is mainly comprised of teenagers who do nothing but complain.

"He also offered a couple options of places I could stay," Spencer adds softly. My fingers clench around the warm mug.

"Kind of him. And yet, you already have a place to stay." He chuckles and leans his shoulder against me like he used to. Tentatively, I lean back. Equally as hesitantly, I add, "Without me. I'll find something else for the time being."

Because I'm looking at his face, I catch his grimace. And then, almost reluctantly, his nod.

"I liked this. Living here together," he clarifies, eyes tracking around the room before settling on me. "But maybe we need a little more time across the pool from one another first."

I don't think Spencer, who seems able to mold himself to fit any situation he finds himself in, needs more time to adjust. It's me that's the problem here, just the same as it usually is. Reaching a hand out to gently use my fingers and angle Spencer's face toward the light, I look at the bruises and make a silent promise to do better. I won't let myself be this person any longer, if there is any chance of Spencer being the one taking on damage.

"Looks worse than it is," he reminds me. A reminder I ignore, because black eyes and a split chin is always bad.

"I worry that you'll regret giving up your life to stay here," I admit, staring at his eyes, reacquainting myself with the color.

"It's not about giving up things; it's about sharing them." Spencer's body presses a little more firmly into my arm, trusting me to hold his weight. "Maybe you can take a few adventures with me around here, and maybe I could come out with you on the *Maiden* every now and again. And maybe...maybe once I save up enough money, we could go to Europe and backpack."

"I'm not sleeping on the ground, Spencer."

He snorts. “Okay, sightseeing trip with plenty of walking and day hikes but where we sleep in a hotel every night. Better?”

“Mm.” I hum, taking a sip of coffee. We could do that right now, if we wanted, with no extended period of saving money needed. But the reason Spencer was so easy to push away was that he was already unsure of whether he was an equal partner. He doesn’t want to feel like a charity case, and I don’t want to treat him like one.

“And...and we’ll agree on a way for me to rent the cottage from you.” He sounds tentative again, his voice and demeanor shifting between sure and uncertain.

“Okay,” I agree, wishing this wasn’t one of the adjustments I’d have to make. I don’t want his money. I don’t want anything from him but what I already had—big brown eyes, smiles, and the company of a person who doesn’t need or ask me to change.

“You’re sure you want me to stay here? At the guesthouse?”

“Yes.” Out of everything we’ve discussed, that’s the one thing I won’t hesitate to take a firm stance on. This is where he belongs.

“Okay. Anything *you* want?” he asks, a slightly more teasing note to his voice, the wariness melting away by degrees.

“Just you,” I admit, the words sour in my mouth. It doesn’t feel safe, saying things like that out loud. Like handing him a knife and asking him to find a good spot to stab me. Vulnerability is meant to be smothered, not shared. Deciding I’m already in it, so I might as well slit my own throat, I continue. “I much prefer life when you’re around.”

He’s silent for long enough that I begin to regret the words. When I look over at him, he’s chewing his lip in thought. Gently, I take his empty mug from him and slide off the bed to get him a refill. Demon attacks my foot on the way by, tripping me, before scooting off under the bed with a growl.

Leaning my hands against the counter, I watch the machine warm up. I’m so zoned out that I don’t hear Spencer leave the bed, nor the sound of him approaching. Hands on my hips surprise me back to reality. I keep still like he’s an animal I might startle off if I move too quickly, barely breathing as he puts his cheek against my back and wraps his arms around my stomach.

It’s easy to relax then. Easy to close my eyes and listen to the whir of the espresso machine and feel the rise and fall of Spencer’s arms as I

breathe. I soak up his warmth like a sponge, the days without it leaving me feeling like I've been deprived for years.

"I want you, too," he agrees, finally breaking the silence. His coffee is ready and waiting on the machine. Neither of us moves to grab it.

"Good. That's settled, then. No more discussion needed."

He laughs silently, chest vibrating against my back. It makes me want to smile, to move a little closer and feel his arms wrap a little tighter. Cognizant of the injury to his hand, I don't put mine on top of his the way I want to.

"Do you believe in soulmates?" he asks suddenly. I roll my eyes.

"Of course not." This time, the laughter isn't silent. He presses a kiss between my shoulder blades, making me wish I weren't wearing a shirt and could feel it against my skin. Sighing, I look up at the ceiling. "It's possible I could be convinced, though."

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Epilogue

SPENCER

ONE YEAR LATER

Dryden doesn't say "I love you" out loud. He does it by watching me haul traps next to Cody with a crazed look in his eye. He does it by growling instructions and warnings at me: "watch out for the ropes, Spencer," "don't take off your jacket, yet, it's too cold," "careful where you put your fingers," "don't lean over the rail like that, Spencer," and on and on and on. It's hard not to laugh, and I've spent most of the morning with my lips pressed so firmly together they hurt. Next to me, Cody's eyebrows haven't left their position against his hairline. Probably knowing that any jokes from him will get his head bitten off, he's remained silent as well.

"Can I come out with you guys tomorrow, too?" I ask Dryden later, rocking easily with the *Maiden Seas* as we head back to the wharf. I've got a whole five days off from Caring Claws. Dryden doesn't, though, which means if I want to spend a lot of time with him, it'll be on this boat. Not that I'm complaining. I love lobstering.

"No," he replies succinctly. "I cannot handle two days in a row with you on board."

I puff out my cheeks, holding in another laugh. Dryden catches it anyway, looking at me over his shoulder and scowling. I shrug, grinning. Worrying might be uncomfortable to him, but I can't pretend that I don't enjoy it. Better than him not caring at all if I were to fall overboard.

"Want to grab a drink tonight?" Cody asks us, crewneck flung over his shoulder and undershirt showing sweat stains. It's an unseasonably hot day.

I glance over at Dryden, leaving, as always, the choice about socialization up to him. He usually prefers a break from people, and today was already more stressful than usual with me on the *Maiden*.

Dryden runs a hand over his hair, buzzed close to the scalp and faded down the sides. I helped him do it yesterday, putting a chair in the lawn and sitting a shirtless Dryden down, letting the hair blow away with the wind. He'd hopped into the pool with me afterward, reclining back on a floatie and falling asleep. I'd taken a picture with my cell phone—all that pretty brown skin on display and the water shimmering around him. Beautiful.

"Sure," he agrees now, surprising me, Cody, and, likely, himself.

"Oh. Hell yeah," Cody replies, rallying quickly, easy smile falling back into place. "Maybe I'll bring my girl Cindy."

"Oh dear lord," Dryden mumbles.

We make a general plan to meet around seven and go our separate ways. Walking side by side to the car, shoulders brushing, Dryden holds out his hand, keys in his palm. I grin, taking them.

Dryden, who is happy to drive the Porsche at any given time, is equally as happy being the passenger princess. I'd been a little shocked when he'd asked if I ever wanted to drive it, surprised that he'd hand over the keys to such a luxury vehicle so easily.

"What if I scratch the paint or something?" I'd asked, nervous. It had been a long time since I drove a car, and I've never driven one like his.

"Then it has a scratch." He'd shrugged, uncaring. "Or I'll get it repainted. Who cares?"

Not Dryden, that was immediately apparent. He didn't backseat drive or rescind the offer. He'd reclined the passenger seat a bit, stretched his legs out, and rested his hands on his stomach like he was settling in for a nap. Every time I've asked to drive the Porsche since then, he's let me.

"You can push it a little," he tells me as I navigate the winding roads up to our property. I shake my head. I'm a both-hands-on-the-wheel, speed-limits-are-meant-to-be-followed kind of driver. It doesn't matter that this is essentially a race car. I'm going to drive it like a minivan.

The construction crew is still here when we crest the top of the driveway. I wave back as I drive carefully over the grass to the cottage, parking next to the Land Rover. Both of us sit quietly for a second, watching behind the privacy of the tinted windows as the crew buzzes

around. The framing went up only last week—it's finally starting to look like a house.

Our house, which is still something I'm having a difficult time wrapping my mind around. It was Dryden and I who sat together and created a blueprint for the house. We mapped out a floor plan together. We drove into the city and looked at paint, tiles, flooring, and marble together. Dryden asks for my opinions and listens to my answers as though I have any understanding of how to do any of this. We've watched hundreds of hours of home improvement shows and have a shared notes file on our phones where we can jot down ideas.

Our house, I think, looking at the concrete slab and the wood frame. Turning, I look at Dryden in the passenger seat.

"Want to go for a walk?"

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Epilogue

DRYDEN

FIVE YEARS LATER

“This is a mistake,” I tell Shiloh, leaning against the open doorframe, hands in the pockets of my slacks.

“Inviting you?” he asks, not even looking up from where he’s fidgeting with his cufflinks. I smirk at him. He knows I was talking about getting married.

“That as well,” I concede. He chuckles. Sighing, I take pity on him and step forward to help him with the cufflinks. His tie is lopsided, I notice. He stands still as I fix the cuffs, quiet until I reach for his tie. “Thanks.”

“I don’t suppose there is any way for me to convince you not to get married,” I continue, driven to get the warning out despite the humor glinting in his eyes. He won’t be laughing if Ewan breaks his heart. Again.

“No, but I’m a little curious to hear how you’d try,” Shiloh admits. I tug on the tie, cinching it up and shaking my head at the way he’s smiling when he tips his chin up to give me room. Finished, I step back to give him space to turn around and peek at the results in the mirror. Retreating back to the doorway, I tuck my hands into my pockets and watch him, not bothering to try and convince him. I know a lost cause when I see one.

“Look okay?” he asks, holding his arms out to the side before dropping them. After a moment, he reaches up to tug on the tie.

“Stop it. It’s where it needs to be. Haven’t you worn a suit before?”

“Yeah, to funerals,” Shiloh mumbles.

I leave him to finish getting ready when his father joins, slipping quietly down the hallway and out the front door, joining the crowds of people mingling on the lawn. Spencer is sitting where I left him, glancing up from his cell phone when I slip down the aisles of chairs. He smiles.

“Wedding off?” he jokes.

“He’s determined not to see sense.”

“Ah, well, you can’t save them all.” Spencer pats my knee in a conciliatory manner as I take my seat next to him, not quite hiding the humor pinching the corners of his mouth.

I drape my arm over the back of his seat, unbuttoning the front of my suit coat. He leans into me, shoulder tucked under mine. Brushing my thumb up and down his arm, I look around at the crowd. Oliver is sitting next to Nils, turned to the side and facing the row behind him, chatting with an older couple I don’t recognize. They’ll likely have added him to their Christmas card rotation by the end of today.

“Did you get your packing done?” Spencer asks. I turn and look at him.

“Mostly.” I have a more relaxed routine when it comes to travel prep, unlike Spencer, whose suitcase has been packed and sitting in the closet for two weeks. He has a checklist on his phone and another for the itinerary. He is anxious he’ll forget something, as though we’re not going to a place where we could simply stop into a store and replace the item that got left behind.

“I’ll help you tonight,” he offers. I sigh. He’ll pull everything out and redo it—organize the packing cubes and fold the clothes into tight little squares meant to maximize storage space.

“Thank you,” I say out loud. He smiles, resting a little more of his weight against me, pleased.

I think the real reason for the anxiety isn’t the packing so much as it is the air travel. He’s never been on a plane, and starting off with an overseas trip is bound to induce a little stress. Particularly in Spencer, who never rides when he can walk. I brush a hand up and down his arm. I’m eager to go—he’ll feel better once we’re there and the excitement smothers the nerves.

“We should probably talk to Oliver again, make sure he knows how to take care of Demon,” he adds.

“She’s a cat, Spencer. All she needs is food and water, and Oliver can figure out how to scoop poop from a box.” He snorts, laughing.

“Yeah, but he needs to remember to hold her cradled like a baby and tuck her into her favorite blanket every morning before he leaves. I need to remind him about her hot-water bottle.” I roll my eyes above his head. Spoiled. That cat is spoiled rotten.

“We’ll tell him.”

“I’m really excited. I wish it was tomorrow and time to go,” he admits.

I tighten my arm, tilting my face just enough to the side that his short hair tickles my cheek. He smells like me, which means he used my shower products this morning. It’s a habit I’m rather fond of, the same way I enjoy it when my clothes are what he leaves the closet wearing instead of his own. Several articles of clothing that made it into his suitcase weren’t technically his, but I didn’t say anything, feeling oddly sentimental about him choosing to bring comfort items of mine along on vacation.

“I’m looking forward to watching you swim in a new pool.”

Spencer laughs, leaning away from me far enough to turn his face and look at me. He’s quite lovely in direct sunlight—hair a richer shade of brown, and those stunning eyes shot through with gold. I can’t wait to enjoy the same view on a Grecian beach.

“Think of all the food, too.” He groans. “Come on, let’s ditch the wedding and go now. I bet we can change our flight.”

“Don’t tempt me,” I warn, making him chuckle. “We’re flying first class, though, so I doubt they’d have an earlier flight available anyway.”

“Dry.” Spencer shakes his head, exasperated.

“I’m not sitting in economy.”

“Snob.”

“Yes,” I agree. “And comfortably so, in first class, where there is adequate leg room.”

This earns me a deeper laugh, open-mouthed and happy. I’m smiling when he meets my eye once more. It’s hard to worry overmuch about the perils of marriage and my friends entering into legally binding contracts when he looks at me like this. Miraculous as it is, it’s a look filled with love. It’s becoming easier to feel as though I deserve it and to believe I won’t lose it.

“Thank you for being here,” I murmur. He stops smiling, Spencer’s face losing the humor and eyes becoming warm and serious.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he promises. In the back of my mind, I can’t help but notice the words sound like a vow.

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Acknowledgments

This book was the easiest thing I've ever written. I stood at my desk every day, cracked open my rib cage, and poured my heart out onto the page. When I finished, I worried about all the parts of myself that I wove in, knowing that, inevitably, someone would tell me everything they despised about Dryden and Spencer, and it would feel like it was actually me they hated. Thank you, Amy, for the continual reminders that everything of myself I put into the story meant it was strong, not that it needed to change.

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And thank you, if you've come this far, for reading. I hope it's warm and safe wherever you sleep.

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JJ is a Colorado native currently living the coastal life. They spend most of their time listening to the characters in their head and putting them on paper. If you don't find them writing, they will be reading too many books, and watching too much hockey. They love traveling, horseback riding, fitness and any outdoor activities (particularly if the ocean is involved).



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